

# THE POSSIBLE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## SUMMARY

The analysis examines the possible geopolitical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and discusses what the post-Covid world order will look like from the perspective of realist International Relations (IR) theory.

The world is going through what by every measure is a great health, socio-economic, and political crisis, so it becomes imperative from both a scholarly and policy perspective to ponder the geopolitical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. To discuss the type of world the pandemic will likely leave in its wake we must rely on theory, all the more so because we are dealing with an unfolding event whose many aspects are unknown to us. Realist International Relations (IR) theory can offer important insights into the geopolitical implications of the current crisis. From a realist vantage point, I argue that prognoses about a radical change in world politics due to the crisis are unfounded and tend to be exaggerated. Instead, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to reinforce major geopolitical trends that already characterized the international system before its outbreak.

At least half a decade before the Covid outbreak, we were living in a world characterized by four prominent geopolitical features: (1) the United States' "unipolar moment" had passed and the power distribution at the systemic level had shifted from uni- to multipolarity; (2) the post-Cold War liberal international order had decayed and as a result, international institutions lost much functionality; (3) the state's role in the economy and protectionist policies increased; and (4) authoritarianism/democratic backsliding

and nationalist far-right political movements were on the rise around the globe. The crisis we are going through is unlikely to alter this geopolitical landscape; rather, it will reinforce its four prominent features. The current analysis concludes by arguing that building a new liberal post-Covid international order is equally unlikely for the simple reason that the structure of the international system will likely continue to remain multipolar and will be dominated by the security competition between the three great powers, namely the United States, China, and Russia. Unlike the two decades after the end of the Cold War, now that power is distributed in more than two hands, a liberal international order cannot rise.



## INTRODUCTION

The world is going through what by every measure is a great health, socioeconomic, and political crisis. The novel coronavirus, Covid-19, that first appeared among the population of the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, has spread around the globe in four months and ravaged all sorts of countries, north and south, east and west, rich and poor, big and small, authoritarian and democratic. The outbreak, which was declared a pandemic by the World Health

Organization (WHO) in March 2020, has shut down schools and most workplaces, vacated public squares, confined millions of people to their homes, and is widely expected to throw the Western economies into their deepest recession since World War II.<sup>1</sup>

What is unique about this pandemic is that the hardest-hit countries until now (in terms of death counts both in absolute number and per million people) are not Africa's large urban slums but rather the world's most prosperous, industrialized, and liberal democratic countries, namely the United States, Italy, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. (Figs. 2, 3) Even the subnational dynamics within these countries fit

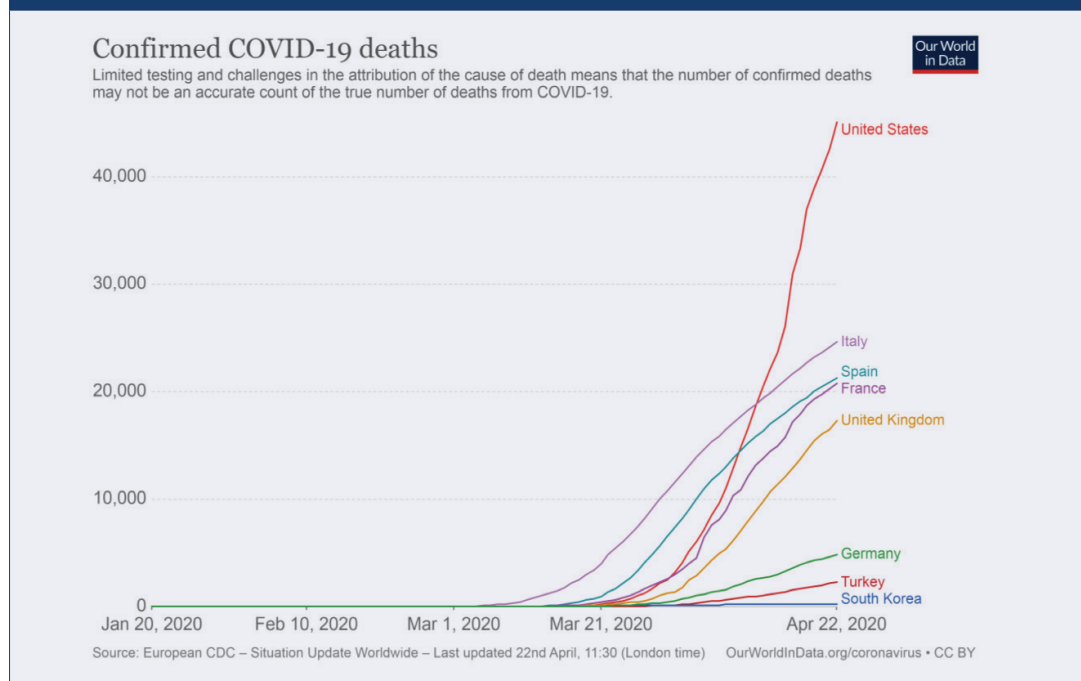
1. Liz Alderman and Jack Ewing, "Europe's Big Economies Brace for Sharpest Drop Since World War II", *The New York Times*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/business/europe-economy-france-germany.html> (Access date: April 19, 2020).

**FIGURE 1. THE EYÜP SULTAN MOSQUE AND THE VACATED SURROUNDING SQUARE AND ROADS IN ISTANBUL ON APRIL 18, 2020, DUE TO THE WEEKEND CURFEW IMPOSED TO STEM THE SPREAD OF COVID-19.**



Source: "Coronavirus Precautions in Istanbul", Anadolu Ajansı, April 18, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/pg/photo-gallery/coronavirus-precautions-in-istanbul-0> (Access date: April 19, 2020).

**FIGURE 2. CONFIRMED COVID-19 DEATHS (IN ABSOLUTE NUMBERS) IN UNITED STATES, ITALY, SPAIN, FRANCE, UNITED KINGDOM, GERMANY, TURKEY, AND SOUTH KOREA.**



Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-usa> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

into this pattern. Italy's worst hit region is the wealthy northern region of Lombardy (Bergamo, Milan) rather than the much less developed south (Puglia, Sicily). Likewise, the hardest-hit U.S. state is none other than the world's premier financial center, namely New York. As a recent piece in the *Washington Post* points out regarding the United States:

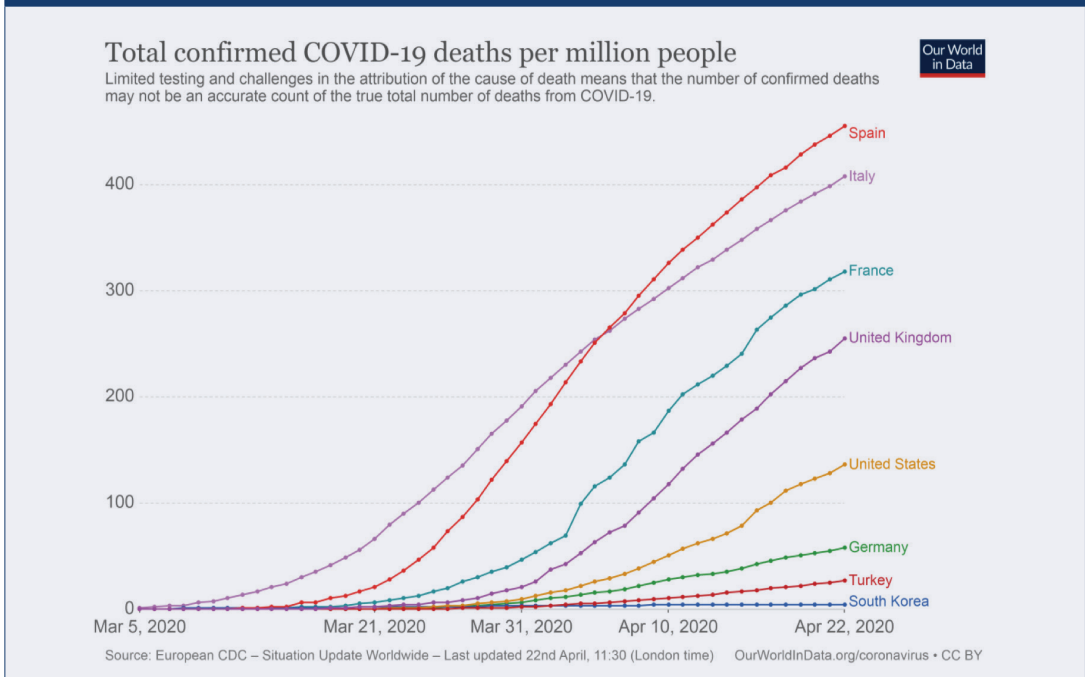
... there are patterns worth noting. Many of the hardest hit regions have high population density; highly populated and dense central business districts; and high usage of rapid transit, especially by rail. They are also more likely to be located in northerly latitudes, have concentrated poverty and have high levels of tourism. New York- the hardest hit region- has all six attributes.<sup>2</sup>

2. Henry Olsen, "There Are Patterns in the Covid-19 Crisis. Here's What They Tell Us", *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/there-are-patterns-covid-19-crisis-heres-what-they-tell-us/> (Access date: April 20, 2020).

It is for this reason that it becomes imperative from both a scholarly and policy perspective to ponder the geopolitical implications of the great crisis we are currently experiencing. Two caveats are in order though before proceeding. First, the geopolitical implications discussed here are all tentative because we are dealing with an unfolding event whose many aspects are unknown to us and, therefore, our ability to predict what is likely to transpire is significantly limited. Second, it is precisely because we are dealing with an unfolding event that we must rely on theory to discuss the type of world the pandemic will likely leave in its wake. Theories are useful tools for discussing what is likely to transpire in world politics because they simplify the complex reality by focusing on certain explanatory variables while ignoring others.<sup>3</sup> For

3. Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

**FIGURE 3-. CONFIRMED COVID-19 DEATHS (PER MILLION PEOPLE) IN UNITED STATES, ITALY, SPAIN, FRANCE, UNITED KINGDOM, GERMANY, TURKEY, AND SOUTH KOREA.**



Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-usa> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

our purposes here, we need to rely on a theory of international politics that explains when major shifts in the balance of power are likely to occur as a result of great crises. Realist International Relations (IR) theory can offer important insights into the geopolitical implications of the current crisis.<sup>4</sup>

From a realist vantage point, I argue that prognoses about a radical change in world politics due to the crisis are unfounded and tend to be exaggerated. For instance, Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi predict that if the U.S. does not rise to coordinate and lead a global response to the crisis, the coronavirus pandemic could mark another “Suez Moment,” meaning it could end the

United States’ reign as a global leader.<sup>5</sup> The influential former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger likewise suggests that the U.S. should once more rise to take over the burdensome task of reconstructing Europe in the post-Covid period, and predicts that “the coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order.”<sup>6</sup> However, these analyses overlook the fact that the distribution of power and the structure of the international system, the primary causal determinant of international orders and states’ behavior, had substantially changed at least half a decade before the coronavirus outbreak. More specifically, at least

4. There are, of course, different versions of realist IR theory, but in this analysis I adopt the offensive realist version put forward most prominently by John J. Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (updated edition), (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), and more recently in *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018).

5. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, “The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order”, *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-18/coronavirus-could-reshape-global-order> (Access date: April 20, 2020).

6. Henry A. Kissinger, “The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order”, *The Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-pandemic-will-forever-alter-the-world-order-11585953005> (Access date: April 20, 2020).

since 2014, we were living in a world characterized by four prominent geopolitical features: (1) the United States' "unipolar moment" had passed and the power distribution at the systemic level had decisively shifted from uni- to multipolarity; (2) the post-Cold War liberal international order had decayed and as a result, international institutions lost much functionality; (3) the state's role in the economy and protectionist policies increased; and (4) authoritarianism/democratic backsliding and nationalist far-right political movements were on the rise around the globe. Hence, the current crisis we are experiencing is unlikely to alter this geopolitical landscape; rather, it will reinforce its four prominent features.

## REINFORCING SECURITY COMPETITION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The fact that the United States has shown a marked lack of leadership both in coordinating a global response to the crisis and even in containing it at home is not a new trend. Waning U.S. leadership is a result of "the rise of the rest," specifically of China and Russia, the faltering American will to lead, and indeed "long before COVID-19 ravaged the earth, there had already been a precipitous decline in the appeal of the American model."<sup>7</sup> In an influential article in *International Security* in 2019, John Mearsheimer made the case that with the rise of China and Russia's comeback, the global distribution of power shifted away from unipolarity to multipolarity in or close to 2016, and that the future will feature two separate realist-based bounded orders

led by the U.S. and China.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, China's spectacular economic rise in the last three decades, coupled with its successful handling of the 2008 global financial crisis, is leading Beijing to attempt to achieve regional hegemony in Asia. The latter is the best pathway for China to solve its various territorial disputes (East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan, and the land border dispute with India) on favorable terms.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Russia, although much weaker than the U.S. and China, has staged an equally spectacular comeback under the iron fist of Vladimir Putin. The U.S. was in full spectator mode when the February 2014 Ukraine crisis erupted and did nothing when Russia annexed Crimea one month later – the first forceful change of international boundaries since the end of World War II. The United States' complete holiday from geopolitics was shown once more after Moscow intervened in Syria in September 2015 to keep the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad in power. More recently, the United States not only did nothing to prevent the looming humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib, but also continues to arm and train Bashar al-Assad's undeclared allies, namely the terrorist PYD/YPG. The fact that Russian assertiveness in the Middle East is rising unchecked proves beyond any doubt that now Russia also is a great power, and that power at the systemic level is distributed in more than two hands. Lastly, the United States negotiated a humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan after the peace agreement signed with the Taliban in Doha on February 29, 2020. The importance of this withdrawal cannot be overstated since the war in Afghanistan (2001-2020) is by far the longest war in U.S. history, lasting longer than the American

7. Richard Haass, "The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It", *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-07/pandemic-will-accelerate-history-rather-reshape-it> (Access date: April 21, 2020).

8. John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), pp. 8-9.

9. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 361-376.



Civil War (1861-65), World War I (1917-18), World War II (1941-45), and the Korean War (1950-53) combined.<sup>10</sup>

All the abovementioned facts clearly show that the global distribution of power had shifted to multipolarity well before the coronavirus outbreak. Hence, the arguments that the Covid-19 crisis will end the United States' reign as a global leader and/or that it will mark the beginning of a China-led world order are unsubstantiated. The "unipolar moment" for the United States is already over. As far as China is concerned, as two leading China experts recently noted, "There are real limits to China's capacity to take advantage of the current crisis - whether through disingenuous propaganda or ineffective global action," and China's dictatorial model in combating the pandemic is actually overshadowed by the democratic model espoused by two of China's neighbors, namely South Korea and Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, given that economic power is the basis of military power, the Covid outbreak will likely limit China's quest for regional hegemony in the short-to-near term, since Chinese economy, like the U.S. and European one, will be severely affected by the pandemic-induced lockdowns and the precipitous decline in the U.S. and European demands for Chinese goods and services. Indeed, Chinese authorities just recently announced that the Chinese economy shrank by 6.8 percent in the first three months of 2020 compared with a year ago, ending a nearly half-century of economic growth.<sup>12</sup> Likewise,

the recent fall of oil prices below zero - the first time oil prices have ever turned negative<sup>13</sup> can be expected to weaken the economy of a petro-state like Russia significantly and hence limit its capacity for foreign military involvements. If oil prices continue to stay at such rates for a considerable period of time, Moscow will have to cut or abandon altogether its support for the murderous regime in Damascus and for the warlord Khalifa Haftar in Libya, and focus instead exclusively on its main priority: funding the insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

To sum up, in terms of the balance of power dynamics, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to reinforce security competition in an already multipolar world. Russia's escorting of medical supplies to Italy with its soldiers, and the images of Russian soldiers in the streets of a NATO member state is a powerful symbolic representation of this security competition.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the strictly national response to a pandemic that is global in scope reinforces the realist dictum that states operate in a self-help world. As Burhanettin Duran aptly puts it, "Countries, which have been confiscating each other's medical supplies, won't back down from an economic fight to the death."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, economic competition will be crucial in this respect because, as already stated, economic power is the building block of military power. Countries will try to the utmost extent to limit the economic fallouts of the pandemic so as not to cause a decline in their relative military power.

10. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", p. 28.

11. Michael Green and Evan S. Medeiros, "The Pandemic Won't Make China the World's Leader", *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-15/pandemic-wont-make-china-worlds-leader> (Access date: April 21, 2020).

12. Keith Bradsher, "China's Economy Shrinks, Ending a Nearly Half-Century of Growth", *The New York Times*, April 16, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/business/china-coronavirus-economy.html> (Access date: April 21, 2020).

13. "Too Much Oil: How a Barrel Came to Be Worth Less Than Nothing", *The New York Times*, April 20, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/20/business/oil-prices.html> (Access date: April 21, 2020).

14. Hasan Basri Yalçın, "NATO Topraklarında Rus Askerleri", *Sabah*, March 28, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hasan-basri-yalcin/2020/03/28/nato-topraklarinda-rus-askerleri> (Access date: April 21, 2020).

15. Burhanettin Duran, "Major Changes Ahead in Post-Pandemic Period", *Daily Sabah*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/major-changes-ahead-in-post-pandemic-period> (Access date: April 21, 2020).

## REINFORCING THE DYSFUNCTIONALITY OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The shift in the global distribution of power from unipolarity to multipolarity was the “death sentence for the liberal international order” that the United States and its European allies had created and vigorously preserved for two decades after the end of the Cold War. This is the case because liberal international orders can arise only in unipolar systems where the hegemon is a liberal democracy.<sup>16</sup> Now that the “unipolar moment” for the United States is over and power is distributed in more hands, the international order has become realist. The decay of the liberal international order has brought about the weakening of its three main pillars: strong international institutions that can take on a life of their own and fundamentally change state behavior; an open international economy that maximizes free trade; and spreading democracy around the world. These three pillars come directly from the three most prominent liberal IR theories: neoliberal institutionalism, economic interdependence theory, and democratic peace theory.<sup>17</sup>

Liberal international institutions began to enter a phase of strategic atrophy well before the coronavirus outbreak. The first example of such an atrophy is NATO’s failure to stand up against Russia and the Assad regime and stop their war crimes in Syria. Most recently, NATO’s failure to support its member state, Turkey, in its efforts to check Russia and the regime’s aggression in Idlib is equally appalling. Second, the EU’s failure to develop a coherent policy toward the civil wars in

Syria and Libya, and its unwillingness to support Turkey in dealing with the so-called refugee crisis is another sign of the dysfunctionality of liberal international institutions. Third, Britain’s referendum vote in June 2016 to exit the EU (Brexit), and Donald Trump’s election as U.S. president on an “America First” platform showed that even liberal democracies were turning against the liberal order they had themselves created.<sup>18</sup>

Against this backdrop, WHO’s incompetence in managing the emerging health crisis and NATO’s and the EU’s blatant failure to show solidarity with and help Italy and Spain, the hardest-hit European countries from the pandemic, hardly represent a new trend. Covid-19 will reinforce the dysfunctionality of international institutions and further erode states’ trust in them.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the more fiscally conservative northern EU countries (Germany, Netherlands, Finland, and Austria) are still blocking an adequate financial recovery package that the indebted south (Italy, France, and Spain) is strongly pushing for. Therefore, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte warned, “If Europe fails to come up with a monetary and financial policy adequate for the biggest challenge since World War Two, not only Italians but European citizens will be deeply disappointed. If we do not seize the opportunity to put new life into the European project, the risk of failure is real.”<sup>20</sup>

Richard Haass succinctly summarizes the situation as such: “The principal question in the post-pandemic world is how much the pen-

16. Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order”, pp. 7-9. The quotation above is from p. 9.

17. Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

18. Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order”, pp. 34-36.

19. Talha Köse, “Koronavirüs Sonrası Siyasi Dönüşümün Yönü”, *Sabah*, March 28, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/talhakose/2020/03/28/koronavirüs-sonrasi-siyasi-donusumun-yonu> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

20. Rebecca Perring, “EU on Brink: Italians Lash Out at Bloc Over Coronavirus – ‘Better to LEAVE Brussels!’”, *Express*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1268787/EU-coronavirus-news-Italy-coronavirus-eu-rescue-package-eu-economy-coronavirus-latest> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

**FIGURE 4. EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S PRESIDENT URSULA VON DER LEYEN (LEFT) AND THE ITALIAN PRIME MINISTER GIUSEPPE CONTE (RIGHT).**



Source: Rebecca Perring, "EU on Brink: Italians Lash Out at Bloc Over Coronavirus – 'Better to LEAVE Brussels!'", *Express*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1268787/EU-coronavirus-news-Italy-coronavirus-eu-rescue-package-eu-economy-coronavirus-latest> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

dulum will continue to swing from Brussels to national capitals, as countries question whether control over their own borders could have slowed the virus's spread.<sup>21</sup> All in all, the coronavirus didn't break liberal international institutions: it revealed what was already broken and will likely reinforce such a trend.

## **REINFORCING THE STATE ROLE IN THE ECONOMY, DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING, AND NATIONALISM**

In addition to dysfunctional international institutions, an increasing state role in the economy and rise of authoritarianism/democratic backsliding and nationalism around the globe were the two other fallouts of the decay of the liberal international order before the coronavirus outbreak. States gradually began to stage a come-

21. Haass, "The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It".

back in economy during and after the 2008 global financial crisis. Increasing protectionist policies were meant to cushion the harmful effects of hyperglobalization. The coronavirus outbreak, however, saw states intervene heavily in the economy by using their whole toolbox to pay businesses not to lay off millions of workers, and to provide various other kinds of financial backstops to limit the pandemic's economic fallout as much as possible.<sup>22</sup> The post-pandemic world is likely to be one in which the state will be the handmaiden of economic growth, using its strengthened role, among other things, to force what it considers key strategic industries to have "domestic backup plans and reserves."<sup>23</sup> "Profitability will fall, but supply stability should

22. Liz Alderman, "France Tries Limiting Joblessness to Confront Coronavirus Recession", *The New York Times*, April 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/business/france-coronavirus-unemployment.html> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

23. "How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic", *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

rise.”<sup>24</sup> As such, adding further to the disappointment and bitterness of proponents of free trade, Covid-19 is actually “a gift to nativist nationalists and protectionists.”<sup>25</sup>

## Rising authoritarianism/democratic backsliding and far-right nationalism around the globe, most conspicuously in the West, were also prominent features of the pre-Covid world.

Rising authoritarianism/democratic backsliding and far-right nationalism around the globe, most conspicuously in the West, were also prominent features of the pre-Covid world. Both problems go hand in hand actually. The 2008 global financial crisis and especially the subsequent refugee waves from war-torn countries into Europe triggered a wide-ranging populist backlash across the Old Continent. Formerly consolidated democracies like Hungary and Poland experienced significant democratic backsliding while most EU countries witnessed the electoral rise of xenophobic, far-right nationalist parties happily supported by Moscow. Most recently, Greece’s and Europe’s harsh treatment of thousands of immigrants/refugees amassed at the Greek-Turkish border proved beyond any doubt the moral bankruptcy of the “European Project.”<sup>26</sup> Exclusionary nationalist visions around the globe have been further reinvigorated by the election of Trump as U.S. president. Trump’s election victory has not only buoyed the white supremacists in the United States, but with Trump’s support, Israel is also on the way to

creating a full apartheid state, while the extremist Hindu nationalist Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, is continuously inciting waves of anti-Muslim violence in India, the world’s most populous democracy.<sup>27</sup>

Again, Covid-19 will reinforce all these trends that were already prominent. The widely expected deep economic recession due to the measures to combat Covid-19 can increase Western publics’ readiness to accept authoritarian models of government if they promise the order and economic security people crave for. After all, it is a well-established fact that authoritarian leaders thrive on fear. Let’s not forget that the Europeans latched on to communism and Nazism in the 1930s mainly because these ideologies promised to bring back conformity and security to people’s lives in the aftermath of the Great Depression. While the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that the world economy braces itself for its worst recession since the Great Depression,<sup>28</sup> hopefully this will not open the way to extremist ideologies seizing power again in Western capitals. Still, the signs are worrisome. Reputable Western academics and thinkers have expressed serious concern about the future of even the American democracy, the former liberal hegemon. For instance, Daron Acemoglu argues that the Trump administration’s incompetent response to the coronavirus “exposed America’s authoritarian turn,”<sup>29</sup> while George Packer in a recent piece

24. Ibid.

25. Philippe Legrain, “The Coronavirus Is Killing Globalization as We Know It”, *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/12/coronavirus-killing-globalization-nationalism-protectionism-trump/> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

26. Ildir Lika, “Greece’s Emerging Security Challenges and the Future of Greek-Turkish Relations”, *SETA Analysis*, No. 62 (April 2020), pp. 10-13.

27. Adam Withnall, “Delhi Riots: Violence That Killed 53 in Indian Capital ‘Was Anti-Muslim Pogrom’, Says Top Expert”, *Independent*, March 7, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/world/delhi-riots-pogrom-violence-deaths-modi-bjp-india-police-a9384891.html> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

28. Graeme Wearden and Jasper Jolly, “IMF: Global Economy Faces Worst Recession Since the Great Depression – As It Happened”, *The Guardian*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2020/apr/14/stock-markets-china-trade-global-recession-imf-forecasts-covid-19-business-live> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

29. Daron Acemoglu, “The Coronavirus Exposed America’s Authoritarian Turn”, *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-23/coronavirus-exposed-americas-authoritarian-turn> (Access date: April 22, 2020).



in the *Atlantic* goes even further and declares, “We [Americans] are living in a failed state.”<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this analysis, I have argued from a realist perspective that prognoses about a radical change in world politics due to the crisis tend to be exaggerated. Instead, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to reinforce major geopolitical trends that already characterized the international system before its outbreak: (1) it will reinforce security competition in a multipolar world; (2) it will reinforce the dysfunctionality of international institutions; (3) it will strengthen the state’s role in the economy; and (4) it will reinforce authoritarianism/

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30. George Packer, “We Are Living in a Failed State”, *The Atlantic*, Special Preview: June 2020 Issue. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/underlying-conditions/610261/> (Access date: April 22, 2020).

democratic backsliding and nationalism around the globe. Before concluding, I want to point out that building a new liberal, cooperative post-Covid international order is very unlikely for the simple reason that the structure of the international system will likely continue to remain multipolar, and liberal orders cannot arise in multipolar systems. Therefore, a realist would not heed the recent argument by G. John Ikenberry, a prominent academic liberal, who contends that nationalism and great power rivalry will have the upper hand only in the short term, whereas in the long term “the democracies will come out of their shells to find a new type of pragmatic and protective internationalism.”<sup>31</sup> Instead, nationalism and great power rivalry in a multipolar world are likely to accompany us in the long term.

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31. G. John Ikenberry in “How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic”, *Foreign Policy*.

# THE POSSIBLE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## SETA | ANALYSIS

The world is going through what by every measure is a great health, socioeconomic, and political crisis, so it becomes imperative from both a scholarly and policy perspective to ponder the geopolitical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. To discuss the type of world the pandemic will likely leave in its wake we must rely on theory, all the more so because we are dealing with an unfolding event whose many aspects are unknown to us. Realist International Relations (IR) theory can offer important insights into the geopolitical implications of the current crisis. From a realist vantage point, I argue that prognoses about a radical change in world politics due to the crisis are unfounded and tend to be exaggerated. Instead, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to reinforce major geopolitical trends that already characterized the international system before its outbreak.

At least half a decade before the Covid outbreak, we were living in a world characterized by four prominent geopolitical features: (1) the United States' "unipolar moment" had passed and the power distribution at the systemic level had shifted from uni- to multipolarity; (2) the post-Cold War liberal international order had decayed and as a result, international institutions lost much functionality; (3) the state's role in the economy and protectionist policies increased; and (4) authoritarianism/democratic backsliding and nationalist far-right political movements were on the rise around the globe. The crisis we are going through is unlikely to alter this geopolitical landscape; rather, it will reinforce its four prominent features. The current analysis concludes by arguing that building a new liberal post-Covid international order is equally unlikely for the simple reason that the structure of the international system will likely continue to remain multipolar and will be dominated by the security competition between the three great powers, namely the United States, China, and Russia. Unlike the two decades after the end of the Cold War, now that power is distributed in more than two hands, a liberal international order cannot rise.

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