



Conclusions:

REFLECTIONS ON GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN A TIME OF COVID-19

By **Dr. Graeme P. Herd**, Marshall Center professor

If great power competition is the defining paradigm of our current era, COVID-19 acts as its X-ray. The pandemic reveals and reinforces a central feature of the structure of the current international system, namely its state- and network-centric nature. Leadership is forced to address tradeoffs involving political liberty, economic growth and public health. In this trilemma, states cannot be healthy in all three dimensions. States could, for example, adopt a China-style algorithmic, authoritarian surveillance state with no political liberty but with the prospect of post-COVID economic growth with a healthy labor force. Alternatively, states may preserve a healthy public and political liberty but kill their economies. While this proposition has the virtue of clarity and clear lines, in reality such trilemma tradeoffs are never absolute and never fully manifest, and negotiable.

Russian and Chinese official narratives generated by state-controlled media strive to convince the public that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are strong leaders (with Xi de jure president for life and Putin de facto the same after constitutional amendments resetting presidential terms were accepted) of effective centralized states. Each claims that their “strong hand” and “iron will” empower them to take necessary but unpopular decisions for the good of the state. Both pose as custodians of stability and curators of order. How viable are these rhetorical claims when set against the reality of their performance in the face of COVID-19?

With regard to the state-centric nature, the United States has demonstrated a hegemonic position, with the means to generate and enforce the norms, rules and

arrangements that govern the international order. COVID-19 spotlights global public health governance as one arena in this great power “soft” competition. As the U.S. froze its World Health Organization (WHO) funding pending a review of the WHO’s alleged pro-China bias and then announced in July 2020 its withdrawal from the organization, China in particular seeks to champion, coordinate and underwrite international responses to COVID-19. China leads four of the 15 United Nations specialized agencies and seeks to lead a fifth. Within the U.N. Human Rights Council, it seeks to redefine the meaning of human rights. Does COVID-19 represent a change in the world order if the U.S. loses its hegemonic position?

For Russia, the U.S. acts as a strategic benchmark, with Russia sending medical equipment to the U.S. to help counter COVID-19 on the basis of equality, reciprocity and parity, as well as to declare victory over and place blame on the U.S. Russian official media reported that COVID-19 was a man-made weapon created by NATO and endorsed the unproven allegation by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman that “it might be U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan.” Allegations of Russian disinformation are met by Russian claims of Russophobia. In March 2020, the Russian military orchestrated the “From Russia with Love” COVID-19 humanitarian relief operation to Bergamo in northern Italy. This represented a geopolitical and diplomatic coup for Russia, helping to break sanctions and highlight Russia’s great power contributions to the international public good.

When we adopt a network-centric lens and apply this to great power competition, we can note that pre-COVID-19 this network was characterized by cross-border flows of goods, services, money, ideas and data. This global network was underpinned by key socioeconomic hubs. The U.S. and European Union were hyperconnected “complex” financial and service hubs. China represented a “simple” manufacturing supply chain hub. Competition was over market and trade protections, connectivity and setting the norms that govern these interactions. COVID-19 demonstrates that these hubs, ever striving to optimize network efficiency and exploit economies of scale and specialization, also represent potential single points of failure, particularly susceptible to systemic shocks that result in systemic paralysis. Given this reality, temporary, coordinated decoupling and diversification reduce the risk to financial, public health and food supply networks. Functional redundancy makes them more robust and resilient and less vulnerable — but at the same time more costly and less efficient. Does COVID-19 force great powers to rethink globalization, making it more digital and greener? Or does it promote populism, protectionism and belligerent nationalism, replacing great power-led globalization with great power autarchy?

COVID-19 allows for real-time comparisons between great powers. Variables such as the health care sector’s ability to “flatten the curve” before the sector itself collapses, the length of immunization, the possibility of secondary infections, and a new strain of COVID-20 surfacing suggest an extended turbulent and cyclical period of peaks and troughs until a vaccine is found. For these reasons, post-COVID great power competition will not pick up where it left off after the virus is eradicated. “Back to the future” is not the most likely paradigm. One important factor in reshaping perceptions will be the impact of COVID-19 and how great powers will be judged by the power of their example. In this respect, we can highlight three important dimensions that track the pathology of the virus.

First, in terms of planning, the quality of expert advice and the ability to put preventive policies in place. Second, the ability to learn from the experience of others and in doing so flatten the infection curve and avoid a spike in mortality rates crashing the health care system and potentially the state. Third, the effectiveness of strategies that allow states to safely navigate an exit from the pandemic (managing to scale testing, tracing, isolating) will burnish or tarnish the reputations of individual leaders and the public’s perception of their competence and ability to manage complex crises, as well as the integrity of underlying democratic and authoritarian governance models. An important part of this third dimension will be the ability of great powers to develop and share new infection control technologies to address the pandemic quickly and effectively.

It is within this context that the strategic center of gravity of the political West remains the Washington-Berlin partnership. In Germany and the U.S., growing convergence

of thought about the risk and threat China poses is not matched, yet, at the policy level. On the military side, U.S. and German concepts about force differ in terms of scale and speed of military modernization and readiness. Because of this, time horizons, interoperability and risk calculus have yet to be aligned. COVID-19 has stress-tested the principles and practices that the EU claims are foundational and sources of strength: solidarity, civil rights, a social economy and institutional resilience. Prior to COVID-19, there was little or no agreement on a new unifying narrative that elites and societies could rally around and support. The German political class was not ready to lead Europe in great power competition, though the instruments were at hand.

COVID-19 does not follow political calendars or follow a political agenda, adhere to state borders, or have an ego that can be intimidated or manipulated. It has no nationality and cannot be addressed through force. It is no respecter of wealth, ethnicity or ideology, nor whether a great power is deemed to be “too big to fail.” Moreover, it is accompanied and compounded by an oil price slump and global recession, if not depression.

Because of — rather than despite — these momentous challenges, COVID-19 presents an opportunity to reboot trans-Atlantic relations. The pandemic is a nonstate, systemic threat that no one state can address unilaterally and that demands a clear trans-Atlantic cooperative imperative. The EU has market power. It can insist on reciprocity with other great powers and flex its “moral muscle” when addressing China and Russia, promoting a counternarrative around open societies and the legitimacy of rule- and law-based systems. Because judgments about the ability of great powers to address the pandemic can be shaped so much by perception, a focus on the message — on strategic communication — is almost as important as reality itself.

Ultimately, the U.S. prefers a Europe open to U.S. ideas, goods and services, supportive of U.S. interests, and able to partner with the U.S. globally. Post-COVID-19, a weaker “balancing” Europe could be dominated by a Russia and a China hostile to U.S. interests. The values and interests of the U.S. and the EU are thus aligned and there is a joint need to exercise consistent, reinforcing and coordinated messaging to counter Russian and Chinese propaganda and disinformation (by emphasizing the successful Taiwan, South Korea, Germany, New Zealand and Japan approaches) and to highlight constructive EU and U.S. leadership in addressing the economic and development fallout from the pandemic.

Critical to this will be strengthening global governance as it relates to public health, as well as recalibrating globalization to build resilience. Great power status needs both to be declared by the holder and acknowledged by followers. Great powers will be those that can have the political will and agility to adapt and bridge the gaps between global problems and the capacity of states to address them. This suggests joint leadership in partnership for the common good as the underlying principle that will resonate with all societies, if not their elites. □