



Weaker together or weaker apart? Great power relations after the coronavirus

Sven Biscop¹

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The coronavirus is a symmetrical threat: it hits everybody. How hard it hits depends in the first instance on the power of each and every state: the resilience of its health infrastructure, the speed and resolve of its crisis response, and the scale of its recovery package after the crisis. National leaders who attach more importance to their image of omnipotence than to the facts put their country at risk. The later one acts, the more people die, the greater the economic and societal disruption, and the slower the recovery. Many weak states anyhow have but limited capacity to protect their citizens, even with international help. The consequences of the corona crisis will obviously be asymmetrical, therefore.

The great powers—the USA, China, Russia, and the European Union—can mobilise more resources than anyone else. If all four manage their own recovery effectively, the balance of power between them may not be much affected. If they would address recovery through close cooperation, they could probably overcome the crisis faster, which would benefit the global economy as a whole, and they could assist other countries much more effectively. But the trend in the twenty-first century is one of increasing great power rivalry, and the coronavirus does not change that. Instead, many powers instrumentalise the crisis to compete with each other.

In a similar vein, it was—sadly—only to be expected that United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' call for a universal ceasefire would be mostly ignored. The coronavirus does not do away with the causes of ongoing wars; it may even exacerbate them, especially as the consequences will be felt for many years. Christmas 1914 saw several informal truces along the western front; here and there, football was even played between the trenches. Christmas 1915 was just another day to kill or be killed.

When a global crisis threatens every single human being, it is a natural reaction to expect that this will change the world forever. Things will change, but probably not as

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is the director of the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and a professor at Ghent University; he also is a senior associate fellow at the Centre for European Studies at Ren Min University in Beijing.

✉ Sven Biscop
s.biscop@egmontinstitute.be

¹ Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, Brussels, Belgium

radically as seems likely at the height of the crisis—and not always for the better. The post-crisis world may look very similar to the world before the coronavirus, and the same negative trends will continue—unless the great powers really alter course.

China: in denial, in the lead

China's disastrously late reaction to the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan caused a lot of anger internally. Such blatant disregard for people's lives brings back bad memories of the worst excesses of Mao's rule. The crisis strengthens opposition to Xi Jinping within the Chinese Communist Party, which might have consequences for the succession. Not everybody was pleased when Xi made himself leader for life, and his anti-corruption drive created many enemies too. In mid-March an anonymous open letter started circulating in China, pleading for a special session of the Party to critically assess the management of the crisis, and thus Xi's leadership. Who knows: perhaps Xi will be forced to step down in 2023 anyway, after the regular two terms. One could then hope for a successor who would reverse the trend towards ever more repression and steer a more cooperative international course. Or Xi will stay in power and come down even harder on any dissent. Whatever happens, CCP rule itself seems firmly entrenched.

Even so the regime is nervous, as shown by the preposterous suggestion by the Foreign Ministry spokesman that the US army is somehow to blame for the coronavirus. The Chinese ambassador to the USA actually repudiated this particular piece of disinformation. More successful, certainly with China's domestic audience, is the provision of aid to Italy and other European countries. What better proof that China is on top of things than images of grateful Europeans? The aid is, of course, gratefully received, regardless of the political agenda attached, but the European public itself is unlikely to forget China's initial attempt to hide the outbreak. Within the EU, therefore, Beijing's charm offensive will not really change the image of China as a power whose assertions always have to be taken with a pinch of salt. That includes China's reported numbers of infected and deceased people; in late March even Prime Minister Li Keqiang called on officials not to cover up new cases as China started to wind down its lockdown measures. In Africa, however, the early arrival of Chinese aid could greatly enhance its reputation.

Russia: leading nowhere

The first Russian action that anyone noticed was a widespread disinformation campaign, alternatively blaming the USA, Europe, and China for the outbreak. Early on, Vladimir Putin also sent aid to Italy (in military aircraft marked "from Russia with love"; one assumes that Russian forces in Syria and Ukraine use other markings). In Russia itself, action followed but later, and it may be hit hard as a result. Being dependent on its oil and gas exports, the low energy prices furthermore cut deep into Russia's already limited means for recovery. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine a change of political system in Russia, which Putin underscored by sending aid even to the USA in early April, even as the virus started spreading in Russia.

The USA: losing the lead

Donald Trump started by pretending that the coronavirus was just a Democrat hoax. When the outbreak could no longer be denied, he shifted gear and insisted on its Chinese origins. Viruses do not have a nationality, however; governments do, and they must act. By acting late, Trump has probably aggravated the crisis. Dispensing federal aid on the basis of Trump's perception of the state authorities' loyalty to him is certainly not helpful either, and contradicts every notion of national leadership in a democracy. All of this casts doubts over Trump's re-election in November; if he loses, one can hope for a more constructive foreign policy in Washington too. But in spite of everything, Trump might yet emerge as the leader who guided the USA through the crisis, especially as a massive recovery package has been authorised. The USA is strikingly absent from the international scene, however. By not taking the crisis seriously, Trump has lost the opportunity for the USA to play any role in international solidarity and coordination. This loss of influence may be repaired, but it is real.

The EU: looking for a lead

The EU as such could not act on the health crisis itself, because Member States never gave it authority in that area; the EU is better placed to deal with swine flu than with any human flu. Many national governments acted selfishly at first, refusing export of medical supplies to fellow Member States and closing borders without any coordination, thus leaving a void for China and Russia to fill. Countries like Italy will not forget any time soon. Even when deciding on the EU strategy for recovery, some of the wealthiest Member States initially put on show their narrow-mindedness rather than their solidarity. Much later than China, but before agreement on its own recovery strategy was reached, the EU also started providing foreign aid, reorienting more than €15 billion of existing funds for external action to support partner countries across the globe.

The EU should come into its own in the recovery phase, however. After the 2008 financial crisis, the EU created the impression that it cared more for the banks than for the citizen. After the 2016 Brexit referendum, leaders of all colours finally discovered the need for a social Europe—and then forgot about it again. The EU cannot afford to make this mistake twice: abandoning the fetish of the balanced budget, strong Keynesian policies must create an economically vibrant and socially just Union. This would be a return to the roots: the founders of European integration were also the founders of the welfare state. Only the two together, they knew, can guarantee peace and stability. If the coronavirus helps the EU to rediscover this truth, then in Europe at least the crisis will not have been in vain.

In the European democracies, governments that failed to act timely and decisively will most likely lose the next elections; nobody questions the democratic system as such. One should be vigilant though and make sure that the extraordinary measures now rightfully taken are not abused or unduly prolonged. In Hungary, Viktor Orban has already crossed the line by using the crisis to gain the power to rule by decree without time limit. If the EU cannot overrule him, that will be a serious defeat.

Conclusion: the balance of power

The balance of power will not be much affected if Russia lags further behind, because it already is the weakest of the four great powers. In a positive twist, a weakened Russia might seek to normalise its relations with the EU, in order to avoid having to become even more subservient to China. If the EU manages its own recovery effectively, it might actually leverage that to stimulate such a move, and engage Russia from a position of strength. But that probably is an overoptimistic scenario. If the USA, China, or the EU falls behind, that will have deeper consequences: they will lose global markets and influence to the benefit of the others. But, paradoxically, if one of the powers really collapses, it risks pulling down the others as well, so to some extent all great powers have an interest in a minimal recovery of the others (though not all of their leaders may see it as such).

China is doing its utmost to prove that it is the first to overcome the crisis. A China that is hard hit itself cannot benefit that much, though, as long as the European and American economies have not restarted. The 2008 scenario, when an unscathed China was able to take advantage of the crisis in the USA and the EU, will not repeat itself. Attempts to use the crisis to increase China's presence in Europe and America will be viewed with a lot more suspicion this time, if Beijing can mobilise the means in the first place, in view of its undoubtedly underreported domestic problems.

At the same time, the crisis will accelerate US and EU action, which they were envisaging already, to reduce the interdependence with China (and others) by reviewing the supply chains in critical sectors of the economy. Another existing trend that the crisis reinforces is the power struggle inside the various multilateral organisations, including the WHO—and the USA's tendency to more and more withdraw from the system. Nevertheless, this is about reorganizing globalisation, not undoing it—the USA, the EU, and China will remain deeply economic interdependent.

For the EU, therefore, this is a time to continue its engagement of China, in order notably to deliver the bilateral investment treaty envisaged at the 2019 EU-China summit. The coronavirus does impede on the preparations. Moreover, on the Chinese side, the idea has arisen that the EU wants a success so badly that it will accept a suboptimal treaty. That is a serious misconception. For the EU, this is the test of its China strategy. If Beijing does not now deliver, then it should not be surprised if, in the wake of Washington, Brussels will begin to see it in more antagonistic terms as well.

All in all, on the condition that all of the great powers effectively manage their recovery, the balance of power may not change that much, because all of them will end up economically weakened and internally shaken. Instead of mitigating the impact of the crisis together, the great powers are more likely to grow further apart—unless a change of leadership and strategy occurs in both Washington and Beijing. If the EU wants the corona crisis to lead to change for the better, it will have to actively create that change itself.

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