

ANALYSIS

How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic

The pandemic will change the world forever. We asked 12 leading global thinkers for their predictions.

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Like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the coronavirus pandemic is a world-shattering event whose far-ranging consequences we can only begin to imagine today.

This much is certain: Just as this disease has shattered lives, disrupted markets and exposed the competence (or lack thereof) of governments, it will lead to permanent shifts in political and economic power in ways that will become apparent only later.

To help us make sense of the ground shifting beneath our feet as this crisis unfolds, *Foreign Policy* asked 12 leading thinkers from around the world to weigh in with their predictions for the global order after the pandemic.

A World Less Open, Prosperous, and Free

by *Stephen M. Walt*

The pandemic will strengthen the state and reinforce nationalism. Governments of all types will adopt emergency measures to manage the crisis, and many will be loath to relinquish these new powers when the crisis is over.

COVID-19 will also accelerate the shift in power and influence from West to East. South Korea and Singapore have responded best, and China has reacted well after its early mistakes. The response in Europe and America has been slow and haphazard by comparison, further tarnishing the aura of the Western “brand.”

What won’t change is the fundamentally conflictive nature of world politics.

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Previous plagues—including the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919—did not end great-power rivalry nor usher in a new era of global cooperation. Neither will COVID-19. We will see a further retreat from hyperglobalization, as citizens look to national governments to protect them and as states and firms seek to reduce future vulnerabilities.

In short, COVID-19 will create a world that is less open, less prosperous, and less free. It did not have to be this way, but the combination of a deadly virus, inadequate planning, and incompetent leadership has placed humanity on a new and worrisome path.

The End of Globalization as We Know It

by *Robin Niblett*

The coronavirus pandemic could be the straw that breaks the camel's back of economic globalization. China's growing economic and military power had already provoked a bipartisan determination in the United States to decouple China from U.S.-sourced high technology and intellectual property and try to force allies to follow suit. Increasing public and political pressure to meet carbon emissions reduction targets had already called into question many companies' reliance on long-distance supply chains. Now, COVID-19 is forcing governments, companies, and societies to strengthen their capacity to cope with extended periods of economic self-isolation.

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It seems highly unlikely in this context that the world will return to the idea of mutually beneficial globalization that defined the early 21st century. And without the incentive to protect the shared gains from global economic integration, the architecture of global economic governance established in the 20th century will quickly atrophy. It will then take enormous self-discipline for political leaders to sustain international cooperation and not retreat into overt geopolitical competition.

Proving to their citizens that they can manage the COVID-19 crisis will buy leaders some political capital. But those who fail will find it hard to resist the temptation to blame others for their failure.

A More China-Centric Globalization

by *Kishore Mahbubani*

The COVID-19 pandemic will not fundamentally alter global economic directions. It will only accelerate a change that had already begun: a move away from U.S.-centric globalization to a more China-centric globalization.

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Why will this trend continue? The American population has lost faith in globalization and international trade. Free trade agreements are toxic, with or without U.S. President Donald Trump. By contrast, China has not lost faith. Why not? There are deeper historical reasons. Chinese leaders now know well that China's century of humiliation from 1842 to 1949 was a result of its own complacency and a futile effort by its leaders to cut it off from the world. By contrast, the past few decades of economic resurgence were a result of global engagement. The Chinese people have also experienced an explosion of cultural confidence. They believe they can compete anywhere.

Consequently, as I document in my new book, *Has China Won?*, the United States has two choices. If its primary goal is to maintain global primacy, it will have to engage in a zero-sum geopolitical contest, politically and economically, with China. However, if the goal of the United States is to improve the well-being of the American people—whose social condition has deteriorated—it should cooperate with China. Wiser counsel would suggest that cooperation would be the better choice. However, given the toxic U.S. political environment toward China, wiser counsel may not prevail.

Democracies Will Come out of Their Shell

by *G. John Ikenberry*

In the short term, the crisis will give fuel to all the various camps in the Western grand strategy debate. The nationalists and anti-globalists, the China hawks, and even the liberal internationalists will all see new evidence for the urgency of their views. Given the economic damage and social collapse that is unfolding, it is hard to see anything other than a reinforcement of the movement toward nationalism, great-power rivalry, strategic decoupling, and the like.

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But just like in the 1930s and '40s, there might also be a slower-evolving countercurrent, a sort of hardheaded internationalism similar to the one that Franklin D. Roosevelt and a few other statesmen began to articulate before and during the war. The 1930s collapse of the world economy showed how connected modern societies were and how vulnerable they were to what FDR called contagion. The United States was less threatened by other great powers than by the deep forces—and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character—of modernity. What FDR and other internationalists conjured was a postwar order that would rebuild an open system with new forms of protection and capacities to manage interdependence. The United States couldn't simply hide within its borders, but to operate in an open postwar order required the building of a global infrastructure of multilateral cooperation.

So the United States and other Western democracies might travel through this same sequence of reactions driven by a cascading sense of vulnerability; the response might be more nationalist at first, but over the longer term, the democracies will come out of their shells to find a new type of pragmatic and protective internationalism.

Lower Profits, but More Stability

by *Shannon K. O'Neil*

COVID-19 is undermining the basic tenets of global manufacturing. Companies will now rethink and shrink the multistep, multicountry supply chains that dominate production today.

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Global supply chains were already coming under fire—economically, due to rising Chinese labor costs, U.S. President Donald Trump’s trade war, and advances in robotics, automation, and 3D printing, as well as politically, due to real and perceived job losses, especially in mature economies. COVID-19 has now broken many of these links: Factory closings in afflicted areas have left other manufacturers—as well as hospitals, pharmacies, supermarkets, and retail stores—bereft of inventories and products.

On the other side of the pandemic, more companies will demand to know more about where their supplies come from and will trade off efficiency for redundancy. Governments will intervene as well, forcing what they consider strategic industries to have domestic backup plans and reserves. Profitability will fall, but supply stability should rise.

This Pandemic Can Serve a Useful Purpose

by *Shivshankar Menon*

It is early days yet, but three things seem apparent. First, the coronavirus pandemic will change our politics, both within states and between them. It is to the power of government that societies—even libertarians—have turned. Government’s relative success in overcoming the pandemic and its economic effects will exacerbate or diminish security issues and the recent polarization within societies. Either way, government is back. Experience so far shows that authoritarians or populists are no better at handling the pandemic. Indeed, the countries that responded early and successfully, such as

Korea and Taiwan, have been democracies—not those run by populist or authoritarian leaders.

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Secondly, this is not yet the end of an interconnected world. The pandemic itself is proof of our interdependence.

But in all polities, there is already a turning inward, a search for autonomy and control of one's own fate. We are headed for a poorer, meaner, and smaller world.

Finally, there are signs of hope and good sense. India took the initiative to convene a video conference of all South Asian leaders to craft a common regional response to the threat. If the pandemic shocks us into recognizing our real interest in cooperating multilaterally on the big global issues facing us, it will have served a useful purpose.

American Power Will Need a New Strategy

by Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

In 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a new national security strategy that focuses on great-power competition. COVID-19 shows this strategy to be inadequate. Even if the United States prevails as a great power, it cannot protect its security by acting alone. As Richard Danzig summarized the problem in 2018: "Twenty-first century technologies are global not just in their distribution, but also in their consequences. Pathogens, AI systems, computer viruses, and radiation that others may accidentally release could become as much our problem as theirs. Agreed reporting systems, shared controls, common contingency plans, norms, and treaties must be pursued as means of moderating our numerous mutual risks."

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On transnational threats like COVID-19 and climate change, it is not enough to think of American power over other nations. The key to success is also learning the importance of power with others. Every country puts its national interest first; the important question is how broadly or narrowly this interest is defined. COVID-19 shows we are failing to adjust our strategy to this new world.

The History of COVID-19 Will Be Written by the Victors

by *John Allen*

As it has always been, history will be written by the “victors” of the COVID-19 crisis. Every nation, and increasingly every individual, is experiencing the societal strain of this disease in new and powerful ways. Inevitably, those nations that persevere—both by virtue of their unique political and economic systems, as well as from a public health perspective—will claim success over those who experience a different, more devastating outcome. To some, this will appear as a great and definitive triumph for democracy, multilateralism, and universal health care. To others, it will showcase the clear “benefits” of decisive, authoritarian rule.

To some, this will appear as a great and definitive triumph for democracy. To others, it will showcase the clear “benefits” of authoritarian rule.

Either way, this crisis will reshuffle the international power structure in ways we can only begin to imagine. COVID-19 will continue to depress economic activity and increase tension between countries. Over the long term, the pandemic will likely significantly reduce the productive capacity of the global economy, especially if businesses

close and individuals detach from the labor force. This risk of dislocation is especially great for developing nations and others with a large share of economically vulnerable workers. The international system will, in turn, come under great pressure, resulting in instability and widespread conflict within and across countries.

A Dramatic New Stage in Global Capitalism

by Laurie Garrett

The fundamental shock to the world's financial and economic system is the recognition that global supply chains and distribution networks are deeply vulnerable to disruption. The coronavirus pandemic will therefore not only have long-lasting economic effects, but lead to a more fundamental change. Globalization allowed companies to farm out manufacturing all over the world and deliver their products to markets on a just-in-time basis, bypassing the costs of warehousing. Inventories that sat on shelves for more than a few days were considered market failures. Supply had to be sourced and shipped on a carefully orchestrated, global level. COVID-19 has proven that pathogens can not only infect people but poison the entire just-in-time system.

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Given the scale of financial market losses the world has experienced since February, companies are likely to come out of this pandemic decidedly gun-shy about the just-in-time model and about globally dispersed production. The result could be a dramatic new stage in global capitalism, in which supply chains are brought closer to home and filled with redundancies to protect against future disruption. That may cut into companies' near-term profits but render the entire system more resilient.

More Failed States

by *Richard N. Haass*

Permanent is not a word I am fond of, as little or nothing is, but I would think the coronavirus crisis will at least for a few years lead most governments to turn inward, focusing on what takes place within their borders rather than on what happens beyond them. I anticipate greater moves toward selective self-sufficiency (and, as a result, decoupling) given supply chain vulnerability; even greater opposition to large-scale immigration; and a reduced willingness or commitment to tackle regional or global problems (including climate change) given the perceived need to dedicate resources to rebuild at home and deal with economic consequences of the crisis.

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I would expect many countries will have difficulty recovering from the crisis, with state weakness and failed states becoming an even more prevalent feature of the world. The crisis will likely contribute to the ongoing deterioration of Sino-American relations and the weakening of European integration. On the positive side, we should see some modest strengthening of global public health governance. But overall, a crisis rooted in globalization will weaken rather than add to the world's willingness and ability to deal with it.

The United States Has Failed the Leadership Test

by *Kori Schake*

The United States will no longer be seen as an international leader.

The United States will no longer be seen as an international leader because of its government's narrow self-interest and bungling incompetence. The global effects of this pandemic could have been greatly attenuated by having international organizations provide more and earlier information, which would have given governments time to prepare and direct resources to where they're most needed. This is something the United States could have organized, showing that while it is self-interested, it is not solely self-interested. Washington has failed the leadership test, and the world is worse off for it.

In Every Country, We See the Power of the Human Spirit

by *Nicholas Burns*

The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest global crisis of this century. Its depth and scale are enormous. The public health crisis threatens each of the 7.8 billion people on Earth. The financial and economic crisis could exceed in its impact the Great Recession of 2008-2009. Each crisis alone could provide a seismic shock that permanently changes the international system and balance of power as we know it.

That provides hope that men and women around the world can prevail in response to this extraordinary challenge.

To date, international collaboration has been woefully insufficient. If the United States and China, the world's most powerful countries, cannot put aside their war of words over which of them is responsible for the crisis and lead more effectively, both countries' credibility may be significantly diminished. If the European Union cannot provide more targeted assistance to its 500 million citizens, national governments might take back more power from Brussels in the future. In the United States, what is most at stake is the ability of the federal government to provide effective measures to stem the crisis.

In every country, however, there are many examples of the power of the human spirit—of doctors, nurses, political leaders, and ordinary citizens demonstrating resilience, effectiveness, and leadership. That provides hope that men and women around the world can prevail in response to this extraordinary challenge.

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