



## Coronavirus and Power: The Impact on International Politics

*Sven Biscop*

*This will change everything. It is an understandable feeling. When people pass through an ordeal, they want to believe that when all is over there will be some compensation. Things may indeed change, but perhaps not as radically as may seem likely today in the midst of the crisis – and not all change will be for the better. What change could the corona crisis bring to international politics?*

More than anything else, this is a test of legitimacy for every government, though not necessarily for the political system as such. Does our government care for our health, and is it capable of protecting us? In the democracies, governments that fail to act timely and decisively, will most likely lose the next elections. They might have lost them anyway, of course, even without a pandemic occurring. Few people if anybody will question the democratic system as such, however. (Though one should be vigilant and make sure that the extraordinary measures

now rightfully taken are not abused or unduly prolonged).

But even authoritarian systems are more likely to endure than not. China's disastrously late reaction caused a lot of unrest with its citizens. Such blatant disregard for people's lives inevitably brought back bad memories of the worst excesses of Mao's rule. The crisis may strengthen 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 which would critically assess the way the crisis was addressed, 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 that his successor 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.

### **INSTRUMENTALISING THE VIRUS**

That the regime in Beijing is nervous is clear enough, though, hence the massive soft power campaign of providing assistance to Italy and other countries. This is addressed to China's domestic audience first of all. What better proof that China is on top of things than images of grateful Europeans, demonstrating that even Europe needs China's help? The aid is, of course, gratefully received, regardless of the political agenda attached, but the Europeans themselves are unlikely to forget that without China's initial attempt to hide the outbreak, the world might have limited its spread. Within the EU, at least, Beijing's charm offensive will therefore 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; even Prime Minister Li Keqiang has called on officials not to cover up new cases as China is winding down its lockdown measures.

In Africa, however, the early arrival of Chinese aid may greatly enhance its reputation. The absence of the United States is all the more striking. By not taking the crisis seriously, Donald Trump lost the opportunity for the US to play any role in international solidarity and coordination. It may even cost him his re-election (in which case in Washington too one can hope for a more constructive foreign policy).

The great powers in their rivalry instrumentalise everything, so it was only to be expected that they would instrumentalise the coronavirus too. Though perhaps not how far they would take this: the suggestion by the spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry that the US army is somehow to blame is preposterous, and unworthy of China – and the Chinese Ambassador to the US has actually said as much.

The same goes for similar Russian disinformation campaigns (alternatively blaming the US, Europe, and China), and for Trump pretending it was all just a Democrat hoax. Trump's initial insistence on identifying corona as a Chinese virus was not helpful either. Viruses do not have a nationality; governments do.

### **THE BALANCE OF POWER**

On those governments it will depend whether the corona crisis will change the balance between the great powers. This is a relative matter: the virus affects everybody, but will it have more impact on some than on others? Those 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.

Vladimir Putin, instead of taking early measures, sent aid to Italy (in military aircraft marked "from Russia with love"; one assumes that Russian forces in Syria and Ukraine use other markings). As a result, Russia may be hit hard, and it has but limited means to spend on recovery (and low energy prices will limit them even further). Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine a change of political system in Russia. In any case, Russia already is the weakest of the great powers, so if it lags further behind the impact on the balance of power will be limited. In a positive twist, a weakened Russia might seek to normalise its relations with the European Union, in order to avoid having to become truly 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 this scenario is probably overoptimistic.

China is doing its utmost to prove that it has overcome the crisis. In the short term, even if it is first to gradually resume business as usual, a China that is hard hit itself cannot benefit that

much, though, if the European and American economies then grind to a halt. This will not just be a repeat of the 2008 financial crisis, when China was able to take advantage of the lack of investment from US and EU sources. The question is whether in the medium term all three powers recover more or less to the same extent and at the same pace. The US, where Trump belatedly awoke to the seriousness of the threat, is obviously at great risk. Fortunately, the US can mobilise massive means for recovery.

So can the EU; now indeed the EU must prove that it can do better than after the 2008 financial crisis and protect the livelihood of its citizens rather than just the banks. After the 2016 British vote for Brexit, 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: strong Keynesian policies must create an economically vibrant and socially just Union. (How the UK will fare, on its own now and under a Prime Minister who unfortunately seems to have taken his cue from Trump, is another question).

If one power falls behind the other two, it will lose global markets and influence to the benefit of the others. But, paradoxically, if one really collapses, that risks pulling down the others as well, so to some extent all three have an interest in a minimal recovery of the others (though not all of their leaders may see it as such).

At the same time, the corona crisis will accelerate US and even EU action, which they were envisaging already, to reduce the interdependence with China (and others) by reviewing the supply chains in critical sectors. Chinese attempts to use the crisis to increase their presence in Europe and America (provided Beijing can mobilise the means in view of its undoubtedly underreported domestic problems) will be viewed with a lot more suspicion this time. Nevertheless, this is about reorganizing globalisation, not undoing it –

at basis, deep economic interdependence will remain.

### **CONCLUSION: CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE**

All in all, the balance of power may not change that much, nor are relations between the powers likely to become more cordial (unless a change of leadership occurs in Washington *and* Beijing). If Europeans want the corona crisis to lead to change for the better, they will have to actively create that change themselves therefore. The EU, in other words, will have to positively instrumentalise the crisis. This could be a chance to try and strengthen global governance in areas such as health, and to organise the EU's interdependence with China and others on a more rational basis.

The domestic front is the most important: the EU institutions as well as the Member States must abandon the fetish of the balanced budget, and focus on productive investment and social justice. European integration must return to its roots. The founders of the European Economic Community were also the founders of the welfare state: only the two together, they knew, could guarantee peace and stability. If the coronavirus can help Europe to rediscover this truth that all too many have forgotten, the crisis will not have been in vain.

*Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, an Honorary Fellow of the EU's European Security and Defence College (ESDC), directs the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels and lectures at Ghent University. His latest book is [European Strategy in the 21st Century](#) (Routledge, 2019); the next one he is now writing at home.*

*The author warmly thanks his colleagues at Egmont and in Ghent, Jo Coelmont, Rik Coolsaet, Tobias Gehrke, Alexander Mattelaer, Johan Verbeke, and Mattias Vermeiren, for their insightful comments and suggestions.*



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