

The United States Post–COVID-19

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Bill Gates first called the COVID-19 pandemic the defining moment of this era, likening it to World War II.¹ World leaders followed suit, with Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte invoking Winston Churchill's words to describe "Italy's darkest hour," and Queen Elizabeth referencing the lyrics of the 1939 Vera Lynn "We'll Meet Again."² The United Kingdom's Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, describes the British Coronavirus Bill as "measures that would be unprecedented in peacetime," because it allows the erosion of the robust democratic institutions that have been the framework for civilized society for over two centuries.³

How do we fight an enemy that cannot be sensed? How do we win a war, where the front-line fighters are no longer soldiers in uniforms but health workers in blue scrubs? How do we maintain hope, when the fear of death does not come from the sound of a jet engine roaring above but the sound of a pneumonia-like rattling cough and even the most sophisticated technology available to mankind has left half the world's population in lockdown?

Rest assured there will be life after COVID-19. However, the post–Covid-19 world will look dramatically different than it did before. We believe that the world and history will be split across the middle by this monumental event, much as most of the Western world conceptualizes history in the Christian BC (before Christ) and AD (anno domini) paradigm, as permanent lines in the sand to think about the world. The virus will spawn a Before COVID (BC) Post-COVID (PC) paradigm. Children born during these times will be labelled as Generation C.

Threats on US Soil

The United States is blessed with an uncomplicated neighborhood and protected by oceans on either side. Therefore, it is unaccustomed to attacks of any kind on its soil—man-made or otherwise. Rest assured any threat causes deep durable changes to its national security landscape, and the virus will have a profound impact on the United States and its associated geopolitics. To understand why and the magnitude, consider this fact—since Pearl Harbor, this is only the third instance of civilian devastation at this scale on American soil. Can the COVID pandemic be likened to monumental events like Pearl Harbor and 9/11?

In eerie parallels to the evolving US–China relations, the relationship between Washington and Tokyo eroded through the late 1930s. The belligerent aggression of the Japanese government was met with stricter sanctions and trade embargoes from the United States, causing an effective stalemate in diplomatic relationships.

On 7 December 1941, an enemy in stealth devastated a US naval base in Honolulu, killing 2,400 civilians, which became immortalized as the turning point in the history of World War II. The US Congress, urged by Pres. Franklin D Roosevelt, declared war on Japan with war on Germany and Italy being declared a few days after.⁴

Similarly, the seeds for 9/11 were sown as early as 1993, with Osama bin Laden’s campaign to “Expel the United States from the Muslim World” following the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War.⁵ The attack, which resulted in the death of nearly 3,000 US civilians, spurred the United States Global War on Terror and almost completely defined the remaining tenure of George W. Bush as a major war-time president.⁶



(US Army National Guard graphic by Wayne Thomas)

Figure 1. Our altered work environment. Artwork to illustrate the concept of teleworking or remote work by US Department of Defense members during COVID-19.

Back to the Future

“May you live in interesting times” is an unverifiable, unattributable proverb, long considered a Chinese curse. These are interesting times indeed. Not since

World War II and 9/11 has this kind of devastation been seen on American soil.⁷ At almost 94,000 deaths of US citizens till date, COVID-19 has far exceeded the combined death toll of two of the most monumental events in recent American history. Those numbers also exceed the numbers on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC. The world waits with bated breath for the White House to respond.

There are some obvious responses. Author Yuval Harari sums it up eloquently: “Once the storm passes, we will inhabit a different world.”⁸ International travel will be forever altered; masks and sterilization equipment will become the new norm; student life will never be the same again; and work will follow strict social distancing norms with work from home at least a few days a week becoming a new normal. However, the geopolitical ramifications are even larger and more complex still.

National Security and Biosafety

Post-9/11 natural disasters and epidemic disease were placed within the remit of the Department of Homeland Security. Post-COVID we can expect a more vigorous reinclusion and readoption of biosafety into the national security framework. One should not be surprised to see a Five Eyes equivalent exclusively focused on pandemics and bio-risks. Among other things there will also be greater scrutiny around biosafety level-4 (BSL-4) labs and the controversial gain-of-function work performed in them. Currently, there are around 70 BSL-4 sites in 30 countries, and more facilities are in the works. The Wuhan Institute of Virology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, at the center of attention in the COVID saga is a BSL-4 site.⁹ We can also expect the United States to lead an international effort to call for sanctions and fines on countries that fail to report outbreaks in a timely fashion.

Older people are most vulnerable to such pandemics. Hence the risk of future outbreaks will be most severe in countries with an aging population. Today more than 10 percent of the US population is over 70. By 2050, that number is expected to account for 17 percent. Mitigation strategies will have to be put in place and health policies will have to be reshaped to reduce future costs.¹⁰ Going forward the Food and Drug Administration might even relax standards to fast-track technologies to market.

Gated Globalization and New Supply Chains

In 1918, it took six days to cross the Atlantic on a ship; in 2020, it takes six hours on an airplane. From 1995 to 2018, global air traffic grew from 1.3 to 4.3 billion passengers.¹¹ Air travel has a strong impact on the spread of epidemics.¹²

The increase in globalization witnessed after the fall of the Soviet Union has led to an interconnected, trade-dependent and driven world. That world is also more fragile. The response to that fragility will be a push for greater nationalism, a trajectory already causing fissures across the world. Supply chains will be nationalized and diversified and excess capacity will be created. Excess capacity and redundancy will replace the “just-in-time” supply that consumers have all come to take for granted.¹³

The Chinese stamp on the essential supply chain is glaring. For example, China is currently the dominant producer of surgical masks, producing nearly 50 percent of the N95 respirators that are so critical for the basic safety of health workers.¹⁴ China also produces most of the active pharmaceutical ingredients required for the manufacture of antibiotics.¹⁵ Beijing views Western countries’ incentives for reduction of Chinese dependence on domestic manufacturing as a war cry, causing further strain on international relationships that already lack trust.¹⁶ US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s criticism of Beijing’s delayed response and lack of transparency echoes Western sentiments currently portraying China as untrustworthy.¹⁷

We can expect a host of new rules. These will include guidelines for where American companies can send their chips for fabrication and where they can accept capital from.

New World Order—Gazing into the Future

In the aftermath of the virus, the temperatures will rise further in the new Cold War between the United States and China. Other countries will be compelled to take sides, and the world may find itself being split into two teams—those with the United States and those with China, with little room for ambiguity in the middle. Thus, another casualty will be certain international multilateral organizations. The World Health Organization will likely be among the first to be targeted, and to survive, it will need a radical overhaul and to expect Chinese influence to be challenged.

As the world grapples with the day-to-day struggles amid this pandemic, leaders are being forced to answer difficult questions. Is the correct response to this crisis increased nationalism or global solidarity? Perhaps the solution lies in yet another alliance—one defined by the concepts of democracy, transparency, and

open systems that have robust economic and military cooperation with each other while promoting sanctions against closed and authoritarian systems.¹⁸ While China does not have a bench strength of controlled territories or strong allies, a widespread boycott of China's role in the global economy might have consequences similar to the advent of the Soviet Union's Iron Curtain.¹⁹ Unlike the nuclear arms race of the previous century, technologies such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and genomics will drive the ideological supremacy of this new Cold War.²⁰

Scientist and policy analyst Vaclav Smil wrote about a long overdue pandemic in his 2019 book, *Growth*.²¹ In January 2017, the US National Security Council, as a part of the transition to the new administration, highlighted the importance of a robust US response to a global pandemic.²² Large-scale pandemics were yet again highlighted as a very significant risk by the 2019 US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence as part of its annual risk assessment—heralded as one of the top threats facing the nation.²³

It would be intellectually lazy and incompetent to call COVID-19 a black swan event. By some estimates, the recurrence interval of pandemics is about once every 28 years.²⁴ Pandemics are better described as white swan events—predictable and foreseeable.²⁵

The question beckons why and how did we miss this? Is it a collective failure or a let down by the few? The lack of global leadership and coordination has been perplexing. By the time the G7 managed to organize a videoconference, it was already the third week of March.

For better or for worse the world will never be the same again. Keep the masks on, and let's wait and watch.

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Notes

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