
Great Power, COVID-19, and Our Global Future

A FOREWORD BY RACHEL KYTE

It is time to refresh and reexamine our understanding of Great Power theory. As was the case in 430 BC, when the Plague of Athens killed almost one-third of its population and changed the course of the Peloponnesian Wars, COVID-19 threatens to alter the trajectory of the new Great Power competition.

2020 may be the year when the warnings of a new Great Power struggle seem prescient, however, rather than analyzing great powers through the lens of their wars, won, and lost, we swapped out that lens for one of pandemic and looming existential threats. 2020 may be the year when the mark of a Great Power becomes its ability to win a war against a pandemic virus.

How countries manage and protect their people and economies from the virus is forming their collective sense of heroism (frontline workers), sacrifice (lockdown for the common good), and identity (“together, we can do this” mentality). Coming at a time when in the West, the identity-forming, “good” wars of the first half of the 20th century are fading away, the COVID-19 experience may form a powerful shared memory.

We will still distinguish Great Powers by their relative power, their type of regime, and the quality of their leadership. But as pandemics have shown throughout history, they can often act as accelerants of demise or ascent. War is an ever-present danger, but together with the threats of nuclear proliferation and cyber-attack are threats from pandemics and climate change.

Rachel Kyte is the 14th dean of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. Prior to joining Fletcher, Kyte served as special representative of the UN secretary-general. In her UN role and as CEO of SEforAll, a nonprofit public/private platform created from an initiative of the UN secretary-general, Kyte led efforts to promote and finance clean, affordable energy and low-carbon growth as part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the context of the Paris Agreement.

As we entered the 2020s, the decade stretched ahead of us. There were signs of a deglobalization with Europe, China, and the United States inhabiting different parts of an ice floe, breaking up and flowing apart. Rather like the impacts of climate change on the poles, no one was sure how fast and how far apart they would float. At the same time, there were signs of concern for the global economy, as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned of instability born of inequality. China's 14th five-year plan, due in Spring 2020, was to be the most critical climate action plan the world was ever to see, with the hopes and aspirations of the world bound up in the levels of ambition for their energy transition. While the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals arrived at their last decade of implementation, the blueprint for a world better than today remained hidden beneath the surface. At the same time, two more—climate change and pandemic disease—hid in plain sight. The Fourth Industrial Revolution was underway, and digitalization, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, if managed, offered opportunities for more inclusive and more sustainable development.

We do not know what will come to pass as COVID-19 settles into our world—will China recover first and advance its military and economic strategic objectives? Will the difficulty of grappling with a novel coronavirus, as well as the economic impacts of fighting it, reinvigorate international cooperation and revive multilateralism? Or will we muddle along? Watching one or more of these paths unfold will open an essential new chapter in the way we think about Great Powers.

Since 1945, the US has been the leading military, economic, and technological power. When there was a global crisis, the world most often looked to Washington for leadership and solutions. The US has based its soft power on a well-earned reputation as a pragmatic, problem-solving, economics-minded, and technologically innovative global actor, including in public health.

However, the United States' international stance in response to COVID-19, consistent with the nationalism of "America First," has been a disdain for, and retreat from, global institutions and agreements, creating a power vacuum and fraying the binding ties which underpin landmark international institutions. Despite all the evidence that absent active global coordination, both defeating COVID-19 and restarting the global economy will be more difficult, a narrow definition of American self-interest has emerged fully onto the international stage.

Will China occupy the space vacated by the United States? As the United States announced it would cut its contribution to the World Health

Organization (WHO), China announced a modest increase. As the United States announced it would withdraw from the WHO, China remained to shape the response and the inquiry into WHO's actions in the early weeks of the pandemic's spread. China has worked assiduously to claim as a success its domestic management of the pandemic and its loyal support to other nations. Combatting the virus has become an instrument of its soft power. What has been called China's "mask diplomacy"—delivering plane loads of masks, protective gear, and ventilators to countries in all regions of the world—has received mixed reviews. While many countries praise Beijing for stepping up when others haven't, some of the supplies have been faulty.

At the same time, U.S. antagonism towards instruments of cooperation on public health, blame of China for the spread of the virus, and diversion of supplies of medical equipment and Personal Protective Equipment from allies have undermined its global response. The United States moves to block efforts to support increased financial capacity for the IMF so it may manage requests from member countries and to stop the United Nations Security Council from agreeing on a resolution. It simultaneously de-fangs G20 resolutions on global health cooperation, while fumbling its G7 leadership means that its allies and others openly question its standing as the "necessary" nation. Additionally, it has seemingly been unwilling to use its chairpersonship of the G7 to galvanize global leadership at a time of peril.

These two most prominent of today's Great Powers has had a great start to the pandemic. Both have been accused of at best, obfuscation and delay, and at worst, willful manipulation and dangerous pursuit of narrowly defined self-interest.

Both China and the United States are leaving few propaganda stones unturned to create their narratives and counternarratives as to who has acted honorably and competently in managing the crisis, and who is a partner to others in managing the global response. China's heavy-handedness in creating a narrative has also ruffled feathers. The inevitable independent review of what happened in the early weeks of the virus will test Beijing, though its persistent quest to rewrite the narrative may be rooted in domestic concerns, as China suffered the worst economic growth for decades at the height of the outbreak in Wuhan.

The United States is shaping its narrative with an eye on the stock market and other economic data in an election year. Both in China and the United States, disquiet at home over the response to COVID-19 may challenge the legitimacy of their respective leadership.

The United States, despite a proud history of soft power projection in global public health, has struggled to project competence and has been

immune to calls for deepening cooperation. The technology rivalry between the two Great Powers has been on display in response to COVID-19 as well. China has deployed artificial intelligence both for health surveillance and for understanding the spread of the disease. Beijing has also used the U.S. COVID-19 distraction as an opportunity to assert its sovereignty, in particular, in Hong Kong, as well as to impose its claims on disputed territories in the South China Sea.

Given that no country can self-isolate or isolate others from a pandemic or climate change, the next crisis on the horizon, will the Great Powers find common cause?

COVID-19 hits the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest, and recurrent waves of the pandemic will batter poorer countries harshly. The virus will work against the self-interest of the Great Powers, not only in providing a launching pad for the virus to return in colder months to the northern hemisphere, but also, as the pandemic undermines progress on poverty and economic development over the last thirty years, as a new source of migrants. Already straining under the pressure of gaps in energy access to healthy diets, the financial, economic, and health crises that the pandemic has brought about threatens peace and security regionally while posing threats internationally.

COVID-19 seems to ring the death knell for economic globalization, accentuating the turn to nationalist policies in critical countries and focusing Powers on their frontiers as they seek to control the virus and realize the fragility of extenuated global supply chains. Therefore, the bell will toll for the institutions that such globalization requires. There would seem to be growing evidence that the rest of the world believes that the United States is failing the pandemic leadership test, as well as the climate and nuclear proliferation tests. Having signaled, at least rhetorically, its withdrawal from international instruments of cooperation, the United States forces others to move ahead without it. Europe, in particular, hopes to keep the doors open for America to rejoin at some future point. Nevertheless, as the United States vacates the international arena, China may take the crisis as an opportunity to start setting new rules.

What would a new era of pandemic-inspired cooperation look like? Great Power leadership would be essential for a massive COVID-19 support program, galvanizing the world to build the public health systems almost all countries are lacking, and which could not only mitigate the worst of this novel virus, but certain zoonotic diseases still to emerge, and resilience to the much larger shocks as a result of climate change.

The Great Powers may usefully co-operate to ensure that the interna-

tional financial system can withstand the unprecedented demands made of the IMF to provide support from countries of all income levels and every region. The solution set developed in the late 1940s may no longer be fit for purpose in the next period, where threats can be global and concentrated rapidly in real-time. Since the last global financial crisis in 2008, China has grown in size and economic power and assumes a more prominent seat at the table. China's role as the most consequential development partner for several countries that prefer the United States as their security partner complicates Great Power dynamics. 2020 is a year of maximum danger, a moment when China's growth, coming closer to parity in economic terms with the United States and matched with a muscular policy in the South China sea, may, on the one hand, be paused by the economic impact of the virus. On the other, China may use the apparent disarray of the United States and other Western powers as a moment to exert control and project power.

If the United States were to exercise its soft power, could the pandemic offer a golden opportunity to reset global cooperation in preparation for the even more significant crises on the horizon? If China were to develop its soft power fully, could the same be true? Or will the virus serve only to accelerate the shift to more nationalist populism and authoritarianism? A Great Power rivalry with bared teeth may not equate to a pathway to deeper international cooperation but may further mount tensions in contested areas of projected power as well as in the corridors of international organizations.

It's too early to tell, but COVID-19, like the Plague of Athens, will not leave any powers unscathed. If, in the words of Stephen Walt, COVID-19 heralds a world that is "less open, less prosperous and less free," which path the Great Powers take will have enormous implications for the future of the entire world. And whichever way we end up traveling along post-COVID-19, understanding the relationship between Great Powers will be critical to our analysis of a decade crucial for the furtherance of global well-being. *f*