

# In a World of Pandemic: A Snapshot of the Geopolitical Spectrum



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## Introduction

As 2019 drew to a close, few people could have imagined the changes that the world would experience over the succeeding six months. True, there were reports circulating of an unusual disease in the middle of China but talk of an epidemic, let alone a pandemic were restricted to a small circle of epidemiologists and left-field preppers. As the New Year dawned, so the stories took on a more definitive shape and by February it was clear that the world was on the brink of something not seen for the better part of a century. Since March we have seen, to a greater or lesser extent, countries locking down; telling their citizens to stay at home regardless of the damage to their respective national economies.

As we sit at home pondering the future, we tend to talk about “getting back to normal”; as if there will come a point in the near future where COVID19 clouds will lift,

disappear and life will be as it was: industries will restart, people will go back to their employ, stopping at a convenient barista for their double espresso. Reality will be very different I suspect. Pandemics have a tendency to linger for a substantial time with a series of successive waves, some more deadly than those before and, unless and until, an effective vaccine is found and administered, certain parts of the population will be at great risk. This article aims to explore what the world might be like and what are the key pressures that will shape our world in the decades to come.

## **The Post-COVID19 World**

In 1999, Erik Durschmied wrote a book entitled *The Hinge Factor – How Chance and Stupidity Have Changed History*<sup>1</sup>. He looked at those points in history where a single incident changed the course of human advancement. The COVID19 virus may well be that sort of event.

The majority of the world's population looks at a relatively simplistic view of the situation – there was the pre-COVID world where people mingled with other people; travelled on trains and buses; met over drinks in a bar and spent Saturday afternoon at a football match. Then there is the COVID reality – closeted at home rarely venturing far and then only once a day for the prescribed period of exercise. The third phase should be where we return to the first one and all normal social freedoms are restored.

But will it?

To some extent, we are all epidemiologists now, professing great knowledge and experience on the behaviour of these zoonotic viruses: we understand the importance of  $R_0$  and the mechanisms by which the virus flourishes. We were prepared to lockdown but now we are bored with that, we want to go back to our social lives and to earning money to pay the bills. On the issue of relaxation of the lockdown, the scientific community is at best confused. The evidence so far is not sufficient for clear, unequivocal scientific guidance and politicians have to base their future strategies on a mix of politics, social media and economic pressures from different lobby groups.

Within this febrile international environment, national interests will prevail in a true Palmerstonian fashion<sup>2</sup>. We can see this very clearly in the manner in which European Union nations have approached the pandemic with little, or no input from Brussels. The World Health Organisation, the UN's agency dealing with global health, has been side

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<sup>1</sup> The Hinge Factor: Durschmied E.1999 Hodder and Stoughton

<sup>2</sup> We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow. Speech, House of Commons, 1 March 1848

lined by the United States' government which has withdrawn all US funding of the organisation. The message seems to be clear: nations, you are on your own.

## Role of the US

Over the last four years the US has been gripped by a form of existential angst, led by a man who is at times highly erratic, appears to be quite simple-minded and, in many ways, totally unsuited to be the leader of a minor county let alone that of the world's acknowledged super-power. His every move is predicated on what is good for Donald Trump, he has no empathy with other human beings and will lash out at friends and foes alike with little or no thought, especially if they gainsay him on any matter – especially one in which they are an acknowledged expert. Over the four years of his presidency he has destroyed much of the trust that existed in the post-World War II order, originally crafted by the US and established with American allies and adopted by most of the world's nations as a pragmatic, if imperfect, manner of running the world's affairs.



The current occupant of the White House seems to be intent on demolishing the established World Order and returning the US to its original founders' roots of isolationism. The "America First" slogan may play well in the Rust Belt of middle America but ignores reality and the US's position as the world's superpower. The inherent inequalities in American society have widened over the last 20 years with the bottom 10% seeing no increase in income in real terms whereas the top 10% have seen their income increase by a massive 50%. Such inequalities are already tearing the heart out of the Great American Dream.

The withdrawal of American leadership and influence leaves a vacuum in geostrategic terms; a vacuum that will be filled by China as an emergent superpower, a swing away from the influence of Western democracy and a rise in autocracy and intolerance.

The US dollar has been the world's currency since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but is losing the trust of the world's nations as America has weaponised its currency, particularly in its pursuit of Iran. Loss of this reserve currency status will cost America dearly.

In short, the US went into the COVID pandemic in an unenviable position. It was totally unprepared having axed a number of precautions set up by the previous administration, it lacked focus on how to deal with infections and the only consistent approach was to place the blame fairly and squarely on China. The Administration is more focused on the re-election prospects for the President and less on stemming the largest death toll of all countries from the pandemic.

The Presidential election in November 2020 will be probably the most critical moment in American history for several decades and will determine the global strategic environment for many years to come.

## Rise of China



In a recent work, Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singaporean ambassador to the UN, looks at the rise of China over the last 20 years<sup>3</sup> and posits that the United States' behaviour in 2020 has more similarity to the sclerotic activities of the former USSR in the 1970s and 80s than it does to the energetic, innovative and dynamic country that won the Cold War. At the same time, China has embarked on the development of a buoyant and dynamic economy that is likely to overtake the US within the next decade or so. One of the many traits we ascribe to China is the ability to think strategically over a period of many years. In contrast, we, in the West, have our horizons firmly set on the next election or major political event. Sometimes, however, we have taken a longer and more studied view of the world. In 1944, George F. Kennan, a US career diplomat, sent the 'Long Telegram' from the US Embassy in Moscow including the advice:

*"[US needs]... long-term patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."*

He followed this up in 1947 when he published an anonymous article in *Foreign Affairs*<sup>4</sup> stressing the need to take a long, hard look at how to deal with the Soviet Union's view of the world. This policy was followed by successive US Presidents and led, inevitably, to the collapse of the Soviet Union 42 years later.

To many in the West, China is seen as an inherently communist country, imbued with all that philosophy implies. In reality, China is the oldest civilisation in the world and, after one and a half centuries of living in the shadow of other nations, is anxious to reclaim its former position. China's activities are all geared to that end rather than to ensuring the global domination of communism. Her activities in the South China Sea are designed not to meet any aims of territorial expansion, but rather to ensure defence-in-depth of the 'Middle Kingdom' and to safeguard its very existence with an autocratic and, at times, a vicious dictatorship. Similarly, the position of Taiwan, like that of Hong Kong and Macau, is of a territory considered integral to the very existence of China. Indeed, this is clearly seen in the current over-writing of Hong Kong's Basic Law by the pliant and rubber-stamping Beijing-supported Chief Executive of Hong Kong.

<sup>3</sup> "Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy" Kishore Mahbubani. Public Affairs, New York 31 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Affairs – July 1947 Washington, USA

Chinese wider, territorial ambitions are, simply, non-existent. As in previous guises, it only looks to other countries to recognise the importance and high status of China rather than seeking territorial conquest.

The Chinese, as an ethnic group, are very proud of their heritage and long, distinguished history to such an extent that they are one of the most xenophobic nations (tribes) on the planet. They look down at all other nationalities as inferior and their treatment of Africans is even more disdainful than the earlier colonial master. Look at the way in which they are dealing with the Uyghur population – setting up “re-education” camps that seem to have more in common with those of Nazi Germany than American summer camps.

If we look at China from this perspective it is easy to appreciate the long-term strategy inherent in the militarisation of the disputed islands and the broader aims of the Belt and Road Initiative launched by China in 2013. China intends to be the number one global power by 2050. China intends that the Renminbi replaces the US dollar as the primary reserve currency in the world and also seeks control of the majority of key global resources, in particular rare earths.

China sees herself as the world’s superpower around whom all other nations should bow down – that’s the way it was when Marco Polo came to China and that’s the way it is going to be in the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. She demands the respect due to her and will jealously guard her reputation and power. The COVID19 pandemic has dented that reputation and is why the CCP will deny and block any serious investigation into the source of the virus unless this Chinese official view is accepted by the world. In this case, the Chinese President and his government demand the same subservience as did a feudal Lord or a Roman Emperor.

There are some flies in the ointment, however. China’s relationships with client states have not always gone according to plan. Many nations caught up on the Dragon’s hook have found that the infrastructure offered to them is not what they originally planned, was unaffordable and gave little, or no, employment opportunities to the indigenous population. Another weakness could well be the growth of a prosperous middle-class who may well demand of their government greater freedoms than those currently on offer. In 2017, some 134 million Chinese travelled outside China as tourists and, as they experience in-depth contact with other nations, they are likely to look to their government for a less authoritative rule. Whether or not the CCP will permit such a loosening of their grip remains to be seen but the CCP must know that increasing prosperity in the middle classes will lead to a demand for political reform. The recent popular demonstrations seen in Hong Kong, as well as those expected over the coming months could well spread further throughout China.



## The Pacific Century?

In 2012, the Obama Administration adopted the “Pivot to East Asia” as a new regional strategy with enhanced diplomatic and military ties to a number of countries in the region. China is assessed to have seen this as a mechanism to contain China and hem her in, restricting Chinese ability to project both militarily and diplomatically into the region. Some analysis suggests that this pivot disrupted the United States’ policy into the Middle East and allowed the eye to be taken off the ball with disastrous consequences, especially in Syria and Iraq. Kevin Rudd, the Australian Prime Minister at the time suggested that this pivot should be accompanied by a long-term collaborative strategy, agreed between the US and China to allow peaceful and prosperous relations throughout the Pacific Rim. (Reminiscent of Kennan’s view between the US and Russia.) Despite Obama supporting ASEAN countries, his successor has dropped the ball and distanced the US from many of its former allies.

The history of the Pacific states is as long and as bloody as that of their European counterparts; the long-standing suspicions between China, Korea and Japan are buried just under the surface and it doesn’t take much scratching for these aged enmities to resurface. Traditionally, the United States as a Pacific nation, has provided the strategic leadership within the region and allowed the countries of Indochina, for example, to develop their shattered economies following the Vietnam War to become the Asian Tigers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Over the first 1,800 years of the last two millennia, two nations have held the top spots for their economies: China and India. It was only as Westernisation spread through the region in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries that their respective economies stalled and were subsumed into those of the colonial powers. Since the economic reforms of the 1990s, the Indian economy has grown considerably. Under the present BJP government, the economy has been freed up and has grown around 6 – 7% per annum. The BJP is a populist Hinduist government and there have been a number of issues with its significant Muslim minority. Both India, and its neighbour, Muslim Pakistan are two nuclear powers, but, recently, their politicians have shown remarkable restraint whenever tensions build up on their border.

It is generally accepted that COVID19, a zoonotic disease, first emerged in Wuhan, China in the latter part of 2019. The exact details as to how this disease emerged, crossed the barrier between bats and humans and then took root in the human population remain to be explored once the current outbreak is contained. Whether or not different policies could have stopped the pandemic developing are also matters for future debate. Within the region, different nations adopted different tactics against the disease with varying amounts of success. China declared a successful elimination of the disease in April 2020 although sporadic outbreaks are continuing at the time of writing. New Zealand managed to eliminate the disease with a robust policy of lockdown and Australia has now managed to get numbers under control.

The interesting issues will be how the post-COVID world colours nations' respective views of the Chinese. Are they the country that infected everybody else or are they a country that has dealt with the outbreak efficiently and proactively? Is China the hub of globalisation and the 'just-in-time' logistic train or is it just a sink of cheap labour? Is China trying to ensure its own supply of limited resources or does it intend to stockpile in an effort to control a monopoly on essential raw materials? These will be some of the key questions to be answered by the post-COVID world.

## The Decay of Europe

Europe is often referred to as the 'Old World' – an epithet I am sure that China and Japan would find much to dispute! From an American or Australian perspective, as the part of the world which gave them their earliest settlers and immigrants, they have always looked back at Europe to give themselves continuity and a place in the world. American policy after the Second World War was essentially an Atlantic one, with the Soviet Union as the primary driver of US focus.

Following that war, the European nations most affected, agreed to bind themselves into a coherent group economically to avoid future military aggression. France, Germany, Holland and, occasionally, the United Kingdom, established and developed the European Union into a group of 28 nations sharing common goals. From a military standpoint, the European allies and the United States set up NATO to bind the Americans into the defence of Europe.



Over the same period, a number of European nations fell under Soviet rule and formed the Warsaw Pact who viewed the Western European nations and, more particularly, the US as a major threat. From the Soviet perspective, the strategy was all about prosecuting the internationalism of communism and they encouraged, funded and directed a number of revolutionary groups worldwide.

When the Cold War came to an end there was a perception that the former Soviet states would adopt a more Western, democratic approach and, indeed, this was proved true of countries like East Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. After a disastrous decade, Russia began to develop its economy and play a more robust role both within Europe and globally. There was hope in the West that Russia would develop a sturdier democratic political system and be more closely integrated with European political structures. The rise of Vladimir Putin as the undisputed leader of Russia in the early years of this century put paid to such hopes as he turned to the old stalwart of authoritarian leadership and launched a number of conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea to bolster his domestic image. At the same time the Russian economy only existed as a result of relatively high oil prices. Russia also developed a very effective cyberwar capability which complemented the long-standing Russian capabilities in the art of disinformation. Russia went into the COVID19 pandemic with a very weak economy and falling oil prices, with Putin attempting to rewrite the country's constitution to maintain his primacy until 2036. The arrival of the disease showed that the country was ill-prepared for such a crisis. The numbers of people affected by COVID is difficult to judge but the expert view is that they are some three to four times that of the official figures supplied by the Kremlin.

Winston Churchill summed up Russia in a BBC broadcast<sup>5</sup>:

*I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.*

Perhaps one should amend it slightly to read: "That key is Putin's interests"!

The pandemic has not been favourable to Europe. Italy, Spain and the UK have been particularly badly hit and the tendency, in all nations, has been to focus on their own countries with little, or no attention paid to the wider interests of Europe as a whole. The economic damage done by various lockdowns and other restrictions will be immense and, coupled with the relatively weak economies of Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal, severely hamper the ability of the region to recover in a timely manner.

In Germany, where the effect of the virus has been less severe, the economy is heading for a major recession and there is considerable political reluctance to be seen to be

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<sup>5</sup> Winston S Churchill: BBC Broadcast. 1 October 1939



bailing out the economically weaker states through the European Union. Germany has been very reluctant to assume the role of leadership which her strong economy would have indicated. Much of this is due to lingering angst over the Second World War and a national tendency to maintain a low profile. It is interesting to note that, in a recent survey, the number of Germans looking towards the US as their preferred international partner, had dropped considerably and that the number looking towards China had increased commensurately.

Into this vacuum left by Germany's reluctance to take a lead stepped France, keen to restore its tarnished reputation after the war and regain what it sees as their rightful place in the world. France retains a worldwide footprint, through its former colonies, particularly in the Pacific and still considers itself to be a global influence. The United Kingdom has continued its long tradition of holding Europe at arm's length and is currently engaged in agreeing terms for its divorce from the European Union. The military collaboration within NATO continues to be supported within Europe, representing a recognition of the value of military coordination at an international level. There are doubts about American commitment following President Trump's negative comments about the alliance and the need for further "burden-sharing" amongst the allies.

Turkey has been distancing itself from Europe in a bid to become a more Islamic nation and to slough off the secular mantle imposed by Kemal Ataturk and the founders of the modern Turkish state. To some extent, this represents a shift back to the glorious days of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey has suffered from the virus but a major investment in hospitals over the past five years has meant that healthcare systems have managed to keep the numbers relatively low. However, the belief in President Erdogan has weakened considerably and, coupled with this increasing distrust of the current government is the weakness of its economy, with Turkey entering a second recession within two years. The Turkish Lira has dropped 12% against the US Dollar and the country is likely to face some difficulties over the next few years. Turkey continues to be a member of the NATO alliance but its recent purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-missile system has alarmed Turkish NATO allies about the security of NATO defence if these weapons are to be integrated in any way. So far, the Turkish military has not attempted to do so.

### **Irrelevance of the UK**

The United Kingdom is often criticised for living too much in the past. Over little more than two generations, the nation that ruled over a large proportion of the globe, faces much reduced circumstances. Some of this reflects the changes in geostrategic reality but also much in the lacklustre performance of successive UK governments and their economies. The 2016 referendum to leave the EU arose from a flawed strategy to contain a vociferous wing of the ruling party. That the UK's economy has suffered

subsequently is not in doubt; the question is going to be whether or not it can be resuscitated in a timely manner. The pandemic has not helped this goal. The UK has always had a difficult relationship with Europe, dating back some three hundred years. We tend to have had to go into Europe to sort out warring European nations whose conflicts were damaging British interests, but we are not instinctively European. The European Union had many advantages in terms of trade and travel but, to a nation that has never needed a written constitution the dirigiste (and French) nature of European legislation never appealed. Britons prefer a rule of law where if something is not expressly forbidden, it must be allowed whereas, in European law, something is allowed only if it is expressly permitted!



As one of the victors of the Second World War and a member of the Permanent Five at the United Nations, the UK still sees itself wielding influence and benefit across the globe. One of our Foreign Secretaries suggested that “We punch above our weight”.<sup>6</sup> In the almost thirty years since Douglas Hurd made such comments, the UK economy has undergone a number of shocks and setbacks. Security investments should be determined by strategy but over this period the weakened economy has hollowed out much of our Foreign Office and our defence forces. Coupled with highly expensive adventures into Iraq and Afghanistan, Britain will face the post-COVID world with a mismatch between strategy and capabilities. No longer will we be able to punch at all. Britain will face the post-COVID world with a huge fiscal burden: the costs of the pandemic itself, the burden of Brexit due at the end of 2020 and a reluctance to reimpose any form of the austerity that characterised the last decade. Britain will have nothing in the bank to weather any future storms.

### **Russia as a satellite state to China**

In the immediate post-war period, the Soviet Union wielded great influence over the Chinese Communist Party but, as time went on and, as the Chinese leaders developed greater confidence, the ability of the Russians to influence the Chinese waned considerably. Today it is the Chinese that hold the whip hand and can provide aid and support to an ailing Russian state. This means that the Chinese can rely on the Russian vote at the Security Council and that between them both nothing they disagree with will be adopted. How far this *entente cordiale* will go is uncertain but it could have important consequences in, for example, the Arctic. Although Russia has a clear and legitimate claim to be one of the Arctic nations<sup>7</sup>, China is an Observer with a stated ambition to become a full member possibly in the hope of exploiting untapped resources

<sup>6</sup> Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd: Grand Strategy London 1992

<sup>7</sup> The Arctic Council: United States, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Norway, Iceland, Russia and Sweden

in the Arctic basin. Russia is quite prepared to use its military forces (not always effectively) and could be used by the Chinese state to spread confusion and chaos if it was felt to be in their national interests. Over the past 15 years, the use of cyber warfare has grown exponentially. It is a convenient way for both China and Russia to exploit their perceived enemies with little possibility of clear unambiguous evidence linking the perpetrators to either nation.

## Middle East and Iran

No overlook of the geostrategic landscape can avoid turning its attention to the Middle East and Iran.

It has been a major battleground over the last twenty years and is still a major source of oil.



The rapid development of US shale gas deposits has changed the balance of power in the region. The US is now a net exporter, albeit at a relatively high price per barrel. Suddenly, the key exporters of oil, Iran, Iraq, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Russia have a major economic problem. Saudi Arabia has just increased the rate of VAT in an attempt to bolster the country's coffers. Although it is expected that there will be a resurgence of the oil price once the pandemic lockdowns wind

down, it is unlikely to ever reach the peaks that were enjoyed by the oil producer nations in days gone by. The last two decades have seen a huge investment in non-fossil fuels and, for example, the costs of solar energy have been falling by almost 5% every year and this trend is expected to continue. The political and economic instabilities that this will generate in the oil producing nations will shape the geostrategic landscape over the next 15 to 20 years. Iran, in particular, hemmed in by US economic sanctions could well become a tinder box as the economic situation continues to deteriorate. We have already seen a number of dual nationals, holding Iranian as well as a Western nationality, being held hostage on some trumped-up charge or other. Iran will be the first to collapse.

## Conclusions

*Those who have knowledge, do not predict and those who predict do not have knowledge*

Lao Tzu, 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Chinese Poet

In looking forward, we can at least discern that the world is going to be more entropic – a world where there is more chaos, social upheaval and considerable change. The pandemic has illustrated many of the fault lines that exist in the world today.

The widening inequalities in our societies, the desperate plight of those without adequate resources and the fragility of many so-called civilised societies to be able to maintain high standards of living for all citizens.

One advantage of national lockdowns has been the immediate improvement of the quality of life for many people: Delhi and Beijing lost their seemingly impenetrable smog, the air in Los Angeles became more breathable, the canals of Venice ceased looking like open sewers and birdsong returned to our everyday lives.

These short-term advantages will not be maintained for long, but it will, perhaps, instil in us all that it is within our own power to clean up our immediate environment. Quality of life may become a driver over the subsequent years.

The global inequalities will continue and increasing numbers of people will seek to move towards wealthier nations where the standards of living are seen to be higher and more attractive. Most of this will be enabled by criminal gangs seeking to extort money from immigrants without any care for their safety. The European Union has already seen arguments between member states about these immigration flows and these disputes will deepen and grow, possibly threatening the very future of the EU. Immigration will continue, increasingly, to flow from the equatorial regions of the world as global warming makes these areas more inhospitable.

China is already under attack from a number of quarters about the origins and early management of the virus; it will also find that many nations will seek to reverse the globalisation trend of the last 30 years and repatriate manufacturing capacity. China will not stand by idly in the face of such attacks and will seek to re-establish what it considers to be her rightful, and respected, place in the world. This will take a number of guises; from building monopolistic positions on rare resources to cyber-attacks on large Western corporations, from trying to frustrate the industrial repatriation processes to ensuring that China has the necessary IPR to produce its own high-tech industries.

The world of tomorrow will be increasingly difficult, with two, seemingly contradictory influences at work. The first will be the growing tendency to become more introspective with nations taking upon themselves more responsibilities for their own interests, with more populist governments, regardless of alliances and the second, where global influences, particularly related to climate change, rare resources and future pandemics, demand some form of international action. It is always tempting to believe that these will not occur “on my watch” but history has proven that multiple crises often happen simultaneously.

Over the next 50 years, the world is going to be a roller coaster and all we can do is hope to survive the journey.

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