

stars insights: 8 April 2020

The Corona Crisis and International Relations: Open Questions, Tentative Assumptions



*Every global crisis impacts the international system, its structures, norms and institutions. The attacks of 11 September 2001 changed international law and state towards non-state actors, while the financial crisis of 2008 saw the G20 transform from a club of finance ministers into a body capable of a soft steering role in some of the less controversial areas of international politics. Today, international responses to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus appear to have turned the world upside down. But are these changes lasting or transient? Prof. Dr. **Volker PERTHES**, Director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin and Member of the stars Scientific Board, takes a first look at the implications for international politics.*

It is too early to make definitive statements. The catchphrase “nothing will ever be the same again” is almost always wrong. It makes sense to ask what might change in international politics “after Corona”. At this stage, however, any answers remain by nature provisional.

The Corona crisis will probably act as a multiplier for US efforts to “decouple” China, and thus promote tendencies towards sectoral de-globalization. In certain areas a new “globality” could also emerge. The broader geopolitical impact – on the international order, inter-state rivalries, conflict and cooperation – is unlikely to produce a uniform overall picture. The shape of the world after the pandemic remains subject to political will, leadership, and the ability of international actors to cooperate.

Will the pandemic, as some commentators imply, reduce multilateral cooperation and further weaken the rules-based international order? Most states have initially reacted unilaterally to the crisis, and may continue to do so. The crisis has also underscored the need for effective global cooperation, so inconsistent and contradictory developments are

likely. Even nationalist leaders accept the relevance of the WHO and the importance of cooperation on information exchange and vaccine research. It is conceivable that the UN and regional organizations will pay greater attention to health systems and public health, and that this will be accompanied by a strengthening of the WHO, more binding rules and more resources. After all, weak health systems in some countries clearly pose a threat to others.

We should not expect any significant initiatives to strengthen multilateral cooperation from the G7 or G20 under their current presidencies. But it might become easier to place public health on the agenda of the UN Security Council, even without linking it to classic security issues. There should no longer be any doubt that global health is directly related to international peace and security.

Will the Corona crisis affect great power conflicts, especially the paradigmatic rivalry between the US and China? It will certainly not mitigate them. Cooperation and open conflict – in particular between the US and China – are likely to coexist. We can assume that the ideological dispute between China and Western states sharpen. At its core this is about the competition between different systems of government and the relationship between state and society. Initially criticized for concealing the epidemic, China is now presenting its authoritarian system as superior to democratic models in dealing with such a crisis. China is also gaining “soft power” through well-staged aid deliveries to Italy and other severely affected states. The United States, in contrast, did not even try to coordinate an international response – further downgrading its image as a benign superpower. Rather, President Trump presented his country as a nationalistic loner. This included an attempt to buy a German pharmaceuticals firm in order to secure a vaccine “only for the USA”, as well as the refusal to ease sanctions on Iran.

Will the virus help to contain wars? Probably not. Countries with ongoing armed conflicts and large vulnerable populations will also be hit hard by the pandemic. At worst, internal conflict lines in highly fragmented states will be drawn even more sharply. The only positive response to the UN Secretary-General’s appeal to “put armed conflict on lockdown” and focus on fighting COVID-19 came from the Philippines. It has gone unheeded in Libya, Yemen and northern Syria, as well as by ISIS and Boko Haram. And North Korea continues to test missiles.

The impact of the pandemic on regional power conflicts is likely to remain negligible. Governments can, however, use the situation for confidence-building measures: the UAE and Kuwait have sent aid to Iran. This was not a one-off, a high-ranking Emirati official explained to me: “We have helped Iran before in emergencies, and Iran would certainly do the same for us. But we have not managed to translate such actions into political reconciliation.” The international community as a whole is likely to devote less energy to crisis diplomacy and conflict resolution. This is clearly so today, with the pandemic as the most urgent issue, but it is likely to remain so, as governments cope with the economic aftermath. Many already poor and weak states are likely to slip into economic crisis without even having contained the health damage. It is conceivable that richer states might grant debt relief to poorer states. But we will probably see less willingness to mobilise aid for humanitarian emergencies, to support the UNHCR, or to fund and staff UN missions.

And Europe? Neither Washington nor Beijing will devote much energy to finding common solutions to global problems. Here, it is for the EU and like-minded multilateralists such as

Canada, South Korea, Indonesia and Mexico to take the initiative. China, the US and Russia may cooperate if others come up with workable proposals – on global health, for example – but are unlikely to lead inclusive multilateral efforts.

It is possible, but not certain, that the crisis will eventually strengthen cohesion within the EU. After some delay, the EU has rather swiftly moved to support its own severely affected member states. For its international posture, the EU will have to re-learn the language of power, as Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative, has put it. This remains true. One should add that Europe's power – and attractiveness – also rest on the practice of solidarity. Particularly in times like these.



Prof. Dr. **Volker PERTHES** has been Director and Executive Chairman of the Board of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) since 2005. From 2015-2016, as UN Assistant Secretary General he served as Senior Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria. From 2016-2018, on behalf of the UN he chaired the Ceasefire Task Force of the International Syria Support Group. Perthes earned his doctoral degree in 1990 and his habilitation in 1999 from the University of Duisburg. He worked as assistant professor at the American University of Beirut from 1991 to 1993. Today, Perthes teaches International Relations at Humboldt University Berlin and Freie Universität Berlin.

The views expressed here are solely those of the author and they do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the stars Foundation. This article, in a slightly different form, has first been published on 31 March 2020 on [SWP](#) (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik).

[stars insights](#) are exclusive contributions by business leaders and experts who scan the horizon to discuss geopolitical, economic, technological and further trends and developments which will impact society and business in the next few years.

[Impressum](#)