

# Multilateralism and Nationalism in an Era of Disruption: the Great Pandemic and International Politics

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<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-3-129-150>

## ABSTRACT

The Great Pandemic of 2020 has caused a shock to international politics. But has it forced a radical restructuring of the international system and a change in the way international actors behave? a survey of the effects of the pandemic demonstrates that it has sped up existing trends, but has not brought about any transformation. The three-tier international system established after 1945 survives, but the struggle between two contesting models of global order (the Atlantic power system and the associated liberal international order and the alignment of sovereign internationalist powers) has intensified to consolidate a nascent new bipolarity in international affairs. Multilateralism has long been under threat, but its degradation has accelerated as bodies such as the World Health Organization have been challenged over their handling of the coronavirus pandemic, and the dangers of distant supply chains and the recrudescence of nationalism have accelerated deglobalisation. The legitimacy of state action has been revalidated as the only effective actor in handling the crisis. But this has been accompanied by the intensification of national populist challenges not only to liberal universalism, but also to sovereign internationalism. The return of great power politics entails the accelerated erosion of the dense structures of the international community developed in the post-war years, and signals a return to the period when a previous international system (the Vienna order established in 1815) came to an end in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Attacks on the UN and other multilateral institutions of the Yalta era means that the struggle between the rival models of world order will be less constrained by the guardrails of the international system, and thus the Second Cold War may well be more dangerous than the first.

## KEYWORDS

*Great Pandemic, international system, world order, Cold War, Yalta, acceleration*

The disruption afflicting the world in 2020 was a “perfect storm,” combining a deadly and highly infectious virus, a global economic recession, the erosion of global governance and intensified domestic divisions.<sup>1</sup> The United Nation’s World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus crisis a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and a pandemic on 11 March, calling the new disease COVID-19. This was not a “black swan” event, something that came about unexpectedly but which has had enormous ramifications. Rather, it was a “grey rhino” – something that was both predictable and even anticipated. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a number of these events, with SARS in 2002–2004, H1N1 in 2009–2010, and Ebola in 2013–2016, but preparations for the inevitable new pandemic were inadequate.<sup>2</sup> The devastating effect of SARS-CoV-2 (the official name for the virus that causes COVID-19) was amplified by its specific characteristics, including ease of transfer, delay in the appearance of symptoms, lethality, inadequate testing facilities and the lack of vaccines and personal protective equipment. The crisis turned into a moment of truth in which the presumptions, prejudices and processes of the post-Cold War era were exposed in a harsh light and developments that had long been maturing started to accelerate. But what exactly have the consequences been? What processes have been accelerated? Or has nothing really changed in the grand scheme of things?

### All Change or no Change

The Black Death in Europe in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century is estimated to have caused between 75 and 200 million deaths, and was the first great pandemic of what was becoming the modern era. It accelerated shifts in social structure and power relations, as labour became scarce and the bargaining power of workers increased. On the other hand, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918–1919 killed up to 100 million people, but its effects were not as long lasting as those of the Great War, which killed fewer people. The question thus arises: What long-term changes will the COVID-19 pandemic accelerate, and what underlying truths about our societies will it expose? In particular, how will the health crisis and the ensuing economic and social turmoil affect international relations? Will a new global and regional balance of power emerge as a result?

The literature on this issue can be broadly categorised on a spectrum with four key points, ranging from those who argue that the great pandemic has represented a fundamental turning point for humanity to those who argue that there no enduring changes have taken place and that it has essentially been “business as usual.” These views sometimes overlap, depending on the issue in question. At the same time, many see the pandemic as a background condition to patterns that already existed. In other words, the pandemic was not so much a game changer as it was an intensifier and accelerant of existing conditions.

The first view is represented primarily by environmentalists and energy experts, and less by international relations commentators. The argument here is that

1 Dmitri K. Simes, “The Perfect Storm,” *the National Interest*, April 24, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/perfect-storm-147791?page=0%2C2>.

2 Osterholm, Olshaker 2020.

the pandemic represented a final warning before runaway pathologies associated with human encroachment on nature make the planet increasingly uninhabitable. At its most extreme, this is where apocalyptic views about the collapse of industrial civilisation can be found. Even before the corona crisis, Extinction Rebellion had warned of the exhaustion of natural resources and nature itself in the face of human exploitation. Increasing fires, floods and droughts are symptoms of a planet under siege. Uncontrollable wildfires in Australia and Siberia in 2019 reflected the inexorable rise of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, accompanied by extensive melting of glaciers and polar ice fields. The pandemic here did lead to an acceleration of the shift away from carbon sources of energy towards renewable sources. The expediency of the use of automobiles was questioned on a global scale, with the forced immobility of lockdowns used to build new cycle paths and close parts of cities to traffic. The phasing out of the internal combustion engine was sped up, and oil companies reprofiled themselves as energy companies and increased their investments in renewable power.

The second view argues that the pandemic has brought about changes, but only to the extent that it has accelerated existing processes. Here the discussion tends to focus on the so-called “liberal international order” and its decline. The issue here is global governance, and the way that in the post-Cold War era “liberal hegemony” claimed to be synonymous with order itself. This model had already been in crisis before the pandemic, but as B. Lo argues, “Faced with the greatest emergency since the Second World War, nations have regressed into narrow self-interest. The concept of a rules-based international order has been stripped of meaning, while liberalism faces its greatest crisis in decades.”<sup>1</sup> B. Lo is right to argue that responsibility for the crisis lies not with the more assertive behaviour of Russia and China, but by the failure of Western governments to live up to their own values accompanied by inept policy-making by Western leaders. This has undermined transatlantic unity (one of the core values of liberal hegemony) and provoked the rise of populist changes from within. This, in his view, has exacerbated the “new world disorder.” One of the fundamental questions debated during the pandemic has been whether authoritarian or democratic states have responded most effectively. Some authoritarian countries coped very well, while others less so as they suppressed information and even denied the potency of the virus. Equally, even though the UK had a developed pandemic strategy in place, it fared worse than most. The record is mixed both for democracies and authoritarian systems, so Carothers and Wong are right to argue that the pandemic will not “bolster authoritarianism globally over the long term.”<sup>2</sup>

The third view argues that the pandemic has had little effect on the continuing deeper processes of change. This in particular affects the issue of sovereignty and the renationalisation of policy that had long been in train. Above all, the normative values of the post-war international system, enshrined above all in the United Nations, its institutions and its Charter, have given way to great power politics of the traditional sort. This means that international institutions such as the UN's World

1 Lo 2020, 1.

2 Thomas Carothers, and David Wong, “Authoritarian Weaknesses and the Pandemic,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 11, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/11/authoritarian-weaknesses-and-pandemic-pub-82452>.

Health Organization and the World Trade Organization have continued to lose their arbitrating and developmental roles, and great power interests have started to prevail instead.<sup>1</sup> Multilateral organisations have been unable to temper national rivalries. There have been repeated charges and counter-charges of “pandemic propaganda,” and then a race between states to be the first to devise and market an effective vaccine. Above all, the long-term shift towards the creation of competing *Grossraume* was confirmed. Even when it came to the race for a vaccine, the Trump administration declared its “America First” strategy, while Russia partnered with India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil and the Philippines for testing and development.<sup>2</sup> Russia thereby declared not only that it no longer considered the US as a partner, but also that it was an alternative to China for middle ranking powers. This is accompanied by continuing processes of deglobalisation, and in particular the decoupling of the US and China. Chinese scholars are right to argue that “Multilateralism as the principle of global governance was much weakened by COVID-19, which changed the way of life and way of production worldwide,” but the suggested solutions, such as reshaping global governance to reflect the new stage of globalisation and balance major power competition and cooperation to avoid confrontation, are worthy aspirations but hardly novel solutions.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth and final perspective is that nothing much has changed. Although the lockdown in 2020 provided a shock, once the virus came under control and economic life was restored, then accustomed patterns of consumerism resumed. Indeed, governments encouraged this attitude in order to restore businesses and the viability of consumer economies, the office as the centre of work, and commuting as a way of life. Some individuals used the pandemic to reflect on their personal lifestyles, and some moved to the countryside or reduced their carbon footprint, but overall life has resumed as normal – at least to the degree that this is possible until a reliable COVID-19 vaccine is introduced on a mass scale. From this perspective, the institutions of international order were continuing to “crumble,” and the pandemic made little difference to this.<sup>4</sup> A. Kortunov notes that “States are on the offensive on two fronts at once,” against non-state actors in the private sector and civil society, as well as against fragile multilateral intergovernmental institutions ranging across the whole spectrum from the UN and the European Union to the WTO. In his view, this is a “mirage of Westphalia,” since, ultimately, states are embedded in corporate and civil society practices and need multilateral bodies to work effectively.<sup>5</sup> This may well be the case, but in the final analysis multilateralism was undermined not only by individual states but also by contrasting the “rules-based” order of the liberal hegemony to the traditional and impartial exercise of international law.

1 As argued, for example, by Kribbe 2020.

2 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Sputnik V: The Geopolitics Surrounding Russia’s Coronavirus Vaccine,” *The National Interest*, August 13, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/sputnik-v-geopolitics-surrounding-russias-coronavirus-vaccine-166805>.

3 Yafei He, “A Look at Post-Pandemic Global Governance,” Valdai Discussion Club, August 10, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/a-look-at-post-pandemic-global-governance/>.

4 Oleg Barabanov et al., “Living in a Crumbling World,” Valdai Discussion Club Report, October 2018, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://valdaiclub.com/files/20155/>; Oleg Barabanov et al., “Staying Sane in a Crumbling World,” Valdai Discussion Club Report, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://valdaiclub.com/files/30052/>.

5 Andrey Kortunov, “The Mirages of Westphalia,” Russian International Affairs Council, August 14, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-mirages-of-westphalia/>.

Domestic and global effects are deeply interwoven, reflecting the multifaceted character of the COVID-19 crisis. This paper will examine four inter-related processes: internationalism, globalisation, multilateralism and nationalism. The pandemic has exacerbated issues that were already contributing to a crisis of globalisation. Responses appeared to demonstrate that only the nation-state had the legitimacy, authority and capacity to manage the health, economic and social consequences of the spread of the virus. After four decades of neo-liberal state negation in favour of market forces and global integration, state action has been re-legitimised. However, the crisis has also highlighted the importance of international cooperation agencies, above all WHO. At the same time, however, it has exposed the weakness of these agencies, as well as of multilateral formats like the Group of Seven (G7) and the Group of Twenty (G20). The new balance between internationalism, globalisation, multilateralism and nationalism is not clear, and there is no clear point along the spectrum outlined above that these issues can be resolved.

### **Causes and Consequences**

The first signs of a disturbing type of lung infection appeared in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province. On 31 December, WHO announced the emergence of the illness. On 9 January, the Chinese authorities announced the existence of a new coronavirus and two days later made public its genomic sequence. By the first week of January, the Chinese leadership was aware of the outbreak of a new disease, but they hesitated to impose quarantine on an entire city, especially since this was at a time when preparations for the Chinese New Year were taking place. Only on 20 January was a full lockdown imposed. This delay has become the source of controversy, but it was repeated in most other countries, fearing the economic and social costs of a lockdown. In the end, the disease spread on a global scale, provoking a crisis the like of which has never been seen in the modern world. As people were forced to isolate, economies came to a shuddering halt, and societies struggled to cope with the infections and deaths.

The crisis intensified the enduring dialectic between state action and multilateral coordination. On the systemic level, the crisis revalidated the role of the state. Globalisation had previously suggested that certain economic imperatives transcended state policies. However, when urgent action was required, it was the state that acted. The problems may well have been global in scale, but national responses were crucial. The importance of national welfare and health provision was reinforced, which years of austerity since the economic crisis of 2008–2009 followed by the Eurozone crisis of 2011 had reduced to a parlous state in a number of European countries. The effectiveness of responses to the Great Pandemic became a new proxy for measuring the adequacy of government, with the US scoring not only badly, but “very badly,” while China's early mismanagement of the growing health crisis amidst attempts to suppress information was offset by the timely sharing of the genetic structure of the novel virus and resolute action to suppress its spread. In Germany, the combination of effective central policy, strong federal and regional governance, adequate health and welfare investment and high societal trust mitigated the crisis, throwing into stark light the absence in the US of a “robust public health care system and social safety net.” The pandemic challenged

narratives of American exceptionalism and the changing character of its leadership, with the crisis acting “like an accelerator of history, speeding up a decline in influence of both the United States and Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

The crisis accelerated the end to the 40-year cycle of social life, the era of neo-liberal denial of state activism. This had already been apparent during the 2008 global financial crisis, but in the end the banks were bailed out, and life continued as normal. The primacy of sovereign nation states was reaffirmed, but at the same time the crucial role of multilateral agencies and problem sharing was once again demonstrated. The global financial crisis saw the baton of leadership passed from the G7 countries, which are aligned as a group of like-minded democracies, to the G20, a more heterogeneous group. The G7 was created in 1975 as an informal forum for the leaders of the world’s capitalist industrialised nations. The absence of representation from developing and emerging economies led to the call in 1999 for the creation of a group of 20 to strengthen the global financial architecture. As one study puts it, “The G20 was born from the conviction that global crises require globalized and inclusive solutions and the belief that there was a need for a permanent forum for informal dialogue between advanced and emerging economies.”<sup>2</sup> The G20 proved its worth, with the first Leaders’ Summit in 2008, and is today considered the leading forum for global economic coordination.

However, this sort of multilateralism was challenged by the corona crisis. The great powers failed to learn the lessons of earlier pandemics and global health challenges. Instead, the US under D. Trump undermined the international rules-based trading system while resorting to an increasingly ramified range of sanctions and trade wars. The long-standing American ambivalence about global governance institutions was taken to a completely new level, with the denigration of the UN, WHO and the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the height of the crisis, the US even withdrew funding and then withdrew entirely from the WHO, reducing its budget by almost a quarter. It soon became clear, however, that no country, even one as powerful as the US, could deal with the crisis and its various economic, health and social ramifications in isolation, and that is why various cooperative solutions were devised for coronavirus research and the production of vaccines. The US donated \$1.2 billion to GAVI, the alliance looking for a vaccine against COVID-19. As always, D. Trump preferred bilateral rather than multilateral solutions. This led to the marginalisation of the G20, and it was unable to repeat the coordinating role that it had assumed at the time of the Great Recession.

Some of the negative consequences were apparent already in the early stages of the pandemic, including the intensification of national egotism, sharpened conflict at the international level, and the struggle to repatriate foreign investment and production. In the European Union, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Schengen Agreement abolishing internal borders almost all movement within the zone was banned. The migrant crisis was renewed earlier in 2020, when Turkey opened its border with Greece, restoring elements of “fortress Europe” in response. The already

1 Katrin Bennhold, “‘Sadness’ and Disbelief from a World Missing American Leadership,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/world/europe/coronavirus-american-exceptionalism.html>.

2 Hosse Almutairi, “G20, G7 and COVID-19: an Opportunity for Cooperation,” *ISPI Online*, June 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/g20-g7-and-covid-19-opportunity-cooperation-26454>.



visible tendencies towards deglobalisation intensified and were accompanied by a repudiation of some of the universalism of the liberal global order. This was accompanied by the strengthening of anti-democratic trends, isolationism and growth in the appetite for strong hand authoritarianism. There were also counter-trends, with the EU hosting a donors' conference on 4 April to gain funds for vaccine research and dissemination, and in many countries opposing political forces cooperated to provide bipartisan support for public health responses.<sup>1</sup>

It is not clear what features, if any, of international life will become part of the transformed world. Globalisation had earlier suggested that certain economic imperatives transcended state policies, but when urgent action was required, it was the state that acted. The problems may well have been global in scale, but national responses were crucial. The importance of universally accessible national welfare and health provision was reinforced. The crucial role of multilateral agencies and problem sharing was once again demonstrated. However, it is not clear that the pandemic will result in enduring changes, or simply intensify trends already long in play.

### **The International System and World Orders**

The pandemic struck at a time when the balance of forces and ideological commitments was already in flux. The intensifying crisis of world order was marked by the re-emergence of great power conflict and a nascent return to a bipolar structure in international politics, with the US and its allies on the one side, and China and those who aligned with it on the other. As in the original period of the bipolarity in the First Cold War, certain major powers (India, China and some others) retained a degree of foreign policy autonomy, but their behaviour was structured by the power field generated by the Soviet-US confrontation.

To understand the dynamics of change today, we need to understand the character of the international system established after the Second World War and the way that it has evolved in recent years. The international system can be understood in terms of three layers (or three storeys of a building), with multiple links between the three – although they do not all necessarily go through the middle layer or storey.<sup>2</sup> On the top floor of this ternary system can be found the multilateral institutions of global governance, primarily the UN and the five permanent members of the Security Council, but also the various UN agencies (notably in the present context, WHO) as well as the Bretton Woods institutions, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, flanked by international legal, environmental and other economic governance institutions. Hard-line offensive realists such as J. Mearsheimer argue that these multilateral institutions have almost no influence on the conduct of international politics, and the great powers like the US scoff at the restrictions that multilateralism imposes on their freedom of action. Also on the top floor are the various trade agreements and the infrastructure of global commerce and services that after 1989 were dubbed “globalisation.” The coronavirus pandemic

1 Ashley Quarcoo, and Rachel Kleinfeld, “Can the Coronavirus Heal Polarization?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/01/can-coronavirus-heal-polarization-pub-81704>.

2 This tripartite model is a modified version of the one presented in Sakwa 2017.

has raised questions about the 40-year cycle of extended global supply chains and interdependent economics. In other words, existing critiques of multilateralism and globalisation have been intensified.

On the middle floor we find competing states and their accompanying “world orders,” such as the US-led liberal international order (LIO) and the Russo-Chinese alignment in defence of sovereign (or conservative) internationalism. This gives rise to what some call a “multi-order world.”<sup>1</sup> Others stress the “multiplex” character of relations between states.<sup>2</sup> Great power relations are accompanied by attempts to advance their hegemony, which takes the form of competing world order agendas. In other words, political and military confrontation is accompanied by an epistemological struggle over how to interpret world order. The Atlantic power system after 1989 rebranded itself as the “liberal international order,” and with the end of bipolarity and other balancing forces, the LIO was free to proclaim itself synonymous with order itself. This meant that the institutions on the top floor of the international system effectively were claimed to be the property of the LIO. A specific order substituted for the system in its entirety. Struggles over the legitimacy of this claim underlie the great power conflicts of our time.

US-managed globalisation transformed China, and for a time China was willing to go along with the substitution.<sup>3</sup> Russia was never quite so supportive, arguing from the outset that the substitution was illicit and part of the hegemonic claims of the LIO. Russia supported the multilateral bodies on the top floor, but resisted their appropriation through the hegemonic claims of the LIO. Russia instead defended the autonomy of international governance institutions. This is the underlying structural reason for the estrangement between Russia and the political West. This alienation was deepened by the advance of the military wing of the LIO, with NATO moving towards to Russia’s borders. The Atlantic powers argue, with good reason, that there was no sustained attempt to exclude Russia, but still, there was “no place for Russia.”<sup>4</sup> Joining the Atlantic power system would have entailed Moscow accepting Washington’s hegemony. There is a constituency in Russia who argues that this would have been the wisest course of action. Russia would have become like France or the UK, part of the most successful joint enterprise in history.

However, one does not have to be a constructivist to understand that questions of identity and strategy, formulated in the ideology of Russia as a great power, pulled in another direction. At the same time, the Great Pandemic has exposed some of the structural weaknesses of the LIO (above all the contradictions of the liberalism at its heart, as well as the long-term hyper-development of the military power of its leading member while allowing its society, governance and infrastructure to decay). At the end of the Cold War, the US did not become “a normal country in a normal time,” and contrary to the advice of J. Kirkpatrick, continued its “unnatural focus” on trying to change the world.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the contradictions accumulated, to be exposed at a time of stress.

1 Flockhart 2016.

2 Acharya 2017

3 Loong 2020.

4 Hill 2018.

5 William S. Smith, “Jeane J. Kirkpatrick: 30 Years Unheeded,” *The National Interest*, June 2020, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/jeane-j-kirkpatrick-30-years-unheeded-162667>.



Russia's stance is sometimes perceived as a reactionary defence of the Yalta system, which gave birth to the UN and endowed the country with a privileged status in the Security Council. However, Moscow's concern is not with recreating the patterns of dominance with which Yalta is associated, but on the more narrow agenda of defending the model of internationalism represented by the Yalta–Potsdam system. The Russian charge of double standards against the LIO arises because of its hegemonic assertions, which include the right to define how and when international law is applied. Paradoxically, as the backlash in the US and some other countries grew against what were perceived to be the excesses of globalisation, including the outsourcing of manufacturing and technological innovation to other countries, internationalism and multilateralism also became subject to critique. This is why defenders of liberal internationalism were so alarmed by Trumpian nationalism, fearing that the baby of liberal hegemony would be thrown out with the bathwater of disadvantageous globalisation.

This epistemological struggle takes place on the ground floor, where civil society groups, think tanks, policy institutes and civil associations try to shape the cultural landscape of politics. Groups trying to push responses to the climate catastrophe up the global agenda are found here, as are movements fighting for racial and historical justice. This is also where grass-roots nationalism is fostered, transnational corporations compete, and some of the “new oligarchs” seek to shape international affairs. G. Soros at the head of the Open Society Institute has long been a major player in this respect, arousing the ire not only of countries such as Hungary and Russia, where he is accused of interfering in domestic matters, but also the US when he challenges some of the country's policies. The pandemic has also brought major health care and epidemiological institutes, notably the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to the fore – again provoking no end of conspiracy theories.

In short, the international system can be seen as the hardware, with competing models of world order working as the operating systems. None has been so powerful and influential since 1945 as the liberal world order created under the sponsorship of the US, but which has gained a certain universal status that in the end proved damaging to its own viability by blurring the distinction between system and order. It is as if a software program tried to assume the characteristics of the system in which it operates, blurring a fundamental distinction that threatened the viability of both.

The LIO changed over the years, and we can observe three phases in its development. The original liberal order was rooted in Wilsonian internationalism and the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. The version that took shape in the Cold War years between 1945 and 1989 drew on these traditions and was initially a relatively modest affair. It was based on the UN Charter and defended the territorial integrity of states (although also committed to anti-colonial national self-determination), multilateral institutions and open markets. Even the Soviet Union could pragmatically accept the basic principles of this order, even though in ideological terms it opposed the system's economic and political foundations. In the later years of this phase, the LIO moved away from the Bretton Woods era of controlled capital markets and towards the financialisation of goods and services, accompanied by more open markets formulated as the “four freedoms” of labour, capital, goods and services. This was accompanied by a prohibition on the use of force except in self-defence.

In the second phase after the Cold War ended in 1989, the liberal world order – as the only surviving system with genuinely universal aspirations – assumed more ambitious characteristics, including a radical version of globalisation, democracy promotion and regime change. The prohibition on the use of force except with the sanction of the UN was weakened, and the adoption of Responsibility to Protect in the mid-2000s represented a move away from sovereign internationalism towards the validation of humanitarian interventionism.<sup>1</sup> Critics argue that this radicalised version of liberal hegemony was “bound to fail,” since its ambitions were so expansive as to make it delusional, and which in the end provoked domestic and external resistance.<sup>2</sup> The “exceptionalist” ideology of the post-Cold War version of the liberal order was accompanied by what was perceived as the aggressive expansion of the Atlantic power system. Rather than the order being undermined by authoritarian challengers, the decline was provoked by the system’s internal contradictions. Above all, the LIO’s utopianism clouded issues of judgment, diplomacy and pragmatism, and instead imposed an inflexible ideological framework in its relations with outside powers and domestic alternatives.<sup>3</sup> While proclaiming pluralism as its fundamental value, the rigidity of the system’s value system meant that it became intolerant at home and aggressive abroad.<sup>4</sup>

The third phase began when the liberal order was at its strongest, reflecting the contradictions of that power, as the system entered a prolonged “interregnum.”<sup>5</sup> This gave rise to the Trumpian rejection of some of the fundamental postulates of the LIO, although there had long been challenges to some of its principles. For example, Trump’s questioning of the utility of NATO and its centrality in US strategic thinking had been prefigured in the debates about “burden-sharing” and B. Obama’s “pivot to the East.” Nevertheless, D. Trump’s transactional and mercantilist approach and his rejection of multilateralism represented the repudiation of the principles on which US foreign policy had been conducted since 1945. Trumpian nationalism represented not a return to the sovereign internationalism of the Yalta system, but to something more visceral and nationalistic that was reminiscent of the pre-1914 era of great power competition and imperialism.

Not surprisingly, his turn to nationalism and the “America first” policy provoked a vigorous reaction of the defenders of liberal internationalism and the Atlantic power system. This was “reactionary” in the full sense of the word, aspiring to return to a state of affairs that had already become anachronistic. D. Trump’s political “genius” was to probe and pick at a decaying system, earning the loyalty of his political base. The tragedy is that the escape from the third phase of the LIO is increasingly perceived to be an exit to the right – towards nationalism, great power conflict, trade wars and social illiberalism. National populism identified genuine issues of concern, but the formulation of responses “from the left” was inchoate and confused at best.

1 Cunliffe 2020a.  
2 Mearsheimer 2018; 2019.  
3 Cunliffe 2020b.  
4 Lieven, Hulsman 2006.  
5 Babic 2020.

## The Pandemic, Nationalism and Great Power Politics

While the Great Pandemic has highlighted the need for multilateral cooperation and the strengthening of the international organisations that are dealing with its consequences, the trend in practice appeared to be towards the “renationalisation” of international politics. The pandemic represented a major cooperation challenge, and most multilateral institutions failed to rise to the occasion.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, while there were cooperative initiatives, above all centred on the EU, the crisis exacerbated and deepened existing tensions. The dilemmas facing the four categories mentioned earlier – internationalism, globalisation, multilateralism and nationalism – can be examined through the prism of issues such as changes in US leadership and relations with China, the impact on Russian strategies, challenges to the EU and the impact of the pandemic on multilateralism.

D. Simes stresses that “Reforming American foreign policy requires nothing less than the recognition that the liberal world order – the battle cry of global elites on both sides of the Atlantic – was largely a myth rooted in illusions and double standards.” He notes that since the invention of political communities in ancient Greece there had been a debate over the relative merits of democracy and autocracy “and what combination of the two is the most appropriate for a particular society under particular circumstances.” He echoes J. Mearsheimer in arguing that making “democracy promotion one of America’s defining foreign policy objectives was always bound to create a powerful international backlash. It ensured that China and Russia would combine against American interests and forced the United States and Europe to whitewash misbehaviour by their allies as they proclaim loyalty to the new Atlanticist hegemon.” The policy implications of such an approach are stark. D. Simes questions the “perverse logic” that considers it “a priority for the West to demand Crimea’s return to Ukraine when Crimea was not only historically a part of Russia, but had an overwhelming Russian-speaking majority which repeatedly indicated its preference for association with Moscow, including in elections under Ukrainian control.” Equally, the US alliance system, particularly NATO, “appears increasingly obsolete in their current form.” Many commentators, including G. F. Kennan, warned that NATO enlargement would turn Russia into a dangerous adversary, and in the end this became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition, “these alliances serve to entangle the United States in the internecine disputes of European nations.”<sup>2</sup> The alternative for realists is for the US at most to become an “off-shore balancer” in Asia and Europe.

This is the context in which D. Trump’s rejection of the universalism of the liberal order, as well as its hubristic interventions on “humanitarian” grounds or to effect regime change, was welcomed by many as an essential rebalancing of US foreign policy towards greater concern for domestic development. However, this was accompanied by the exacerbation of long-term conflicts. This in particular concerns relations with China. The trade war launched in late 2018 was resolved in early 2020 with the signing of part one of a deal. However, as the US was gripped by the most extensive outbreak of the pandemic, along with a high death toll, D. Trump’s early nonchalance about

1 Patrick 2020.

2 Dmitri K. Simes, “The Perfect Storm.”

the threat the virus posed to America came to haunt him. The crisis magnified and exposed the drawbacks of his governance style and the larger failings of the America health care and crisis management system. Attention turned to China, which the US blamed for its early failings to get the outbreak in Wuhan under control. The US then sought reparations for the enormous damage the crisis caused to the US and global economy. Other countries were enlisted in the nascent new bipolarity, with Australia one of the most active, while in the UK the influential Henry Jackson Society mobilised parliament and society against the putative Chinese threat. As befits a body that prioritises military multilateralism over economic globalisation, one of its reports noted that members of the Five Eyes (the intelligence-sharing alliance comprising the US, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand) were dependent on China for 831 separate categories of imports, of which 260 were elements of critical national infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

Even before that, Russia had been subject to escalating sanctions, with the latest imposed in December 2019 against the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea to Germany. Despite D. Trump proclaiming in 2016 that it made sense to “get on” with Russia, the allegations of Russian electoral interference stymied moves towards rapprochement. Trump’s friendly words towards Putin may have been motivated by a grudging respect for his power, but above all by the strategic goal of peeling Russia away from alignment with China. This alignment had been in the making since the 1990s, but was greatly accelerated after 2014 and the onset of the Second Cold War. There is no chance of D. Trump achieving a Kissingerian manoeuvre in reverse and winning Russia (rather than China) over to the US side. As he did with NATO in 2016, D. Trump declared the G7 obsolete in May 2020: “It is a very outdated group of countries.”<sup>2</sup> His attempt to turn an extended G7 meeting in late 2020 in Washington, with the addition of India, South Korea, Australia and Russia, into an anti-China coalition was just one manifestation of the polarising character of US leadership in this period. Even the regular G7 meeting due to be held in September was postponed because of A. Merkel’s refusal to attend in person. She cited health concerns, but such a meeting was intended to prove that the crisis was over and business could resume as usual, boosting D. Trump’s chances of re-election in the November election. D. Trump’s uncoordinated announcement of the withdrawal of 9,500 troops from Germany was considered a reprisal for A. Merkel’s refusal to attend the G7 summit, but it was also in keeping with D. Trump’s long-term condemnation of Germany’s failure to meet the two per cent NATO military spending target.

The pandemic only confirmed the unpredictability and pitfalls of US policy, as well as the entrenched character of the impasse in relations between Russia and the political West. Despite calls for sanctions to be lifted, as well as a moratorium on military exercises, the common challenge did not lead to the easing of European or US sanctions, and the exercises continued. With Russia beset by a triple crisis – the pandemic, a collapse in oil prices and long-term economic stagnation – the China–Russia alignment was deepened. China began a “layered defence for years to come,” with the quasi-alliance with Russia the cornerstone of its strategy, while Russia had nowhere else but China

1 Rogers et al. 2020.

2 Cited by Antonio Villafranca, “Europe: Rising Frictions with Trump’s G7,” ISPI Online, June 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/europe-rising-frictions-trumps-g7-26448>.

to look for relief. This meant nothing less than “the split of the world into two opposing poles.” However, T. Bordachev notes that the new version of bipolarity would have little in common with the one that dominated in the period from 1945 to 1990. This time it would be real, because “it arises within the framework of a single international system and the global market economy.” This bipolarity would be superimposed on economic interdependence, thus creating a particularly explosive form, unlike in the earlier period when the two poles lived largely in separate worlds. Earlier, the main arena of bipolarity was in the field of strategic arms, which after the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 became increasingly managed and regulated. Today, China lacks significant natural resources, but the level of interdependence is incomparably higher, creating tensions that could lead one side or another to resolve the contradictions in a forceful manner.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of bilateral relations, there have been few signs that the pandemic will bring nations together. US–China relations have been poisoned by suggestions from the American side that the virus had escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, which was subsequently covered up by the Chinese authorities. The search for a guilty party led to the politicisation of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Claims for compensation were part of a larger strategy designed to put pressure on China. As one commentator noted, “a prolonged period of strategic confrontation with the United States, such as the one China is currently experiencing, will create conditions that are conducive to dramatic changes.” Even though Chinese scholars had studied the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was ostensibly in danger of “repeating some of the most consequential mistakes of the Soviet regime” nevertheless.<sup>3</sup> This is a salutary warning, and it came amidst a new assertiveness from Beijing, called “wolf warrior diplomacy,” in which it abandoned the old D. Xiaoping slogan of “tread softly and bide your time,” and instead pushed back against perceived slights and threats.

This all served to consolidate the long-term strategic partnership between China and Russia. On 29 April 2020, the Kremlin announced that the National Wealth Fund would be allowed to invest in the Chinese Yuan and Chinese state bonds. The crisis accelerated mutual moves to phase out the use of the US dollar in their interactions as part of the larger strategy of insulating themselves from American sanctions and other forms of extra-territorial pressure. There was renewed talk of a second gas pipeline to China, and even ambitious plans for a railway to link Arctic ports with the Indian Ocean. More immediately, China came to Russia’s rescue when oil prices plunged and producers looked to dump surplus output. In March 2020, Chinese imports of Russian crude oil increased by one third year-on-year, throwing a lifeline to Russian companies hit by falling demand in recession-hit Europe. The Great Pandemic demonstrated to both Moscow and Beijing the strategic importance of a common front in the face of shared challenges. This could entail a real shift in investment and production towards Eurasia, something that had long been talked about but had only been implemented with hesitation.

1 Timofey Bordachev, “Threat of a New Bipolarity?” Valdai Discussion Club, April 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/threat-of-a-new-bipolarity/>.

2 Vasily Kashin, “Why Did it Happen? On the Issue of China’s ‘Guilt’ for the Coronavirus Pandemic,” Valdai Discussion Club, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/on-the-issue-of-china-s-guilt-for-the-coronavirus-/>.

3 Minxin Pei 2020, 82.

At the same time, military cooperation had steadily deepened creating a “strategic partnership” that in certain respects veered towards a quasi-alliance.<sup>1</sup> Although immeasurably weaker economically, Russia is still a great power in military and diplomatic terms. Above all, the two shared similar perspectives on the international system, stressing sovereign internationalism and non-interference in the internal affairs of others. Both perceived themselves victims of American hegemonic ambitions and the substitution of the autonomy of international governance institutions with the LIO, equally resenting being placed in a subordinate position. There were of course fears that Russia would end up the loser in the intensifying cold war between the US and China, becoming a junior partner to Beijing in that struggle, but at the same time Russia’s status as a necessary partner gave it significant leverage in that relationship. There are undoubtedly “structural uncertainties” in the relationship, but in the immediate-term “Facing an intensifying confrontation with the US, China will need Russia – its only major-power friend – even more. As for Russia, it will hardly be able to recover economically after the pandemic unless China is willing to keep buying its energy and other commodities.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, the crisis proved a stress test for the deepening relationship between China and Russia. As the outbreak in Wuhan spiralled into a global pandemic, Russia closed the border with China on 31 January. Later, Russia became one of the main sources of renewed infection as Chinese citizens returned home, with the border in the Russian Far East closed by China, leaving numerous Chinese citizens trapped in the environs of Vladivostok.<sup>3</sup> These actions were not so much manifestations of nationalism as they were attempts to manage a dangerous epidemiological threat in conditions where so much was unknown. Some interpreted these actions as signs of deteriorating relations between Russia and China, especially since Russia delayed closing its borders to Europe. In fact, China’s outrage was directed against the US and some of its Western allies, who scapegoated China “for their own COVID catastrophes.”<sup>4</sup> The global backlash against China did indeed gather pace, with accusations that the virus may have escaped from a virology laboratory in Wuhan and demands that China should pay compensation. China now joined Russia in the pit of Western denunciation, including as a source of “active disinformation threats.” China stood accused of seeking to exploit the crisis for political gain by sending testing equipment and personal protection clothing to European states, some of which proved faulty. In fact, the Chinese response set the pattern for the imposition of harsh, but effective measures, which were repeated and honed elsewhere in Asia.<sup>5</sup>

As efforts to shorten supply chains and repatriate production lines of essential pharmacological and other items from China began (in April, Japan offered financial

1 Dmitry Gorenburg, “An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia–China Military Cooperation,” George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, no. 54, April 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/emerging-strategic-partnership-trends-russia-china-military-cooperation-0>.

2 Artyom Lukin, “Western Media is Wrong, Russia and China are not Going to Clash over COVID-19,” RT.com, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/487832-mainstream-media-russia-china-relations/>.

3 Ankur Shah, “Trouble on the China–Russia Border,” The Diplomat, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/COVID-19-trouble-on-the-china-russia-border/>.

4 Artyom Lukin, “Western Media is Wrong, Russia and China are not Going to Clash over COVID-19,” RT, May 5, 2020, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/487832-mainstream-media-russia-china-relations/>.

5 Vladimir Popov, “Learning from Asia: How to Handle Coronavirus Economic Recessions,” Ponars Eurasia, April 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/learning-asia-how-handle-coronavirus-economic-recessions>.



incentives for companies to return production lines from China), Russia emerged as one of the few countries which stood firmly with China. Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov argued that calls for China to pay compensation were “unacceptable and shocking.” In a call with X. Jinping on 16 April, V. Putin condemned the criticisms that China had not acted fast enough to contain the pandemic as “counterproductive.” He praised the “consistent and effective actions” taken by the Chinese authorities and declared that the crisis served as “further evidence of the special nature of the Russian-Chinese comprehensive strategic partnership.”<sup>1</sup>

### Has the Pandemic Changed Anything?

Has anything in international affairs changed substantially as a result of the pandemic? In terms of our spectrum of views outlined above, the answer in part lies in the issue in question, with an accelerated shift to renewables amid a deepened awareness of the fragility of human life on the planet. In social and economic terms, some profound changes have taken on a more accentuated form, with the coronavirus hastening the global shift towards cleaner energy sources while emphasising the role of the state.<sup>2</sup> However, in international affairs, stasis (immobility) has trumped processes of change. In terms of larger structural shifts in international affairs, there has been no hint of any systemic transformations as a result of the corona crisis. What we have seen instead is the acceleration of certain trends that had already appeared. If the pandemic acted as an accelerant, what did it accelerate?

The first question is whether American “exceptionalism” – the view that the US has a special mission in the world and that it has achieved a uniquely successful domestic governance structure – would survive the pandemic. The 2003 war in Iraq, the poor response to Hurricane Katrina and the dangers of the development of financial capitalism exposed by the Great Recession of 2008–2009 suggested that a rethinking of American foreign policy and domestic priorities was in order. Instead, B. Obama’s presidency restored a “semblance of normalcy,” but the underlying tensions were not resolved, which is what paved the way for D. Trump to be elected in 2016. The pandemic exposed the way that the pursuit of “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq squandered billions yet did not make America safer. Greater resources devoted to the health of the population, public services and infrastructure would have been a wiser investment. A. Bacevich, the president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, argues that “the world’s most powerful and most expensive military establishment is not proving terribly relevant to the most lethal national security threat to face the United States since World War Two.” The pandemic was a curse, but it was also an opportunity for Americans to understand that they were “not God’s agents.”<sup>3</sup>

The pandemic has exposed grave shortcomings not only in the provision of health care and social welfare in the US, but also in its governance system. An Indian commentator interpreted this as evidence that the “decline of the US as a global

1 Dimitri A. Simes, “Will Russia Be the Real Loser in the New US–China Cold War?” *The National Interest*, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-russia-be-real-loser-new-us-china-cold-war-150071>.

2 Fukuyama 2020.

3 Andrew Bacevich, “Will American Exceptionalism Survive the Pandemic?” *Spectator US*, April 22, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://spectator.us/american-exceptionalism-survive-pandemic/>.

power is accelerating,” rendering it more dangerous and unpredictable as it tries “to perpetuate its domination of the global arena, no matter what it takes.” In this context, “it is in the common interests of Russia and China that in their growing confrontation with the US, they stand by each other and support each other. There is every indication that US imperialism will assume an even more violent and oppressive character in the prevailing world situation.”<sup>1</sup>

F. Zakaria had already voiced similar disquiet about the American overreaction to the Chinese challenge, although couched in more measured tones. He noted that some of the same concerns had been voiced about Japan’s rise in the 1980s, but they proved to be exaggerated. The big difference, of course, was that Japan was part of the American alliance system, whereas China is a resolutely independent power. He noted the consequences of overreaction in the Soviet case, provoking the domestic abuses of the McCarthy era, the Vietnam War, and “countless other military interventions.” He also stressed that US policy towards China had never been one solely of engagement, and its “hedging strategy” was accompanied by various forms of containment and deterrence, including continued arms sales to Taiwan, maintaining and increasing the number of American bases and troops in Asia, developing close relations with Vietnam and other potential adversaries of China, and promoting the planned Trans-Pacific Partnership. He also notes that, although China was not becoming a liberal democracy and was guilty of gross human rights abuses against the Uyghurs and other ethnic groups inside the country, it nevertheless was a remarkably responsible power, notably in supporting UN peacekeeping missions and working towards improvements in economic governance, including greater protection for intellectual property rights. F. Zakaria questions the Pentagon’s designation of China as a “strategic competitor” and notes the high level of economic interdependence between the two countries. He calls on Washington to “keep its cool” and maintain the patient strategy of engagement and deterrence.<sup>2</sup> His argument was important, but the pandemic only intensified the features against which he warned.

As far as relations between Russia and the US are concerned, there is little evidence of a new “reset.” There had been a long-term deterioration in relations, interspersed by periods when a crisis provided an opportunity to reset ties. This had been the case after 9/11, and with D. Trump – a transactional president who favoured great power deals and personal relations – the Great Pandemic provided an opportunity for a new opening. There were more telephone calls between V. Putin and D. Trump in spring 2020 than in the whole previous period of D. Trump’s presidency. A call on 30 March helped pave the way for an OPEC++ deal on oil production cuts to stabilise the precipitous plunge in prices caused by the collapse of the previous deal of December 2016 and the catastrophic decline in demand, accompanied by huge oversupply. In that call, Putin offered Russian assistance with medical equipment, which D. Trump gratefully accepted. However, D. Trump’s room for manoeuvre to strike a “grand bargain” was extremely limited. Not only were the Democrats in Congress resolutely opposed to any concessions, but a large part of the traditional

1 M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Russia-China Entente Deepens in the Shadow of the Pandemic,” Indian Punchline, May 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://indianpunchline.com/russia-china-entente-deepens-in-the-shadow-of-the-pandemic/>.

2 Zakaria 2020.

Republican Party did not share D. Trump's view that Russia was a potential ally in the struggle against China. The sanctions regime was now locked in by Congressional acts, which D. Trump had been forced to sign into law. These included not only on Russian companies and individuals, but also third parties who had purchased Russian military equipment or helped build the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

With Russia beset by the greatest combination of crises since V. Putin came to power in 2000, "proponents of great power competition within the US national security apparatus would argue that it is ludicrous for the United States to throw Moscow a life preserver when the virus, the oil crisis and the economic aftermath has the real possibility of transforming Russia from a near-peer into a non-peer competitor."<sup>1</sup> D. Trump's options were very limited, while the Democratic nominee (the winner of the 2020 presidential election), J. Biden, pledged "to impose real costs on Russia for its violation of international norms and stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood time and again against President V. Putin's kleptocratic authoritarian system."<sup>2</sup> There was not much that V. Putin could offer in Ukraine and Syria, or on other divisive policy issues such as NATO enlargement, without losing status and prestige abroad and undermining his position at home. The multitude of problems besetting Russia certainly encouraged the "Putin is doomed" school of thinking, but while he faced the greatest challenge of his presidency, there was no reason to believe that the crisis was terminal. The national vote on the constitutional amendments passed by parliament in March 2020, which would allow V. Putin to run for two more terms after his current period in office ends in 2024, was postponed from 22 April to early July.

This raises the fundamental question of why the stasis prevailed despite the fact that COVID-19 represented a major shock to international and domestic governance. The Black Lives Matter protests against the killing of G. Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May, just as the US COVID-19 death was hitting 100,000, became a global phenomenon. Along with this came increasing questions regarding history, remorse and reparations for slavery, as well as the issue of enduring injustice. These are crucial topics, but shifting the terrain of debate to questions of identity and even "culture wars" overshadowed many fundamental structural questions of power and purpose. Some in the anti-war movement welcomed D. Trump as a "tactical ally against American imperialism," but "they failed to see that he wanted to wage war at home."<sup>3</sup> The fight for justice at home does have the potential to change the terms of debate over foreign policy, but in the short term the focus on domestic failings only reinforced the stasis in international affairs. The impasse in relations was too deep and the absence of alternative institutional, ideational or policy choices on all sides suggested that the deadlock would endure.

The B. Obama White House staffer B. Rhodes termed the foreign policy establishment "the Blob." This group, mostly located in Washington and its environs, was preoccupied with the apparent decline of American hegemony: "It has been distinguished by its unwillingness, or inability, to reconsider or reprioritize national

1 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Don't Bet on Reset: US-Russian Relations in the Wake of the Coronavirus," *Russia Matters*, April 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/dont-bet-reset-us-russian-relations-wake-coronavirus>.

2 Biden 2020, 73.

3 Shatz 2020, 5.

interests that were first defined after World War II, and then continued, by and large, on auto-pilot after the end of the Cold War.”<sup>1</sup> M. Glennon argues that the structural development of the American state after 1945 in Cold War conditions created a “deep state.” In foreign and security policy, the country is governed by “Trumanite” entities: the ramified national security structures and associated corporations spawned by the Cold War that survived and proliferated afterwards.<sup>2</sup> The effectiveness of constitutional control has withered because of the inherent complexity of national security issues, as well as the enduring bipartisan ideological consensus on America’s “leadership” (reformulated in the Trump era as “greatness”) in world affairs.<sup>3</sup> The fundamental paradox is that “The deep state, once an object of suspicion among liberal Americans, has turned into an object of longing under Trump.”<sup>4</sup>

Although D. Trump came to power as the great disruptor, he fulfilled his promises to reduce US involvement in the structures of multilateralism. However, when it came to the positive part of his agenda, including “getting on” with Russia, he signally failed. Trump’s foreign policy options were constrained by *Russiagate*, and above all by the national security state. Trump challenged what he considered to be the ossified and anachronistic “Trumanite” multilateral formats of the national security state abroad, notably NATO, which seemed only to confirm the concerns of the military intelligence community. It would take more than the Great Pandemic to undermine the power of the Trumanite state or to change the views of its ideological defenders, with Democrats and Republicans competing to be the most militant.<sup>5</sup> Together, they turned their attention to China, launching a new Cold War that would be more complex than the first, as complex processes of supply chain interdependence fostered in the era of globalisation were painfully dismantled. The Second Cold War would be a full-spectrum conflict as two near-peer competitors struggled for primacy, with few rules on how such a conflict should be fought.

## Conclusion

The impasse is complete, and no viable exit is visible. A return to the liberal internationalism that was already being disrupted by its inherent contradictions does not offer an escape route, while the outlines of an alternative to the disruptive third phase of the LIO remain undeveloped. Russia and China defend a model of sovereign internationalism and guarded multilateralism, and on this basis the outlines of a new bipolarity are emerging. The ghosts of nationalism are once again unleashed, restrained only by the structures of post-war multilateralism.

D. Trump was the great disruptor, and the inadequacies of his leadership were exposed by his management of the pandemic. He also questioned America’s multilateral commitments. When it came to rethinking the established patterns of

1 Hunter DeRensis, “The Blob Strikes Back,” *The National Interest*, October 2019, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/blob-strikes-back-90476>.

2 For a detailed study of the “revolving doors connecting government, conservative think tanks, lobbying firms, law firms and the defense industry,” see Richard Cummings, “US: Lockheed Stock and Two Smoking Barrels,” *Corpwatch*, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://corpwatch.org/article/us-lockheed-stock-and-two-smoking-barrels>.

3 Glennon 2015.

4 Shatz 2020, 7.

5 See, for example, Nuland 2020.

the Cold War, this was welcomed by Russia and international peace movements. However, when it concerned the global (not necessarily liberal) institutionalism developed in the post-war years, his disruptions were less welcome. The EU proved too weak to respond to the positive elements of that disruption, while lamenting its negative features. It was able to mitigate some of the latter, primarily by investing in responses to the global health crisis, and after a shaky start it did invest in some new solidarity mechanisms with the hard-hit southern member states like Italy and Spain. Nevertheless, the pandemic only exacerbated the various political fissures, with right wing nationalists using the crisis to advance national agendas, sometimes in the paradoxical guise of defending civil liberties against lockdown restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

The crisis deepened the Russia–China alignment, and with disruptions expected to continue to emanate from Washington irrespective of the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, there has even been talk of this becoming a formal alliance. Russia, as always, was ready for rapprochement with any Western power that was prepared to return to normal diplomatic engagement, but the institutional and ideological inertia of Cold War structures meant that even a major crisis like the Great Pandemic could do little to change entrenched patterns. However, the crisis has been a trial for all countries. State capacity and competencies have been tested everywhere, revalidating state activism and social welfare. One of the main lessons of the pandemic is that the character of a regime – liberal democratic or authoritarian – is not the main measure of effective governance. Rather, it is the quality of its ruling elite and governance structures. In terms of global governance, the G7 once again proved itself too narrow a body to have a significant impact on managing the crisis, while the G20 group was unable to assume the leadership role that it had taken following the financial collapse in autumn 2008. The ultimate result of the pandemic was to intensify the disruptive elements in national and global affairs while highlighting the weakness of multilateral institutions. The crisis has accelerated moves towards the creation of a diffuse yet probably enduring bipolarity in international affairs. In short, everything changed and nothing changed – at least in the short term.

1 Richard Youngs, "Coronavirus and Europe's New Political Fissures," Carnegie Europe, June 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/06/10/coronavirus-and-europe-s-new-political-fissures-pub-82023>.

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**Additional information**

Received: July 10, 2020. Accepted: November 17, 2020.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**For citation**

Sakwa, Richard. "Multilateralism and Nationalism in an Era of Disruption:  
the Great Pandemic and International Politics."

*Journal of International Analytics* 11, no. 3 (2020): 129–150.

<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-3-129-150>



# Многосторонность и национализм в эпоху кризиса: глобальная пандемия и международная политика

## АННОТАЦИЯ

Глобальная пандемия 2020 г. стала источником потрясений для международной системы. Но стала ли она причиной её перестройки и изменения логики внешнеполитического поведения игроков на международной арене? Анализ последствий пандемии показывает, что она лишь ускорила существующие тенденции, но не привела к каким-либо существенным преобразованиям. Трехуровневая международная система, созданная после 1945 года, сохраняет свою структуру, но борьба между двумя конкурирующими моделями мирового порядка (либеральным международным порядком и группой суверенных незападных держав) усилилась и может закрепить зарождающуюся новую биполярность. Принцип многосторонности в международных делах уже давно находится под угрозой, но его деградация ускорилась по мере того, как такие органы, как ВОЗ, столкнулись с проблемой борьбы с пандемией коронавируса, а возрождение национализма ускорило процесс деглобализации. Легитимность государства как единственного эффективного субъекта, способного преодолеть глобальный кризис, была переоценена. Но это сопровождалось усилением национал-популистских вызовов не только либеральному универсализму, но и суверенному интернационализму. Возвращение великодержавной конкуренции влечет за собой эрозию «плотных» структур международного сообщества, сложившихся в послевоенные годы, и может свидетельствовать о возвращении к похожему на венский периоду, подошедшему к концу в первые годы XX столетия. Критика ООН и других многосторонних институтов Ялтинско-Потсдамской системы означает, что борьба между соперничающими моделями мирового порядка будет сдерживаться ограждениями международной системы в меньшей степени, и поэтому «новая холодная война» вполне может оказаться более опасной, чем противостояние СССР и США.

## КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

*глобальная пандемия, международная система, мировой порядок, холодная война, Ялтинско-потсдамский порядок, ускорение*

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**Дополнительная информация**

Поступила в редакцию: 10 июля 2020. Принята к публикации: 17 ноября 2020.

**Конфликт интересов**

Автор заявляет об отсутствии потенциального конфликта интересов.

**Цитирование**

*Саева, Р.* Многосторонность и национализм в эпоху кризиса: глобальная пандемия и международная политика // Международная аналитика. – 2020. – Том 11 (3). – С. 129–150  
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-3-129-150>