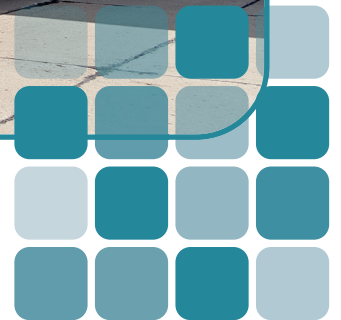


# COVID-19, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND THE POSSIBLE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM



GÖKTUĞ SÖNMEZ





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## Contents

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Introduction .....	3
Possible Effects of the Pandemic in the Context of National and International Security .....	4
Future Security Debates and Predictions about the Changes in the International System .....	9

## Introduction

The unprecedented rise of the concept of human security, which has gained even more significance especially through migration and refugees, will quite possibly be witnessed in the upcoming years due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has emerged in the last months of 2019. The pandemic has increased its severity day by day and no remarkable progress towards a solution has yet been made. In addition to human security, the problem seems to have a meaning well beyond the pandemic because of the threats it poses to critical infrastructures and cyber systems as well as prospective stagnations in several sectors of strategic importance for the sustainability of states. A disease that spreads so easily and proves fatal at such a level may become, not only a global health problem, but also a national, regional and global security threat. depending on its scale. The situation we are experiencing right now is rapidly evolving into such.

Significant risks, such as with the security of critical infrastructures and cyber systems, regime

“ Although it has a relatively low mortality rate of 3.5 percent compared to SARS and MERS viruses, the mortality rates of which are 9.6-11 percent and 34 percent respectively, COVID-19 has been one of the most important epidemic diseases of the 20th century with its high spread ability and pace of its transmission.

security, the sustainability of strategic sectors and the rise of suspicion and xenophobia within the society, will be more intensive in the coming years. As a result of pandemics, countries may quickly return to their own resources, close their borders and minimize their interaction with one another. On the one hand, this pulling back has the potential to serve, based on interdependence theory, as a catalyst that eases the tension in the coming years. On the other hand, some countries such as Russia and China seek to create rifts in the international system through their aid policies toward these countries, which have turned inwards. In general, epidemic diseases are likely to have negative effects on human security, financial sustainability, military personnel and structures, critical infrastructures, etc. The COVID-19 outbreak, the second-largest pandemic case following the Spanish flu in the 20th century has the potential to display such a feature as well. Accordingly, this study will prepare the groundwork, create a basis for future studies, and provide a general framework for the threats and possible measures that epidemic diseases may pose to security. Later, in this paper, a future projection will be put forward through the evaluation of which topics will become more controversial in the world order after the pandemic.

Although it has a relatively low mortality rate of 3.5 percent compared to SARS and MERS viruses, the mortality rates of which are 9.6-11 percent and 34 percent respectively, COVID-19 has been one of the most important epidemic diseases of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with its high spread ability and pace of its transmission. The comparison with the Black Plague that caused the death of 200 million people or the Spanish flu which caused the loss of 45 to 50 million lives and the assessment that 100 to 240 thousand people will die in the best scenario in

the USA, for example, are important data on the severity of the disease.

In the context of the Middle East, especially Iran's being inadequate and late to take measures against the disease, keeping the Shia religious centers open to visitors in the country has made the country a base for the outbreak in the region. The factors, such as the movement of Shia militia groups out of Iran to the region, the visits by Shia population from the region entering into the country, and the mobilization of the clergy, may be argued to have played a big role in the rapid spread of the disease in a broad territory extending from Afghanistan to Lebanon. The widespread viral presence in Iran has been one of the factors that has caused the spread of the disease to Iraq and Syria, causing many military and political figures to catch the disease. Considering the route and the destination of the Shiite militias, it seems likely that Syria will be another important epicenter where the size of the outbreak cannot be measured due to the current climate. Syria, where many Shiite foreign fighter groupings such as Zaynabiyyoun, Fatemiyyoun, Nujaba, Hezbollah and so on are deployed, "imports" the virus not only from Iran but also from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan through the fighters coming from those countries, therefore magnifying the risks associated with the spread the virus to these countries as these fighters are sent dead or alive back to their countries. Indeed, even the Wagner fighters are reportedly getting sick as a result of this structure of interaction. Italy has recently become "Europe's Wuhan" and become a new epicenter of the disease. The fact that land and air borders are not closed within the Schengen area has been another factor contributing to the rapid spread of the disease in the continent. As well as the closed structure of the Chinese regime which kept the world unaware of the disease for a while, the mobility within the Schengen area

and the effectiveness of global organizations such as the WHO and regional organizations such as the EU are likely to be among the most important discussion topics in the post-pandemic period.

### **Possible Effects of the Pandemic in the Context of National and International Security**

With the outbreak of COVID-19, each country faces threats under their specific circumstances. They also face some of the new common security threats and these threats have the potential to increase over time. Therefore, this article tackles some general security concerns that constitute similarity or uniformness for many countries and some suggestions for the measures to be taken. While the world focuses on the health aspect of the pandemic primarily, which is normal, evaluating the possibilities for the international security climate and the international system in the period during and after the pandemic will be able to offer important suggestions for the construction of more prepared systems for the future.

Terrorist organizations, criminal organizations and their backers may think of taking action in such an atmosphere in the wake of their own damage assessment by taking advantage of the situation through looting and raiding, acquiring revenues on the black market, inciting unrest among the populace and increasing the distance between state and society.




As stated by professionals and experts in general, one of the biggest problems related to the disease is the inevitable limitation of the bed capacity, medical staff, and device capacity (ventilator storage capacity) of each country for their patients. When the disease becomes fatal, especially by showing its effect on the upper respiratory tract, it is necessary to support breathing with respiratory equipment. Therefore, exceeding the number of these devices after a certain period with the geometric increase of the disease cases is quite possible. In this context, the importance of Turkey's efforts to accelerate the domestic production breathing apparatus units and the transition to mass production as of the first week of April is well understood. In addition, when hospitals are filled with patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, and personnel and devices are transferred to them, health systems, that are not normally designed for such a burden, may not be able to deal with other emergency patients. Therefore, it is possible that those who


are delivered to hospitals due to illnesses that require patients to be isolated or due to cases such as traffic accidents, partial respiratory failure, injury, etc. may lose their lives. Even though COVID-19's death rate remains at 3-4 percent, this may lead to higher numbers of deaths. The purpose of "flattening the curve" with the coronavirus is understandable when the numbers increase substantially, considering that such a scenario may cause increased confusion and anxiety in society and some unrest may arise in countries that already have weak state mechanisms, if any. Especially when the security aspect of the issue is taken into account, it is possible that the necessary level of service cannot be transferred to the security forces who need health services in the context of daily public security, and this may result in undesirable consequences and cause greater unrest among societies. It is also probable that such an atmosphere is taken advantage of by illegal non-state armed actors and/or individual terrorists or criminals.



However, potential weaknesses that security institutions may have due to shifts in systems and personnel reductions will be the points that such groups would carefully observe. Terrorist organizations, criminal organizations and their backers may think of taking action in such an atmosphere in the wake of their own damage assessment by taking advantage of the situation through looting and raiding, acquiring revenues on the black market, inciting unrest among the populace and increasing the distance between state and society.



Cybersecurity, that protects this wide front, needs to be questioned seriously and rapidly in such a way as to include the security of cyber-infrastructure, including financial data, internal operations of companies, closed negotiations, and critical infrastructures such as health institutions, government agencies and financial institutions across the country and, beyond this, satellite and defense systems.



Another possible danger lies with that countries, companies, and institutions must resort to online communication as soon as possible. While the online world offers a great advantage in maintaining the continuity of communication under the conditions of the pandemic and has become quite essential, it also has, for a long time, constituted a suitable target since some organizations and criminal groups operate over the dark web and deep web for the purposes of communication, material acquisition, and planning processes. Moreover, it still faces threats such

as data theft and/or attacks preventing the operation of the systems. From the Carbanak attacks to the hacking of the NHS, dozens of examples can be given from banking and military systems to health and population-related systems. Therefore, this opportunity of the internet, which is considered as an important advantage in issues such as the continuity of education and the functioning of companies, also significantly expands the frontline of cybersecurity and rapidly increases the number of points to be defended on this front by moving many offline communications to the online world. Institutions and companies, which operate in connection with each other, have attributed varying degrees of strategic importance to internal and external communication. Therefore, maintaining internal and external communication require both quick action and expertise, two components which are paradoxically difficult to have at the same time. Increasingly critical infrastructures have started to be exposed to cyber-attacks in recent years, and non-state armed actors, cross-border and local criminal organizations, and illegal groups, in general, have become more and more skillfully directed with their cyber capacities towards disrupting activities. With this increase, other groups and individuals have become more equipped and more eager regarding the necessary expertise and the importance of similar activities. Compared to the physical front, which is more costly, risky and challenging to attack, the cyber front is less costly, more technical, but relatively less risky and, hence, may become the primary target for such organizations or individuals. Cybersecurity, that protects this wide front, needs to be questioned seriously and rapidly in such a way as to include the security of cyber-infrastructure, including financial data, internal operations of companies, closed negotiations, and critical infrastructures such as health institutions, government agencies and financial institutions across the country and,



beyond this, satellite and defense systems. Considering that the communication between international organizations, state institutions, and between states can also be maintained over some time via cyber infrastructure, the protection of this communication and the use and/or development of national software systems against potential infiltration and data theft by not only non-state actors but also other highly developed countries should take priority in this period. Aside from the critical infrastructure directly related to the state's military security, even threats to the healthcare system and the in-house software of hospitals in such a period have the potential to have devastating effects. In this period when health systems are approaching the limits of their capacity in each country, changes in data and/or attacks on devices may cause this capacity to be exceeded rapidly and/or the inefficient utilization of the existing capacity. This threat will generally require both more staff and more qualified technical infrastructure to secure commu-

nications and protect the electronic infrastructure of institutions. Access to these people is directly related to both the capacity of the countries and the pool of trained people, and to the extent that the outbreak will affect these people as well. In this atmosphere where countries prioritize self-sufficiency in the short term, each country will act first in accordance with its strategic resources and their sustainability. At this point, how international organizations will act should also be carefully monitored. After this crisis, every country will conduct their own damage assessment processes and then subject international organizations to reevaluation, and, accordingly, the prestige and effectiveness of these organizations are likely to be directly affected in the upcoming years. The bilateral relations, which have developed or worsened in this process, are one of the most important agenda items. At the end of the study, this issue will be discussed in more detail under the title of possible effects.



With the spread of the disease, the escalation of public unrest may be one of the objectives of terrorist organizations, criminal groups, and their backers. The more the society feels that their government does not sufficiently care for them, that its capacity is not enough, (even if the state cares), that the disease has spread enormously (even if the state's capacity is sufficient), that hospitals are desperate and deprived of resources, that they would not be provided with enough health care in case the lives of their own or their beloved ones are in danger, that the necessary investments have not been made, and that politicians ensured their own survival and let the people down, etc., the more the rift between the society and the state will deepen. This deepening would lead to the emergence of a fault line that is likely to offer important opportunities to non-state armed groups acting outside this legal area. Another risk that the COVID-19 pandemic can pose is associated with security institutions. The rapid spread of the disease in any military facility or in several institutions that are effective in security bureaucracy such as in a law enforcement agency and in intelligence along with disinformation or just disinformation itself about such a spread have the potential to create significant resentment. Such a situation will not only undermine the trust in the state apparatus but also cause significant problems in the functioning of the security apparatus. Under the effect of such an epidemic, precautions should also be taken at a higher level in places where large numbers of people are packed together in restricted areas such as penal institutions and barracks. There is also widespread news that reports of cases of the disease among the military units of the actors who try to engage in global power projection are spreading rapidly to the military units of different geographies where the disease is seen, such as with the US forces. If security bureaucracy and security forces do not attempt to diagnose

and treat the outbreak at the right time compared to how this is being done in civilian conditions, the virus can spread to more people and much faster. Likewise, it should not be overlooked that security bureaucracy and security forces can produce more effective and faster solutions to such problems, and if necessary, this potential should be used. Such a situation may cause irreversible rotations in the military forces outside the country and may change the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the ideal planning elements within the said forces. This would thus prevent the desired presence of the forces on the field. Another factor that is as crucial as the decrease in the likelihood of infection is the category of disinformation efforts that can be carried out from inside or outside the country. Taking into account the engagement of multiple great powers in many countries such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Iraq, and that this engagement has included all of the elements of a hybrid war, disinformation has become one of the very essential elements. It seems that such efforts may be made not only by non-state actors but also by states. To prevent the escalation of the risks posed by the disease in the current financial, social and security environment and to stop its spread to the whole community, countries must reveal the roadmaps of how to provide strategic communication against disinformation activities in the fastest way, revise their existing strategic communication guides, and develop new discourse and include new messaging instruments against such a pandemic. It is also important in the context of preventing its further growth and its rapid spread to all segments of society. If no one until today has prepared themselves for a scenario where global actors struggle with one another over a pandemic and developed strategic communication tools for such cases, indeed it would be realistic to assume that many countries do not have such a plan. In such a case, several de-

vices that different actors (such as strategic communication experts, social scientists, NGOs, security bureaucracy and private companies, the advertising and marketing sectors) can use should be developed with applicable strategies quickly and frequently, without neglecting cybersecurity

The new era will constitute an atmosphere in which two subtitles of security are of critical importance: human security and cybersecurity. These two subtitles, which have already increased to be at the top of the security agenda in recent years, will make their importance more felt after the pandemic. Possibly many issues such as health, finance, production, etc., which are considered to be rather secondary in terms of security studies, will be quickly included in the security domain.

### Future Security Debates and Predictions about the Changes in the International System

The extent of the COVID-19 pandemic gives signals of the emergence of quite a different world in the coming years. This can be understood not only in terms of the security challenges and precautions mentioned so far, but also in the context of the broader international system, the position of the great powers in the system, the

struggle between the hegemon and possible “challengers”, and developments that may require new evaluations in terms of International Relations theory.

Important debates may arise after the epidemic that may center around the system itself, the regime types and ideologies of the great powers, and the effectiveness and adequacy of international organizations. As mentioned briefly above, countries quickly have turned to their own domestic needs in the face of the pandemic. They have passed cautionary judgments and imposed bans over the export of medical equipment and protective equipment, and national and international aid agencies have prioritized their countries of residence. In addition, there have been reports allegedly of the US and Israel seizing or hijacking equipment that other countries have or expect to receive in recent days. Security institutions are likely to carry out more such operations over time. In this environment, the efforts by both the WHO and the UN, to the extent they are able to help countries, and therefore the capacity of these structures, and, beyond their capacity, their will to support the international community, have been questioned. It is quite possible to see an increase in this debate in the upcoming years.

The new conditions may further change the strategic perception that has been somewhat stretched and has changed after the Cold War as a result of the distrust towards the USA for some time and possible assistance of Russia, especially in the European theatre.





On the other hand, in the context of human mobility and the spread of the disease, the Schengen regulations may be brought up on the agenda, and from a broader perspective, the extent and amount of aid that the EU can transfer to the member countries will be evaluated. Aid and support from China in the case of Hungary and from Russia in the case of Italy will lead to important questions within the EU. The questioning of these actors will trigger criticism towards NATO as well. The NATO countries, which are considered to be more resistant to medium-scale changes in the system and to have stronger ties compared to many other international organizations due to common enemy perceptions and security considerations, do not have scenarios about or against such a pandemic as far as they focus on classic military threats. Besides, it can be evaluated that the solidarity between the allies is not at the expected level. One of the most important features of this questioning is to see how competent NATO is to respond to a possible extensive biological attack. Although the organization (NATO) has been subject to many questions in its history, the questioning of its capacity is something quite rare.

The pandemic, which may be the peak point of a process in which China is increasing its power on a global scale, offers a great advantage for China in the regions it has already been involved in and opens the door to the regions it is not involved in yet.


The new conditions may further change the strategic perception that has been somewhat

stretched and has changed after the Cold War as a result of the distrust towards the USA for some time and possible assistance of Russia, especially in the European theatre. Although some countries in the energy sector share the feeling that the USA has not been able to inspire trust and confidence as much as before and that Russia poses much less of a threat than before, the consequences of the rapid reflection of the given assessment on the security domain will be serious, causing the deepening of the plan Russia has been conducting in its immediate environment, that is, in the Middle East and the Baltic region, in recent years. One of the most important arguments that should not be forgotten is that the term hegemon contains a “challenger” by definition. This challenging actor may not be able to contest the hegemon on some fronts. It may have the power to coerce yet lack the capacity to produce consent. It may resort to imitation in some cases and to rivalry in others, but it ultimately aims to challenge the hegemon by increasing its relative power. In this context, not only Russia but also China, which can also be considered as the “challenger”, is rapidly initiating aid campaigns in Europe, and Africa, and transferring support personnel and equipment to the countries in these continents. It also conducts a highly effective public diplomacy in marketing the success of its struggle. The pandemic, which may be the peak point of a process in which China is increasing its power on a global scale, offers a great advantage for China in the regions it has already been involved in and opens the door to the regions it is not involved in yet. One of the most significant handicaps of China in producing the consent that a hegemon needs coercion is its regime type and ideology. Nevertheless, China will increasingly benefit from this pandemic by using public diplomacy to show that its regime and ideology have enabled a remarkably effective struggle. At the point of

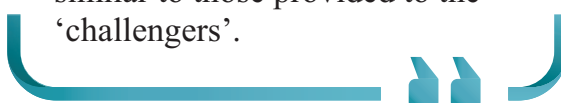
China's effective struggle in the face of the pandemic, the boundaries of democracy and individual freedoms may be discussed again and this discussion may cause the questioning of politics in many countries and discussions on the adequacy and speed of democracy in responding to the crises may come to be on the agenda. The extraordinary powers that Orban has acquired in Hungary point to this process. The elections to be held in the democracies after the pandemic may be expected to yield quite interesting results. An international atmosphere where parties at the extreme ends of the political spectrum can be pushed onto the scene quickly may emerge. This, as mentioned above, may bring about the sharpening of the competitive environment in the international system after a period in which "interdependence" is severely disrupted. As the countries close their borders for commercial activities and are likely to follow this trend in the near future as well, self-sufficiency of nations will be once again and very seriously brought to the agendas of national institutions and international organizations in an unexpected manner. Waltz's billiard balls metaphor will be more prone to proving the unpredictability in the new system, and alliances and rivalries will be able to be reshaped in accordance with the experiences of the pandemic.

Considering that we are just at the first stage of the pandemic and its mid-to-long term ramifications, it can be seen that these impacts have the potential to cause significant problems in the international system. In addition, while the global financial system reinforces itself after the pandemic, some actors may be seen unusually flexing the limits of their powers. As the USA predicted that a possible collapse would open more space for China and Russia, its efforts to pump dollars rapidly to the world to prevent this possibility do not constitute a coincidence. The leadership of the USA will be questioned in

many parts of the world, particularly in continental Europe, if they fail to implement "Marshall Aid 2.0" during and after the pandemic. This situation will not provide China or Russia with a hegemonic role. Due to several reasons such as the long-standing economic and political problems of these countries, their image- and capacity-oriented difficulties in producing consent, and that the problems related to their regimes prepare a more suitable environment for internal tension, their rise to the hegemonic position does not seem possible in the short- and mid-term. Yet, the pandemic offers an especially important opportunity for these countries, which do their best to erode the USA's hegemonic power and, without any doubt, would continue to do so in the future. It would also be more rational to assert that the given opportunity may be taken advantage of to a greater extent by China.



The countries, which did not show any military, political or social potential for being a pivotal country, will, surely, not be able to acquire the position of a "regional pivot" overnight through soft power during the pandemic. Yet for others, which already projected these in the field, there is a soft power projection opportunity similar to those provided to the 'challengers'.



The post-pandemic atmosphere will also provide such opportunities for regional actors as well. The actors who are effective in combating the disease in their regions and who do not focus only on their own struggle but support other regional countries will increase their chances





to be regional pivots of the post-pandemic period. The countries, which did not show any military, political or social potential for being a pivotal country, will, surely, not be able to acquire the position of a “regional pivot” overnight through soft power during the pandemic. Yet for others, which already projected these in the field, there is a soft power projection opportunity similar to those provided to the ‘challengers’.

In this sense, while Turkey is effectively fighting for its own interests, its support to neighboring countries will have the potential to make significant long-term positive effects in this period when regional competition with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE continues in various areas and on various scales and, indeed, has extended beyond the region. Each of the regional powers will focus more on these possibilities after the initial damage assessment of the crisis within their borders. Each will evaluate the necessary and transferable resources and strive to utilize opportunities that may arise in the on-going competition in the Middle East and North Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has quickly emerged among the many topics that have been occupying

the international agenda, causing regional and global crises, and still have the potential to do so, and has gained a central place and importance. When the speed and persistence of the pandemic are evaluated, it is the most likely scenario that this situation will have permanent effects on many other areas and remain with us at least in the medium term. In this scenario, new threats and challenges will emerge in terms of international security, and therefore new, innovative, and fast-paced/revised tools will be required to combat them. The debates about the international system, the limits of the capacity and will of states and international organizations, the position of the hegemon and the challengers will be with us for many years. This situation will create regional and global opportunities that may cause critical breakdowns or accelerate such breakdowns beyond all the human drama experienced and are still likely to be experienced in the world international system. In this process, the actors, who can effectively show their struggle both on the ground and in the information area and display an international presence beyond their national struggle, will gain an important area of prestige and influence that can turn into a post-pandemic power and an ultimate impact.



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