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COVID-19 that Accelerates Geopolitical Time

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

The new coronavirus pandemic has taken over the global media agenda. Researchers, politicians, officials and journalists have put aside other priorities and focus exclusively on one thing, seeking to apply their expertise amidst total confusion and uncertainty. One concept that became their shared viewpoint at quite an early phase was that the world would never be the same again after COVID-19.

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We are only at the beginning of the crisis, and there is no foreseeing all of its manifestations and consequences. It is clear though that it will affect, one way or another, almost every aspect of our lives in every possible dimension: domestic, social, professional, national, and international. There is therefore good reason to expect that the pandemic will become a historic milestone, which will bring about significant changes.

A dirty-white swan

In this regard, COVID-19 could be listed among phenomena referred to in foresight and future planning as black swan events (or wild cards) – in terms of both its explosive manifestation and fundamental (also pandemic) impact on many aspects of life. However, there is no saying that the swan has emerged from absolutely nowhere and that no one had expected anything of its kind.

> The obvious risks of such a crisis in the increasingly globalizing world had long been discussed. Some researchers had even predicted it with pinpoint accuracy.

Therefore, strictly speaking, the coronavirus pandemic is not a black swan event. In order to accurately describe such events in foresight, another term is used – a dirty-white swan. In normal conditions, these terminology subtleties should hardly interest anyone but researchers and business analysts specializing in forecasting; however, in today's environment, they can help gain a better understanding of the various aspects of the crisis and its repercussions, including geopolitical ones.

A dirty-white swan is a disruptive event that has become surprising only because there was some reason why observers preferred to ignore its prerequisites, or, on the other hand, they were accounted for, but not taken really seriously. In our case, this applies both to the apparent ubiquitous unpreparedness for the pandemic and to the recently provoked discussions of the premise that the coronavirus crisis might bring about radical changes to the landscape of international relations – all the way to the nullifying of the achievements of globalization and the liberal world order. Specifically, even those experts who rarely agree with each other on a routine basis have already joined the massive choir chanting about the EU's perhaps "last game" and the "final nail in the coffin" of united Europe. Some researchers suggest that for the United States – the pillar of the liberal world order – COVID-19 could become a "Suez moment", the likes of which marked the end of the United Kingdom's reign as a global power back in 1956, i.e. an historical indication of a quality change in the international status.

Both the reasoning and emotional messages of these discussions are clear and downright. Moreover, they became obvious at least a few years ago, not yesterday, which is evidenced by the agenda for numerous recent European and American forums and publications. For one, consider "Westlessness", the title of the Munich Security Report 2020.

However, one can have an impression that even as they captured the ongoing structural changes in the system of international relations that were gradually weakening the West, most European and North American politicians and experts never really believed they were actually taking place.

> The concepts of "the end of history" and the all-out superiority of the Western system over all others became a sort of religious dogmas in the elitist mindset. In order to stop perceiving them as such, the analytical understanding of long-term trends is never enough. What is needed is a painful and disturbing wake up call to bring Western elites to their senses.

Apparently, this is what the COVID-19 pandemic is all about. At the same time, it does not trigger any sudden and dramatic international change, but, on the contrary, looks more like a concentrated expression of some long-running trends that had already gained momentum. In other words, what we witness here is a kind of acceleration of geopolitical time. How this acceleration will affect the transformation of the system of international relations, which has been underway for many years, is a separate issue. But one consequence can be predicted with certainty: the crisis will literally force many to stop ignoring the altering geopolitical reality.

Does the crisis have creative potential?

This reality results from the inevitable decomposition of the unipolar world that emerged after the Cold War. The contours of the new world design are not yet fully understood, although the likeliest option is that of a bipolar system built around the competition/confrontation between the U.S. and China. This global rivalry will be somewhat diluted in different regions of the world by diversified interests and contradictions between secondary and tertiary (in terms of their geopolitical power) states. In practice, the way this system will operate may differ significantly from the historical examples of the bipolar pattern.

The most urgent thing is not what exactly the new system will look and how it will work, though – it is how the world will transit to it. Historically, any transformation of systems of international relations was as a rule accompanied by major wars, which would bring about a new stable reality. That is, the devastation caused by wars simultaneously had some sort of creative functionality for postwar settlement. Today, many would be tempted to speculate whether the pandemic could become a "creative disruption" that would contribute to the emergence of a new system of international relations.

Unfortunately, however desirable such a scenario might look, it is still hard to believe it is realistic, at least assuming that COVID-19 will not paralyze the planet for years to come.

Based upon such assumptions, the pandemic structurally cannot be tantamount to a major war. The creative impact of wars on the transformation of the framework of international relations can be attributed not so much to the exhaustion of warring nations and states, which compels them to realize the vital need to negotiate, as to the establishment – in the wake of a war – of a new balance of power that is obvious to all and that cannot be altered with available capabilities. It is therefore more profitable for all to agree on a new system that captures this balance.

It seems that COVID-19 will produce exactly the opposite impact, at least on the U.S.-China track. The coronavirus crisis will only push them towards further bickering, inciting even greater hostility and dragging them deeper into the "Thucydides's Trap". This is evidenced, among other things, by the mutual accusations that Washington and Beijing have been making about the sources of the crisis and measures to counter it, including references to conspiracy theories, as well as by the virtually non-existent engagement between them to coordinate the fight against the virus. If the situation develops in the same way, the outcome will be an even greater increase in tensions, rather than de-escalation.

COVID-19's security implications for Belarus and Eastern Europe

The crisis probably has a twofold effect on regional security in Eastern Europe.

> Most countries of the region, as well as East European security stakeholders beyond the region, will have to focus almost all of their political and financial resources on mitigating the aftermath of the pandemic in their own countries. For them, regional security issues will temporarily move down on their priority lists.

On the one hand, this may even offer certain benefits, easing the "security dilemma", which has become the main source of regional tensions in recent years, whereas the shared interest in getting back to normal life as soon as possible and strengthening their positions against the backdrop of the growing U.S.–China confrontation should promote dialogue and collaboration between Russia and the EU. On the other hand, however, the inevitable lack of attention to the challenges and risks to regional security makes it particularly vulnerable. Events that are usually perceived as low-risk in such circumstances can lead to most unpredictable consequences.

Therefore, no matter how trivial it sounds, in 12–18 months, Eastern Europe may witness some regional security developments that are hardly conceivable today. They may stem from both new initiatives, such as China's recent Health Silk Road proposal, or mere concourse of circumstances, while most countries focus almost exclusively on their domestic affairs.

Incidentally, it is in domestic affairs that the impact of the pandemic will pose the most serious threat to the security and stability of East European countries, including Belarus. The shock of the crisis exposes numerous issues, primarily those that determine the ability of states to perform their basic function – to ensure security. Moreover, they are supposed to safeguard security not only against new challenges (such as the pandemic

itself), but also against those old and almost forgotten. For example, one would not be wrong to predict the rise of organized crime in many countries, especially in those most affected by the virus, the more so because the pandemic will invariably be followed by a severe economic crisis and probably a global recession. Unlike the economic crises of the past decades, COVID-19 will hit hard both demand and supply, making it difficult to expect a speedy recovery. The ability of most governments to stimulate demand will be limited. In Belarus, the situation looks particularly alarming.

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Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations