Backgrounder
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The World HandCOV'd: Assessing longer-term implications of the pandemic disruption for international security

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Summary

The pandemic of the new coronavirus is on everyone's mind. Besides the conspicuous immediate implications for our personal lives the unprecedented events unfolding in front of us seem to have historical magnitude. Even though most analysts agree that the global outbreak of the coronavirus, as a virological phenomenon, is in itself hardly a game-changer for world affairs, it looks increasingly likely that the repercussions of the reactions by governments around the globe will have a significant impact on the international system beyond the pandemic. Among the multitude of ongoing transformations, some will accelerate while others might slow down, take a halt or change direction. But since hardly any of them are likely to remain completely unaffected, it is fair to say that international politics as a whole have fallen captive to COVID-19.

Given the pace of change and the overall state of global uncertainty, we might well find ourselves in quite a different world once the pandemic is over in which the balances of power, capabilities and interests will be shifting and provoking new tensions between international actors. Politicians, media, academics, and think tanks are therefore writing, livestreaming, and podcasting about the COVID-19 crisis on an almost hourly basis trying to keep track of the events and to grasp some of its possible implications. Yet, even as the flow of information and analysis on the subject has become immense, much of the analysis is entirely news-driven and lacks a longer-term perspective. When it does take a longer-term perspective, it frequently tends to be either normative (that is, focused on the question about preferred outcomes without necessarily accounting properly for the changing context) or dystopian. On top of this, analytical texts are often about just extrapolating (most often uncritically) today's general trends on specific issues/institutions/countries and making judgements about their future within a rather generalized expectation framework.

In light of the high dynamics and the large number of factors that affect the developments, methodological approaches that want to generate new added value and fresh insights need to consider the broader spectrum of relevant actors, their individual starting points, preferences and most likely future behaviour when coping with the pandemic and its adjacent set of crises. With this in mind, the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS Belarus) are launching a new research and debate project titled "*The World HandCOV'd: Assessing longer-term implications of the pandemic disruption for international security*".

The overall goal of the project is to analyze the main **pillars of international security** in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian spaces and to draw policy-relevant conclusions for Eastern Europe. In particular, it will pursue the following **objectives:**

- To explore specific challenges and choices that selected individual pillars of Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security (key states and international institutions) are confronted with in light of the pandemic disruption;
- To understand what impact those challenges and potential choices facing key states and international institutions might have on broader developments in Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security;
- To analyse possible scenarios (big geopolitical trends) that can result from choices made by key states and international institutions; and to identify early indicators of each such scenario;
- Based on the findings, to produce a list of policy recommendations tailor-made for the stakeholders of East European security.

Methodologically, the project will work on the assumption that future geopolitical changes caused, accelerated or distorted by COVID-19 and its side-effects will depend to a significant extent on the sum of specific dynamics around key pillars of Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security. Therefore, the project will take an inductive view that international relations are not being directly shaped by (external) structural forces per se but rather via the 'transmission belt' of key individual actors. For this reason research should take a close look at individual actors and explore what outcomes structural pressures, like the pandemic, "produce" after they have gone through the filters of various actor-level factors.

For the purposes of the project, the following states and institutions will be considered the pillars of Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security:

1. Countries

    1. United States of America

2. People's Republic of China
3. Russian Federation
4. United Kingdom
5. Republic of France
6. Federal Republic of Germany

2. Institutions

1. European Union (EU)
2. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)
3. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
4. Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)
5. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)
6. Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)
7. United Nations

Thus, the project will evaluate the challenges and choices the identified pillars are facing and assess their combined implications for Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security. In this way, the project will also apply an element of the net assessment logic. That is, it will try to understand the overall transformational dynamic by "tying" together the specific pressures, stimuli, opportunities and challenges faced by the key actors.

The Project will consist of four main components:

1. **A series of short publications analyzing the identified pillars** (May-September). On each pillar, two separate short papers will be written: one – by a representative of the respective KAS office, and the other one – by a member of the Minsk Dialogue's Advisory or Expert Council with relevant expertise. This will ensure a certain degree of diversity of views and representation.

1. **A series of virtual panels analyzing the identified pillars** (May-September). After two thematic papers on a single pillar have been published, an online panel will be held with a view to discussing the papers in more detail and facilitating a debate that will allow to dive deeper into the issue. Each online event will gather the authors of both papers and other speakers from among acting/former officials and established scholars in the relevant field.
2. **A situational analysis and scenario-building workshop** (September) will synthesize the material, identify key trends in Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security, and convert them into a scenario matrix.
3. **A final report** (October) will summarize the project's findings and offer a list of tailor-made policy recommendations on enhancing regional security in Eastern

Europe. Both are to be presented and discussed with a broader auditorium at the 2020 Minsk Dialogue Forum.

The project starts on Monday, 25 May 2020, and our first virtual panel will take place on **Thursday, 28 May**. You will find all publications and the details of each event on the websites and social network channels of the Minsk Dialogue and KAS Belarus.

We look forward to engaging with our experts and audiences during the five months of intense debates and research ahead of us.

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