

HCSS Security

COVID-19 and world peace: An overture to a new era or business as usual?

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Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19, which began at the end 2019 in China and led to more than two million infected by April 2020, is now recognized as an inflection point to longstanding international tensions, political relations, and even the conduct of war. Secretary-General of the UN António Guterres called¹ for a ‘global ceasefire’; a cessation of hostilities to free people, money and capabilities to fight COVID-19. Additional issues, such as climate change, economic cooperation, and social interaction during this crisis at this moment, are now recognized as being at a watershed moment. This snapshot investigates how the call by Secretary-General Guterres was answered, and how far and in what capacity the results of this response will impact upon the future.

The virus

The first signals² of a new deadly strain of coronavirus developing in the Chinese city of Wuhan were either downplayed or withheld by the Chinese government. Restricted messaging, including those directed towards the World Health Organization, led to a worldwide belief that the consequences of the virus could be easily maintained and its damage easily mitigated. As the origin seems to be the Seafood and Poultry market in Wuhan³, where wild animals are traded and find their way into exotic food (and/or medicine), the initial speculation was that the virus could only be transmitted from animals to humans, and consequently containment would not be a major issue. As viruses are⁴, they have a ‘survival strategy’ which allows them to mutate over time and now subsequently transmit between humans. When it became clear that confinement plans limited to China or Asia wholly underestimated the spread of the virus, principally as it spread along supply chains and international commuting channels, new centers of infection developed across northern Italy; more countries reported infections and a pandemic⁵ was officially called on March 11, 2020. In light of worldwide action against further spread and increased hospital and ICU care, the UN responded by its secretary-general calling for a halt to all hostilities worldwide. Some newspapers and news outlets dreamed⁶ of a new era in international relations and forecasts for a more optimistic world developing.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/asia/china-SARS-pneumonia-like.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>

⁴ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/microbiology/chapter/the-viral-life-cycle/>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51839944>

⁶ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/peace-poison-how-coronavirus-could-fix-globalization-problems-133112>

Conflicts

In general, conflicts in the world have different dimensions, different levels of violence, and differ in their modus operandi. A very rough division can be made between open or 'kinetic' warfare and covert violence, and violence in other dimensions.

Looking at kinetic violence, the immediate intuitive case study is the war in Syria. When examined in detail, we see that Turkey has scaled down its presence in northern Syria; a cease-fire is more or less in place even as strongholds in Idlib are continuously fought over. Much of the news coverage regarding the status of this war remains sporadic and surface-level, but hostilities are nonetheless ongoing⁷. The tripartite civil war raging in Afghanistan between US-supported government forces and the Taliban continues, with the exchange of prisoners remaining troublesome; however, little reporting about this can be read. The catastrophic war in Yemen continues unabated, despite initial cases of Coronavirus arising there⁸. Fighting and tensions between Burma and Bangladesh remain high, and the Rohingya people who remain caught between violence and Coronavirus⁹ have little prospect of respite. The tensions between Israel and the disputed West Bank seems to be on the increase as settler violence¹⁰ against the Palestinians is ongoing as the government's eviction policy¹¹, specifically in Eastern Jerusalem, is accelerating under the assumed veil of absent media attention. The question remains: is the level of violence really decreasing, or has the media attention been diverted by the impact of the pandemic, its concurrent travel restrictions, and the need for reporting and consumption of other news?

On the non-kinetic side of conflicts, the vacuum of media attention seems to have dovetailed with a rise in tensions. The number of cyber incidents is on the rise¹², and the amount of high-volume commodity phishing attempts and targeted ransomware relating to the virus has increased to unprecedented levels. Derivative toolkits have proliferated across deep web forums as cyber-criminals attempt to extort frontline hospitals at the height of the crisis¹³. Some of these ransomware attacks have employed 'double extortion' tactics, holding vital hospital services hostage and making life-saving operations impossible¹⁴. Within the underbelly of the information domain, the machinery seems to be at full swing. When China accepted medical assistance from the EU, and Italy especially,

⁷ <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en>

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/yemen-war-rages-shadow-looming-coronavirus-threat-200416103641261.html>

⁹ <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/nowhere-to-turn-rohingya-trapped-between-ongoing-risk-of-genocide-and-dead>

¹⁰ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-as-coronavirus-spreads-in-west-bank-palestinians-also-face-greater-settler-violence-1.8735820>

¹¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/palestinians-east-jerusalem-between-fear-deadly-virus-and-violent-occupation/>

¹² <https://www.airbus.com/newsroom/news/en/2020/04/airbus-cyber-bodyguards-provide-peace-of-mind-during-the-covid19-pandemic.html>

¹³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/daveywinder/2020/04/16/hospitals-on-covid-19-frontline-face-double-extortion-threat-security-experts-caution/>

¹⁴ <https://fortune.com/2020/04/01/hackers-ransomware-hospitals-labs-coronavirus/>

during the early days when COVID-19 was confined to just Wuhan, little attention was given to this international aid. Moreover, China asked other countries not to advocate for this assistance, downplaying the extent of the virus or its potential impact. Later, when China was in a position to lend aid to European countries, the propaganda machine switched tactics and accelerated to full strength. This led to an inflation of anti-European sentiments fired by extremist political groups, questioning the coherence and mutual assistance mechanisms touted within the EU. Russia soon joined the fray, delivering goods to Italy and accompanying this with a propaganda campaign which led people in the EU to believe that outsiders to the EU were more helpful than the bloc itself. On the origins of the virus, the information campaign coalesced around China's suggested claim that the virus was planted by the US military in China itself¹⁵. This was followed by similar Russian allegations to band-wagon the Chinese campaign to weaponize the virus as a geopolitical tool. In the US, President Trump's reaction was to label the Coronavirus the "Wuhan" or "Chinese virus".

Competition - Military

A pandemic of this scale could alter our fundamental thinking about international relations, and create opportunities for a new attitude towards interstate competition and perhaps relaxation, as was called for by the UN. In reality, however, the cloak of reduced attention by the media conceals business as usual, to a degree events have accelerated to 'more than business as usual'. Even in poorly stricken and possibly heavily infected North Korea, testing with advanced weapon systems, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, continues¹⁶, bringing a rise in tensions to the area. According to Russian news site TASS, Russia is on the one hand trying to appease the US in seeking to start a dialogue on hypersonic weapons¹⁷ as part of or as a prequel to an updated New START agreement; on the other hand, it continues to test its direct ascent anti-satellite weapons¹⁸. Meanwhile reports about the decreasing readiness of European and especially US naval presence are on the rise. The only French aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle¹⁹, is battling with a high amount of Coronavirus infected crew members. The US aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt²⁰, with a crew of approximately 5,500, is not capable of conducting freedom of navigation exercises or maintaining its forward presence in the South-China sea and Asian waters due to the high amount of crew infected with the virus. The ship is now anchored off the coast near Guam, a US-owned island east of the Philippines. The situation onboard the ship precipitated a minor domestic political crisis, with the firing of the ship's captain at calling attention to the spread of the virus inciting

¹⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-korea-test-fires-short-range-missiles-11586844874>

¹⁷ <https://tass.com/politics/1144535>

¹⁸ <https://www.c4isrnet.com/battlefield-tech/space/2020/04/15/russia-conducted-anti-satellite-missile-test-says-us-space-command/>

¹⁹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/crew-members-on-french-aircraft-carrier-de-gaulle-coronavirus-positive-2020-4?international=true&r=US&IR=T>

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/politics/coronavirus-navy-roosevelt-crozier.html>

public outrage and the resignation of the Navy secretary. As NATO nations are now fighting the Coronavirus and require widespread attention from member states, in tandem with other issues of NATO's defense, the pinpoint pricks of the Russian Federation and China towards testing NATO's defenses have certainly not reduced²¹.

Competition - Economic

Although slightly outside the scope of this piece, some words about economic competition are warranted. China has already employed economic tactics to increase its wealth and power. The Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Route enabled China to expand its market and its influence worldwide. One oft used tactic is the debt-trap, wherein countries are lent Chinese-funded money for infrastructure and harbor projects in exchange for use of said projects and harbor space. Where the loans cannot be repaid, China will claim ownership of these harbors and projects. And now with the economic downpour stemming from the Corona crisis, the chance that these loans cannot be met is rising tremendously. After ownership of harbors is transferred to Chinese hands as collateral repayment of the debt, China will have a free hand in the use of said infrastructure, and can potentially begin stationing troops there. This strategy was noted by the US and was part of its *casus belli* for its trade war with China. And as China is the first state to rise from the Corona crisis - whilst others remain in its grips - it now seizes upon emergent opportunities, buying tech²² companies which will soon come into high demand, where other nations now lack funds or whose attention is diverted to domestic health care issues.

Conclusions

So, how is the call for less violence and more dialogue by UN SecGen António Guterres answered? When casually reading general newspapers, the main news items consist of national and international health and economic problems, as the fallout of the Coronavirus pandemic continues to reverberate worldwide. News on conflict and wars is difficult to find, which could lead to the conclusion that arms have been universally laid down in solidarity to deal with the pandemic. Delving deeper, little seems to have changed. Conflicts are definitely unresolved, nor have they halted in the name of a common threat. The news of ongoing battles and humanitarian crisis is pushed to the background and off the headlines of mainstream media. On the information side of interstate competition, there even seems to be an increase in activities and tensions fueled by opportunities arising from exchanges of international aid; an enthusiasm for cross-border exchange of equipment driving geopolitical goals. Cloaked by attention towards fighting the health and economic issues stemming from COVID-19, pandemic-

²¹ <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/lidstaten-navo-willen-elkaar-nog-nauwer-bijstaan-in-coronacrisis-middels-uitbreiding-luchtbrug~ba67195f/>

²² <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/16/chinese-takeover-of-europe-tech-firms-face-increased-scrutiny.html>

stricken states are firming up their positions of strength as global power players, rather than striving for detente and a normalization of international relations, or a dampening of ongoing conflicts. Guterres' call seems to have fallen on deaf ears. The gaining party looks to be China, who is now definitively in resurrection mode and will come out of this crisis as a moral and economic winner. The losers are the countries and peoples where wars are still ranging, but where reporting has either decreased or stopped entirely. Attention is turned away and solutions to end violence will thus only take longer, at the cost of more human lives and suffering.