



COVID-19 and the Emerging Global Picture

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28 May 2020

Summary

The global system is still barely five months into the COVID-19 pandemic and so it is difficult to draw general conclusions about the outbreak. But what is noticeable is that certain countries have fared better than others in managing the spread of the virus. This briefing explores some of the possible reasons for this development.

Introduction

The [March briefing](#) (*Austerity in the Age of COVID-19: A Match Made in Hell?*) was written at the end of that month when the pandemic was expanding rapidly, with worries across Western Europe as to its extent and duration. That briefing concentrated on Britain and the impact of the neoliberal economic model and austerity on the country's preparedness for a pandemic, pointing to the *National Risk Assessment* and the *2018 UK Biological Security Strategy* on the possible consequences of a flu-type pandemic. One of the briefing's conclusions was:

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“ Should the crisis be overcome in a matter of a few months without the suffering and loss of life that many people presently fear, then it will be critically important to learn the lessons not just as they apply to COVID-19 and similar emergencies but also to the wider failings of neoliberal culture. ”

A month later, the briefing (*The Global Crisis of Our Time: The Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19*) was clear that the crisis would last much longer than “a few months” and commented:

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“ Though the virus will eventually be contained, its effects will last for years. In a post-coronavirus world, patterns of global inequality will likely be even more extreme than they are now, potentially causing substantial future unrest. As such, it will be crucial to work towards fairer economic and political systems in states across the globe. ”

Bearing in mind those two conclusions, this month's briefing will provide a brief overview of the global situation, point to countries that have been successful, so far, in bringing the pandemic under control, suggest reasons why some other countries have been notably unsuccessful and then draw some tentative conclusions about the longer-term implications of the pandemic.

The Global Situation

At the end of May, there are some indications that the pandemic has been brought under control in a few countries. These include New Zealand, Australia and several Asian states including China, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand. In addition, it may have peaked in some of the initially worst-affected countries in Europe such as Italy, Spain and France, although in all of these countries there are fears of second and possibly third waves. So the current easing of lockdown restrictions is being approached cautiously. The pandemic

is not under control in the United States, the UK, Russia or Brazil and there are fears of a rapid spread in many other countries across the Global South, not least states in South Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

In Africa, experts have been divided on its potential impact. There is a hope that across Africa as a whole, with a younger population than most continents, the relatively small cohort of older and more vulnerable people may make it possible to limit the rate of spread and prevent utter disaster. However, in many areas, such as refugee camps, social distancing is near-impossible and, according to [Mary Harper](#), BBC Africa Editor, is “almost disrespectful to even ask.” ORG has [also noted elsewhere](#) how overly aggressive crackdowns, as seen in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Rwanda, may see more deaths and a breakdown of democracy. So too could regimes using the pandemic as an excuse to delay or cancel elections. The outcome of coronavirus in Africa will depend on the action taken in the next three months and sufficient help being provided from other countries where necessary.

In terms of the overall pandemic, it is salutary to note that at the end of March, the global death toll was [estimated at](#) 24,000 and that this increased nearly ten-fold [during April](#) to approximately 210,000 with three million diagnosed cases. At the end of May, this has risen to close to around 400,000 deaths and six million cases, with the World Health Organisation warning of the risk of further waves of infection in countries already affected by the virus.

Relative Success

Although we may still be in the early stages of a global experience, some early conclusions can be drawn. Most of those countries where the pandemic has been minimised or brought under control exhibit two features.

One is a strong element of central economic planning, whether or not they are adherents to market economics. Examples are the so-called Asian **tiger economies** of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, where rapid economic progress in the half century since 1970 was accompanied by a degree of centralisation that ensured quick action in the face of the pandemic.

The second was the experience of the **SARS pandemic in 2002-04** which, while less infectious than COVID-19, was around ten times more lethal and required very strong responses including rigorous quarantining. Other countries close to the main zone of SARS such as New Zealand, Australia and Thailand also acted quickly and effectively. In all these countries, the SARS experience had a substantial impact on public health thinking and the need to prepare for similar crises.

Against this, though, there clearly remains a need for considerable caution in the face of uncertainty. Singapore, for example, brought COVID-19 under a high degree of control within a few weeks but then saw a sudden surge in infections, primarily in the crowded dormitories occupied by migrant workers. At the end of this month, just as children were going back to school, South Korea saw a sudden and thoroughly unwelcome outbreak.

In China, where the virus was first detected, the details of its origin have been subject to multiple conspiracy theories. Leaving these aside, the most reliable sources indicate that the breakout from wild animals to human hosts took place sometime in September or October last year, with Western intelligence sources picking up indications of a developing problem in early November. As the virus spread rapidly in Wuhan in December, regional authorities were very reluctant to face up to the risk of a pandemic, most likely in fear of strong criticism and retribution from an authoritarian government in Beijing.

That persisted into early January when the central government finally took strong action to contain the crisis. Much of this involved the rapid mobilisation of security and medical resources and the rigorous imposition of quarantine procedures affecting tens of millions of people. Significantly, though, it also included the sharing of essential virology data world-wide which was a necessary prelude to the multinational action now under way to develop vaccines and other anti-viral interventions. Within China it still took two months to bring the pandemic under control and while it proved possible to do so, it was **only after** 84,000 cases and at least 4,500 deaths.

Failure

In assessing the speed and extent of reaction, three countries stand out as examples of relative failure, Brazil, the United States and the UK, and there is a fourth country where the situation is less clear, Russia. In Brazil, the populist, right-wing and increasingly beleaguered government has taken its lead from President Jair Bolsonaro who is insistent that the threat from the virus has been massively exaggerated and that Brazil must prioritise its economic development. During the course of the **past month** this has become less and less credible as the death toll has accelerated to 24,000, with 375,000 confirmed cases. Even so, there is little sign of the state reversing its stance, much to the consternation of neighbouring states and of epidemiologists and health professionals across the world.

In the case of Russia, back in January and February it appeared that firm action was being taken, especially in eastern Russia where quarantine procedures against SARS had been introduced during that pandemic. More recently, major centres of population elsewhere, especially in European Russia, have experienced a surge in cases with **360,000** people diagnosed with the virus.

Curiously, there have been just 3,600 deaths compared with Brazil's 24,000 deaths among a similar number of people diagnosed. There are indications that President Putin has yet to recognise the full danger of an evolving pandemic and that Russia could soon join Brazil in being a focus of expansion.

Concerning the United States and the United Kingdom, with the current global picture of 400,000 deaths and close to six million cases, it is remarkable and worrying that around a third of all cases have been in these two countries alone: 100,000 deaths and 1.7 million cases in the United States and 37,000 deaths and 267,000 cases in the UK. As the April briefing reported, both the United States and the UK had public health professionals who fully recognised the threat from new flu-type respiratory viruses. Indeed, in 2019 the World Economic Forum published a league table assessing the planning undertaken by 195 states to prepare for such a pandemic. This was based on the Global Health Security Index and placed the US as the best prepared country followed by the UK in second place.

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Neither country performed remotely as well as the advanced planning should have ensured. Furthermore, and primarily for reasons of geography, both countries were about three weeks behind in experiencing the rapid spread of COVID-19 that had been seen in Spain, France and especially Italy yet were still slow to recognise the extent of the danger. Part of the reason in the United States was the personality and attitude of its leader, Donald Trump, who had initially called COVID-19 little more than a hoax. He remained convinced that the economy came first, using his powers and influence wherever possible to counter state-level demands for lockdowns.

In the UK it appears to have been more complex and rooted in a political environment dominated by Brexit combined with the government in a state of euphoria following an unexpectedly successful general election result. There have also been questions asked about the effectiveness of Boris Johnson's leadership during the early stages of the crisis. He was reportedly absent from COBRA meetings from 24 January to 2 March. For two weeks of that period, when the outbreak was already having a visible impact in other countries, he was on [holiday](#). While there is much that is not yet fully in the public eye it is becoming increasingly evident that for ten weeks from the start of the year to mid-March, there was a lamentable lack of political will to recognise the extent of the evolving crisis.

A further factor affecting both countries, which relates to issues discussed in the March briefing, is that the United States and the UK were at the forefront of the global move towards the neoliberal economic model in the 1980s and have taken it further than many other countries. This included a shrinking of central government along with privatisation of state assets. The combination of the two being especially pertinent in terms of health and social care policy. As Vassilis Fouskas and Bulent Gokay [commented](#) in OpenDemocracy:

“ The effects of neoliberalism can be seen as a form of *structural violence*, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable sections of the population. Forty years of neoliberalism across the continents, especially in the so-called “advanced” western economies, have left the countries totally ill-prepared to deal with a public health crisis of this kind. More than anything else, this crisis has displayed the flaws of neoliberalism and disaster capitalism. ”

In the UK, in particular, there were substantial reductions in social care spending together with inadequate responses to the recommendations of public health professionals on matters of pandemic preparedness. To put it another way, planning may have been effective and even world-leading, but the implementation of the plans was woefully inadequate.

Global Trends

At this early stage in the world-wide COVID-19 experience, a number of issues and trends are discernible.

- In several countries the neoliberal economic environment has militated against maintaining a substantial and adaptable public sector, with particular failings in the resourcing of social care as well as a public health capability, even when that latter element may have embodied competent pandemic planning.
- Three countries that have so far responded very poorly to COVID-19, the USA, UK and Brazil, have all combined this neoliberal economic model with right-wing populist leadership, but it is too early to say whether this will damage that political orientation. It could even strengthen it.
- One core feature of the recent decades of hyper-globalisation, the concentration of manufacturing in a few countries, has added greatly to the severe overstretching of the just-in-time system of distribution.
- A substantial majority of people in wealthier countries have experienced sudden changes in their economic and social circumstances that are new to most people under 70 years. In doing so they have been willing to make substantial behavioural changes that may have a long-term impact on them, including the need for increased domestic resilience.
- The ability of states to make considerable yet acceptable demands on their populations may be welcome in the current circumstances but does allow room for more autocratic demands in a post-COVID-19 future.
- Some states have already used this environment to further specific political agendas, [China's selective actions](#) against Uighurs being an example.

Conclusion

The global system is still barely five months into the pandemic and a general overview is not yet possible. What is already clear, though, is that it raises serious questions in three areas. The first is that in many countries the

neoliberal economic orientation is not appropriate to responding to this kind of global security challenge. Secondly, our wider understanding of the nature of security is far too primitive and is excessively predicated on obsolete analysis of the nature of threats to human security. Finally, much new thinking needs to be done on security following the COVID-19 experience, but it may at least catalyse and strengthen an understanding of security that embraces the even greater challenge of preventing global climate breakdown.

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About the author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in International Security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '**Monthly Global Security Briefings**' are available from our website. His book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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