
Updated March 10, 2021

Some observers argue the COVID-19 pandemic could be a world-changing event with potentially profound and long-lasting implications for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world. Other observers are more skeptical that the pandemic will have such effects.

Observers who argue the pandemic could be world-changing for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world have focused on several areas of potential change, including the following, which are listed here separately but overlap in some cases and can interact with one another:

- world order, international institutions, and global governance;
- U.S. global leadership and the U.S. role in the world;
- China’s potential role as a global leader;
- U.S. relations and great power competition with China and Russia, including the use of the pandemic as a theme or tool for conducting ideological competition;
- the relative prevalence of democratic and authoritarian or autocratic forms of government;
- societal tension, reform, transformation, and governmental stability in various countries;
- the world economy, globalization, and U.S. trade policy;
- the characteristics and conduct of conflict;
- allied defense budgets and U.S. alliances;
- the cohesion of the European Union;
- the definition of, and budgeting for, U.S. national security;
- U.S. defense strategy, defense budgets, and military operations;
- U.S. foreign assistance programs and international debt relief;
- activities of non-state actors;
- the amount of U.S. attention devoted to ongoing international issues other than the pandemic; and
- the role of Congress in setting and overseeing the execution of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

Issues for Congress may include whether and how the pandemic could change the international security environment, whether the Biden Administration’s actions for responding to such change are appropriate and sufficient, and what implications such change could have for the role of Congress in setting and overseeing the execution of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

Congress’s decisions regarding these issues could have significant and even profound implications for U.S. foreign and defense policy, and for the status of Congress as a co-equal branch relative to the executive branch in setting and overseeing the implementation of U.S. foreign and defense policy.
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Introduction

Some observers argue the COVID-19 pandemic could be a world-changing event with potentially profound and long-lasting implications for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world. Other observers are more skeptical that the pandemic will have such effects. This report provides a brief overview of some potential implications the pandemic might have for the international security environment, and a bibliography of CRS reports and other writings for further reading.

Issues for Congress may include whether and how the pandemic could change the international security environment, whether the Biden Administration’s actions for responding to such change are appropriate and sufficient, and what implications such change could have for the role of Congress in setting and overseeing the execution of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

Congress’s decisions regarding these issues could have significant implications for U.S. foreign and defense policy, and for the status of Congress as a co-equal branch relative to the executive branch in setting and overseeing the implementation of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

Appendix A presents a list of CRS reports that provide more in-depth discussions of issues presented in this report. Appendix B presents a list of additional writings reflecting various perspectives on these issues.

Overview of Potential Implications

Areas of potential change reflected in writings from observers who view the pandemic as a potentially world-changing event include but are not limited to those discussed below. Although these areas of potential change are presented separately, they overlap in some cases and can interact with one another.

World Order, International Institutions, and Global Governance

Some observers have focused on the possibility that the pandemic could cause or accelerate changes to the U.S.-led liberal international order that has operated since World War II, to the international institutions and norms that contribute to it, and consequently to global governance.¹

¹ For more on the U.S.-led liberal international order and the concept of world order generally, see CRS Report R44891, U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress, by Ronald O'Rourke. As discussed in that report, the term international order or world order generally refers to foreign policy discussions of the collection of organizations, institutions, treaties, rules, norms, and practices that are intended to organize, structure, and regulate international relations during a given historical period. Other terms used to refer to the U.S.-led liberal international order include postwar international order, rules-based international order, and open international order. Observers sometimes substitute world for international, or omit international or world and refer simply to the liberal order, the U.S.-led order, and so on. In the terms liberal international order and liberal order, the word liberal does not refer to the conservative-liberal construct often used in discussing contemporary politics in the United States or other countries. It is, instead, an older use of the term that refers to an order based on the rule of law, as opposed to an order based on the arbitrary powers of hereditary monarchs.

Though often referred to as if it is a fully developed or universally established situation, the liberal international order, like other international orders that preceded it, is incomplete in geographic reach and in other ways; partly aspirational; not fixed in stone, but rather subject to evolution over time; sometimes violated by its supporters; not entirely free of might-makes-right behavior; resisted or rejected by certain states and non-state actors; and subject to various stresses and challenges.
Changes to the international order and its supporting institutions and norms could affect the international context for addressing not only the pandemic, but other international issues as well.

U.S. Global Leadership and Role in the World

The pandemic could influence discussions over the costs and benefits to the United States of acting as a global leader, not only with respect to global health but across a range of issues.

During the Trump Administration, some observers focused on how the pandemic may have illustrated the strengths or weaknesses of the Trump Administration’s “America First” approach to the U.S. role in the world. During the Trump Administration, some observers argued that the pandemic demonstrated that the United States was maintaining or reasserting its role as global leader, while others argued that the pandemic demonstrated that the United States was choosing to withdraw from or was no longer capable of performing that role, and that the pandemic was the first major international crisis since World War II for which the United States did not serve as the leader for spearheading, organizing, or implementing an international response.

Some observers, including some foreign observers, have argued that the U.S. domestic response to the pandemic is demonstrating weaknesses in U.S. democracy, governance, and public health, particularly in comparison to how certain other countries have responded to the pandemic within their own borders, and that this will reduce the ability of the United States in the future to offer itself or be accepted by other countries as a global leader on other international issues or as a model for other countries to emulate.

Other observers have argued that the U.S. response to the pandemic is focusing international attention on what they view as a need for reform at the World Health Organization (WHO), demonstrating the strength and innovativeness of the U.S. scientific establishment in terms of developing vaccines and other medical responses to the pandemic, and demonstrating the flexibility and resiliency of the U.S. federal system in terms of permitting states and localities to respond to the pandemic in ways that are tailored to local conditions.

China’s Potential Role as a Global Leader

Some observers have focused on how the pandemic may be providing insight into whether China desires and is working to become a global leader on par with (or in the place of) the United States, whether China has a capacity for doing so, and how other countries might view China acting in such a role. China’s transparency, particularly regarding its actions in the early days of its COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, as well as China’s actions to send vaccines, other medical supplies, and medical personnel to other countries, have become one element of a broader ongoing discussion regarding China’s capacity or suitability for acting as a global leader. This ongoing discussion includes consideration of a range of other issues, including China’s actions for implementing its Belt and Road Initiative, China’s territorial disputes with other countries, its participation in international organizations, and its technology-development and international lending activities.

U.S. Relations and Great Power Competition with China and Russia

Some observers have focused on how the pandemic has become a significant element in U.S.-China relations, and in U.S. great power competition with China and Russia. For some observers, the pandemic presents an opportunity for U.S.-China cooperation on an important international
issue of common interest. For other observers, the pandemic is a major source of dispute and an arena of competition between the two countries, and is causing U.S.-China relations to harden more fully into a Cold War-like adversarial situation.

Some observers have focused on what they view as a competition or race between the United States, China, Russia, and other countries to develop and administer effective vaccines for the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, and thus be able to restore their economies to full operation sooner than other countries, and/or exploit foreign access to their vaccines as foreign policy levers, and thereby gain a political-economic advantage in the post-pandemic world. The terms vaccine diplomacy and vaccine nationalism are being used by some of these observers to refer to aspects of this perceived competition or race. Some observers have expressed concern that decisions by countries to pursue vaccine development and deployment in a competitive, individual manner rather than a cooperative, multilateral manner could reduce the overall effectiveness of efforts to develop and administer effective vaccines and thereby prolong the pandemic.

Some observers have focused on the pandemic as a factor in the discussion of whether the United States should decouple its economy from China’s and reduce its dependence on China for key materials and products, including hospital supplies and pharmaceuticals. Some observers have focused on whether the U.S. and Chinese responses to the pandemic will affect views around the world regarding the relative merits of the U.S. and Chinese forms of government and economic models as potential examples to emulate.

**Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Autocracy**

Related to the point above about forms of government, some observers have focused on the potential impact of the pandemic on discussions in various countries regarding the merits of democracy compared to those of other forms of government. Some observers have focused on whether the pandemic is providing national leaders with an opportunity or rationale for taking actions to seize greater power and move their countries away from democracy and toward authoritarianism or autocracy, or strengthen or consolidate their already-existing authoritarian or autocratic forms of government.

**Societal Tension, Reform, and Transformation, and Governmental Stability**

Beyond the specific point above about potential movement toward greater authoritarianism and autocracy, some observers have focused on the possibility that the pandemic more generally could cause increased social tensions in certain countries, could lead to (or present opportunities for) societal reforms and transformations, and could destabilize and perhaps cause the downfall of governments, akin to the effects of certain past world-changing events, such as World War I.

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Such changes could alter the political orientations, national strategies, foreign policies, and defense policies of the countries in which they occur, potentially inducing follow-on effects among governments and other global actors that interact with those countries.

**World Economy, Globalization, and U.S. Trade Policy**

Some observers have focused on the possibility that the pandemic could lead to significant and potentially long-lasting changes to the world economy that in turn could reshape the international security environment. Among other things, observers have focused on the possibility that the COVID-19 situation could lead the world economy into a significant recession—an effect that could contribute to the societal tensions mentioned in the previous point. Noting that the pandemic has reduced world trade volumes and disrupted global supply chains, they have focused on the question of whether economic globalization will as a result be slowed, halted, or reversed. Observers are monitoring how such effects could influence or be influenced by U.S. trade policy.

**Allied Defense Spending and U.S. Alliances**

The so-called burden-sharing issue—that is, the question of whether U.S. allies are shouldering a sufficient share of the collective allied defense burden—has long been a point of contention between the United States and its allies around the globe. Some observers have focused on the possibility that the costs that U.S. allies are incurring to support their economies during stay-at-home/lockdown periods will lead to offsetting reductions in their defense expenditures. Some observers argue that the NATO allies in Europe in particular may experience contractions in their defense budgets for this reason. More generally, some observers argue that if the pandemic causes a global recession, allied defense budgets could be further reduced—a potential impact that could affect not only NATO allies in Europe, but those in Asia as well.

**European Union**

Some observers have additionally focused on the question of whether the pandemic is creating tensions—or, conversely, opportunities for greater coordination—among the European Union member states, and what impact the pandemic might ultimately have on the cohesion of the European Union.

**Definition of, and Budgeting for, U.S. National Security**

Some observers have focused on the question of whether the pandemic will (or should) lead to a revised definition of U.S. national security, particularly one that is less military-centric and more focused on what are sometimes called human-security-oriented challenges or global issues, such as climate change, that have sometimes been more at the periphery of U.S. national security policy and plans. Such a change in definition could lead to a changed allocation of funding between the Department of Defense (DOD) and other government agencies that perform national-security-related tasks, a realignment of resources within DOD between combat-oriented programs and other programs (such as those related to DOD’s mission of providing defense support of civil authorities), and perhaps a changed allocation of funding among the agencies other than DOD that perform national-security-related tasks.


Some observers have focused on the question of whether the large federal expenditures being made in response to the domestic U.S. economic effects of the pandemic, and the impact these expenditures will have on the federal budget deficit and federal debt, could lead to greater constraints in coming years on U.S. defense spending levels. As a follow-on matter, these observers are additionally focusing on the question of whether responding to such increased constraints will (or should) lead to revisions in U.S. defense strategy, changes in U.S. defense programs, and a reduction or termination of certain overseas U.S. military operations.

U.S. Foreign Assistance, International Debt Relief, and Refugee Policy

Some observers have focused on the question of whether the pandemic is providing a new lens through which to measure the value of U.S. foreign assistance, international debt relief, and refugee policy in promoting U.S. interests, particularly in connection with the previously mentioned issue of whether to revise the definition of U.S. national security to make it less military-centric.

Non-state Actors

Some observers have focused on how non-state actors such as international terrorist and criminal organizations are reacting to the pandemic, and on how much priority should be given to countering such actors in the future, particularly in a context of a changed definition of U.S. national security.

U.S. Attention to International Issues Other than COVID-19

Some observers have focused on whether responding to the pandemic is affecting the time and resources that U.S. leaders and agencies can devote to addressing other international issues of concern to the United States that predate but continue to exist in parallel with the pandemic. U.S. officials warned other countries to not take actions during the pandemic to challenge U.S. interests around the world or otherwise test U.S. resolve or responsiveness on the thinking that the pandemic is distracting the U.S. government from other concerns or reducing U.S. capacity for responding to any such challenges.

Role of Congress

A few observers have focused on the issue of how the pandemic has affected Congress’s activities for conducting oversight of the Administration’s foreign policy actions.

Further Reading

For further reading on the topics outlined above, see the CRS reports presented in Appendix A and the additional writings presented in Appendix B.

Potential Issues for Congress

Potential issues for Congress regarding implications of the pandemic for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world include but are not limited to the following:
Will the pandemic change the international security environment, and if so, in what ways? How clearly can potential changes be anticipated?

How should the United States respond to potential changes in the international security environment arising from the pandemic and its effects, particularly in light of uncertainty regarding the precise nature and likelihood of these changes? How might U.S. action or inaction influence or accelerate these changes?

What does the pandemic demonstrate about the role of the United States as a global leader? What impact, if any, will the U.S. domestic response to the pandemic have on the ability of the United States in the future to offer itself or be accepted by other countries as a global leader on other international issues, or to serve as a model for other countries to emulate in terms of their own political systems, governance, and economic models?

What actions is the Administration developing to respond to potential changes in the international security environment arising from the pandemic? Does Congress have sufficient visibility into these actions? Are these actions appropriate and sufficient? What metrics should Congress use to assess them?

What implications do potential changes in the international security environment arising from the pandemic have for the role of Congress in setting and overseeing the execution of U.S. foreign and defense policy? Is Congress appropriately organized for maintaining Congress as a co-equal branch of government relative to the executive branch in addressing these potential changes? If the pandemic becomes a world-changing event for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world, what implications, if any, might that have for congressional organization and operations?
Appendix A. Related CRS Reports

CRS reports that provide more in-depth discussions of specific issues discussed in this report include the following, which are presented in alphabetical order of their titles:

- CRS Insight IN11198, Bolivia Postpones May Elections Amidst COVID-19 Outbreak, by Clare Ribando Seelke.
- CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10525, Can the United States Sue China over COVID-19 in an International Court?, by Stephen P. Mulligan.
- CRS In Focus IF11606, COVID-19 and Foreign Assistance: Congressional Oversight Framework and Current Activities, by Nick M. Brown and Emily M. Morgenstern.
- CRS In Focus IF11496, COVID-19 and Foreign Assistance: Issues for Congress, by Nick M. Brown, Marian L. Lawson, and Emily M. Morgenstern.
- CRS Insight IN11288, COVID-19 and the Defense Industrial Base: DOD Response and Legislative Considerations, by Heidi M. Peters.
- CRS Insight IN11305, COVID-19: Defense Support of Civil Authorities, by Lawrence Kapp and Alan Ott.
- CRS In Focus IF11421, COVID-19: Global Implications and Responses, by Sara M. Tharakan et al.

3 Additional CRS reports that do not include COVID-19 in their titles and are not listed here may include discussions of the international implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.
• CRS Insight IN11583, *COVID-19 International Responses: Resources for the 117th Congress*, by Hannah Fischer and Sara M. Tharakan.
• CRS In Focus IF11635, *Europe, COVID-19, and U.S. Relations*, by Kristin Archick et al.
• CRS In Focus IF11551, *Export Restrictions in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, by Christopher A. Casey and Cathleen D. Cimino-Isaacs.
• CRS In Focus IF11548, *Helping U.S. Citizens Abroad During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other International Crises: Role of the Department of State*, by Cory R. Gill.
• CRS In Focus IF11537, *Intelligence Community Support to Pandemic Preparedness and Response*, by Michael E. DeVine.
• CRS In Focus IF11581, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19*, by Mark P. Sullivan et al.

- CRS In Focus IF11480, *Overview: The Department of Defense and COVID-19*, coordinated by Kathleen J. McInnis.
- CRS Insight IN11365, *President Trump Criticizes VOA Coverage of China’s COVID-19 Response*, by Thomas Lum and Matthew C. Weed.
- CRS In Focus IF11029, *The Venezuela Regional Humanitarian Crisis and COVID-19*, by Rhoda Margesson and Clare Ribando Seelke.
- CRS Insight IN11369, *U.S. Funding to the World Health Organization (WHO)*, by Luisa Blanchfield and Tiaji Salaam-Blyther.
- CRS In Focus IF11494, *Wildlife Trade, COVID-19, and Other Zoonotic Diseases*, by Pervaze A. Sheikh and Katarina C. O'Regan.
Appendix B. Additional Writings

In presenting sources of additional reading, this appendix includes some examples of writings reflecting various perspectives on the potential implications of the pandemic on the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world, organized by specific themes or topics. Within each section, the items are presented in chronological order, with the most recent on top. For some of the sections, additional citations with dates earlier than that of the last item listed in the section can be found in previous versions of this CRS report.

General/Multitopic


James Goldgeier and Carmen Iezzi Mezzera, “How to Rethink the Teaching of International Relations, As Universities Struggle to Respond to the Ongoing Pandemic, Here’s What They Should Focus On,” Foreign Policy, June 12, 2020.


Phillip Y. Lipsy, “It’s Too Soon to Call Coronavirus Winners and Losers, Given how much remains unknown about the virus, talk of success may be premature,” Foreign Policy, May 12, 2020.


Resilience in the Face of the Coronavirus Pandemic, World Politics Review report, May 2020, 47 pp. (Includes essays by various authors with the titles “Planning for the World After the Coronavirus Pandemic,” “What It Will Take to Save Economies From the Coronavirus...


John Allen et al., “How the World Will Look after the Coronavirus Pandemic,” Foreign Policy, March 20, 2020. (Includes short contributions from 12 authors.)


**World Order, International Institutions, and Global Governance**


Hung Tran, “*One World, Two Systems* Takes Shape During the Pandemic,” Atlantic Council, September 2020, 10 pp.


Joseph S. Nye Jr., “No, the Coronavirus Will Not Change the Global Order,” Foreign Policy, April 16, 2020.


Colum Lynch, “Can the United Nations Survive the Coronavirus? In the Absence of U.S. Leadership, the U.N. Is Struggling to Carve Out a Role in the Face of What May Be the Greatest Threat Since Its Founding,” Foreign Policy, April 8, 2020.


U.S. Global Leadership and Role in World


Colm Quinn, “G-7 Scrambles for Global Vaccine Plan, After Months of Warnings, the Group of Wealthy Nations Has Begun to Put Forward Solutions to the Lopsided Distribution of Coronavirus Vaccines,” Foreign Policy, February 19, 2021.


Ethan Guillén, “End the Pandemic Faster by Listening to Developing Countries, Biden Has a Golden Opportunity to Help with Global Vaccines,” Foreign Policy, February 8, 2021.


China’s Potential Role as a Global Leader


Alice Han and Eyck Freymann, “Coronavirus Hasn’t Killed Belt and Road, As the Pandemic Rages, China’s Strategy Is Becoming More High-Tech And Sophisticated,” Foreign Policy, January 6, 2021.


Hanns Günther Hilpert and Angela Stanzel, China—Winning the Pandemic...for Now, The People’s Republic Is Exuding Strength, but Can They Keep It Up? Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs), SWP Comment No. 1, January 2021, 4 pp.


U.S. Relations and Great Power Competition with China and Russia


Prabhjote Gill, “India Is Asking the QUAD for Money to Boost Vaccine Production and Counter China’s Moves on the Global Stage,” Business Insider India, March 9, 2021.


Daniel Milo, “The Deadly Effects of Disinformation, Russian COVID Disinformation Operation Has Been Tragically Successful, at Both Undermining the West and in Spreading Lies That Have Cost Lives,” Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), February 8, 2021.


Steven A. Cook, “America’s Vaccine Diplomacy Is AWOL in the Middle East, China and Russia Are Spreading Their Vaccines—And Forging New Ties—to Some of Washington’s Closest Allies,” Foreign Policy, January 8, 2021.


Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Autocracy


Yasmeen Serhan, “The Pandemic Isn’t a Death Knell for Populism, Just Because Populist Leaders Haven’t Fared Well Against the Coronavirus Doesn’t Mean Their Opponents Should Count Them Out,” Atlantic, August 22, 2020.


**Societal Tension, Reform, and Transformation, and Governmental Stability**


Augusta Saraiva and Darcy Palder, “After COVID-19, Latin America Braces for ‘Lost Decade,’ Already One of the Most Unequal Regions in the World, It May Face an Unprecedented Rise in
Inequality and Poverty Due to the Economic Carnage of the Pandemic,” *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2020.


Cyrus Newlin and Heather A. Conley, “Responding to a Pandemic, Putin Trades Russia’s Future for His Own,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), May 27, 2020.


Nathan Hodge, “As Coronavirus Hits Record Numbers in Russia, This Is a Dangerous Moment for Putin,” *CNN*, May 4, 2020.


World Economy, Globalization, and U.S. Trade Policy


Michael Nienaber, “Germany’s Altmaier Wants Europe to Be Less Dependent on Other Countries,” *Reuters*, May 9, 2020.


James Crabtree, “The End of Emerging Markets? Economies such as Brazil, Indonesia, India, Russia, and Turkey face a daunting new reality,” *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2020.


**Allied Defense Spending and U.S. Alliances**


Kurt Volker, “Think Big, To Build a Post-pandemic World Order We Must Wake a Sleeping Giant: NATO,” Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), June 12, 2020.


**European Union**


Paul Hockenos, “Has the Coronavirus Disappeared Climate Politics? Europe’s Pandemic Bailouts Are Trying to Save the Continent’s Economy. Less Clear Is If They Can Save the Planet,” Foreign Policy, May 21, 2020.


“EU’s Top Diplomat Warns Against Defense Cuts,” *Defense News*, May 12, 2020. (This article does not list an author.)


**Definition of, and Budgeting for, U.S. National Security**


Hal Brands, “Can a Broke America Fight a Cold War With China? The Coronavirus Has United Americans Against Beijing’s Aggressions, But It Will Also Devastate the Pentagon Budget,” Bloomberg, May 5, 2020.


**U.S. Foreign Assistance, International Debt Relief, and Refugee Policy**


Non-state Actors


Ashley Jackson, “For the Taliban, the Pandemic Is a Ladder,” *Foreign Policy*, May 6, 2020.


**U.S. Attention to International Issues Other than COVID-19**


Con Coughlin, “China Exploiting the Coronavirus Pandemic to Expand in Asia,” Gatestone Institute, April 30, 2020.


Victor Davis Hanson, “Pandemic Only 1 of America’s Security Concerns,” Daily Signal, April 23, 2020.

Emily Estelle, “Eyes on the Other Global Crises,” Real Clear World, April 21, 2020.


“With the world distracted, China intimidates Taiwan,” Economist, April 8, 2020. (This article does not list an author.)

Role of Congress


Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, “Pandemic Stymies Congressional Check on Trump’s Foreign Policy,” Foreign Policy, April 8, 2020.

Author Information

Ronald O'Rourke
Specialist in Naval Affairs

Kathleen J. McInnis
Specialist in International Security
Acknowledgments

A third original coauthor of this report was Michael Moodie, who was Assistant Director of the Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division of CRS and a Senior Specialist in Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade until his retirement from CRS in December 2020.

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