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RUSSIA, CHINA, EUROPE, EURASIA AND THE USA: COVID-2019 AND AFTER – WHAT OUR FUTURE MAY BE?

SUMMARY OF THE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

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| <p>Информация о статье: <i>Received:</i> 14.04.2020 <i>Accepted:</i> 28.04.2020</p> | <p>Abstract: Summary of the online international roundtable discussion “Russia, China, Europe, Eurasia and the USA: COVID-2019 and after – What Our Future May Be?” taken place on April, 11, 2020 via Zoom as an online conference*. The topics discussed are: perception of China in different countries, Russian-Chinese partnership, and its Role, US / China / Russia’s changing international role after COVID-19, SARS-Cov-2019/COVOD-2019; COVID-19 and its consequences for international order; China, Europe and the USA political economy models and COVID-19. The conference was organized in the frameworks of the online academic events series of the Centre for Comprehensive Chinese Studies and Regional Projects, MGIMO University: “The World-Eurasia-China Agenda and Regional Problematique. On-Line Discussions”.</p> |
| <p>About the author:: <i>Prepared for publication by Alexei D. Voskressenski</i> e-mail: sravnitpolit@mail.ru</p> | <p>* Theme: Conference Zoom Alexei Voskressenski China, Europe, Eurasia and the USA: COVID-2019 and After – What Our Future May Be? Online Discussion 11.04.2020 05:00 PM Москва https://us02web.zoom.us/j/372427526?pwd=V1p0ZzF4aFRYbnkL0ZGZjhWUEExYdz09</p> |
| <p>Key words: COVID-19; China; Europe; Russia, Eurasia; the USA; international relations</p> | |

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Discussants:

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Richard Weitz, Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute, Washington D.C. Metro Area

Walter LEE Wan Fai, Programme Leader for Global and China Studies, Research Fellow and Assistant Professor, Public and Social Policy Research Centre, School of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University of Hong Kong

Chih-yu Shih, Professor, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University

Eugene Rumer, Senior Fellow and Director, Russia and Eurasia Program Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Ekaterina Koldunova, Deputy Dean, School of International Relations, Associate Professor, Asian and African Studies Department; Senior Expert, ASEAN Centre, MGIMO University

Literature for the discussion:

– Alexei D. Voskressenski, Mikhail Karpov, Vasily Kashin. *China’s Infinite Transition and Its Limits: Economic, Political and Military Dimensions*. Springer Global: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020 (forthcoming).

– *The Belt and Road After COVID-19. Possible Post-Pandemic Scenarios for China’s Long-term Foreign Policy Strategy*. By Plamen Tonchev. April 07, 2020. Mode of access: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-belt-and-road-after-covid-19/>

– Global Health Security / *RSIS* Commentary. No. 066/2020 dated 8 April 2020.

– Tackling COVID-19: Success or Failure of China’s Governance? By Anu Anwar / RSIS Publications <publications@rsis.edu.sg>

Questions discussed:

1. May China’s development be described as the “Infinite Transition”? What are the consequences of this Russian concept for understanding China?

2. Will China’s transformation be unlimited? What are the criteria for success or failure in present circumstances?

3. What does China’s military modernization mean for the world?

4. Can military help to solve problems within the government’s response?

5. Is China’s medical diplomacy successful?

6. How is China’s international identity changing? What maybe consequences of this process for international community?

7. How the international order may change after COVID-19? How this transformation may influence the USA, China, Europe, Russia and other countries?

8. What may be the role (if any) of the triangular relations USA-Russia-China after COVID-19?

9. How European, US or China political economy model may influence the possibility of the future economic growth in the world?

10. Is there a future for ASEAN in the future political economy and geopolitics? How is the ASEAN states’ perception of China, US and Russia / Eurasia changing in the context of COVID-19 pandemic? Is the Greater Eurasia concept still possible?

Discussion Summary

Like the end of the Cold War, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the COVID-19 crisis promises to have lasting effects on the international system or at least on state behaviors. The crisis is likely to be a watershed event, as Eugene Rumer argues, but there is little chance of it transforming the international system or behaviors of individual states. If anything, the pandemic may reinforce the entrenched views of foreign policy elites and their approaches to the conduct of international

relations. However, there are also other options that may be valid.

The end of the Cold War provided a brief – in historical terms – respite from the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, and less than a generation later geopolitics returned as one of the principal drivers of relations between states. Eugene Rumer argues that the 9/11 attacks only reinforced the U.S. foreign policy establishment’s belief in the virtues democratic governance and importance of promoting it as the answer to the terrorist scourge. According to this perception it is still early in the era of COVID-19 and, probably, other pandemics to follow, to make an appraisal of the actions of the big three – the United States, China, and Russia – current developments already suggest that states will be states, their elites will be guided by their, rather than some common, interests and assessments, and existing behaviors may be even reinforced. Thus, in the United States, the conversation is unfolding about the advantages of democratic governance in handling global pandemics, in Russia legislators are proposing new measures to heighten the political stability but outside Russia these attempts are seen as limiting the impact of the few remaining independent actors in Russian politics. China, having – apparently – managed to stem the spread of the virus, similarly is acting to heighten stability to save the maximum out of the years of reforms while in the USA China blamed for limiting information in the country from reaching foreign or domestic audiences. And in a strange coincidence, as Eugene Rumer pointed out, Russian, Chinese, and U.S. media all continue to spread disinformation about the origins of the virus.

However, as pointed by *Alexei D. Voskressenski*, China’s rising is based on international development principles and not only on “Chinese characteristics,” i.e. international development principles are adapted to China’s specifics, this development is successful, made the country possible to survive American sanctions and proved to be able to successfully overcome pandemic. Russia, though has its own interests, supports China and sees Chinese globalization as an important step to establish real polycentricity of

the world, a tool to de-facto de-westernization of the international system thus enabling more room for Russia's independent national development and more comfortable place in world system.

If we look at COVID-19 from the angle of searching a vaccine as a metaphor of political solution, as proposes *Chih-yu Shih*, there are at least two relational threads in the discussion on COVID-19. One comes from the divides between and within nations, caused by the structures of class, power, and stage of pandemic, as well as discursive practices of civilizational imagination, racial discrimination, and partisanship. The level of personal risk, the ability of self-help, the opportunity of treatment all vary according to these relational settings. The other thread reflects the divide between the virus and mankind. There has been an apparent determination in the public discourse everywhere to conceive of the virus as alien to mankind. However, the virus and mankind belong to the same ecology instead of being external to each other as the public discourse has assumed.

Both divides require certain relational treatments in order to reconstruct the mutual constitution of all sides each falsely conceived of as autonomous entity. The first divide undermines solidarity for any human society to remain mutually beneficial. The second divide falsely externalizes what is actually internal, to the effect of continuously self-estranging. This process of self-estranging needs elaboration.

If the virus were alien to the ecology that supports mankind, quarantine would be the proper solution. Quarantine the virus, then the infected, then the potentially infected, then the heavily infected area, then the nation to which the area belongs, then the race that stereotypically constitutes the nation, and then the civilization that stereotypically characterizes the race – argues *Chih-yu Shih*.

Scapegoating on some selected internal target is inevitable where quarantining fails. Ultimately, however, no quarantine will succeed as the virus and mankind are ontologically connected through their shared ecology. The only solution is to develop antibodies through vaccine. In other words, virus and human have to be mutually constituted to restore ecological

relations in which the virus and mankind achieve harmony.

Asking the first country that fails to quarantine the virus to account for the subsequent failure of others presupposes a (misperceived) human ecology, to which the virus does not belong. This is wrong. Quarantine is at best functional to squeezing time for a vaccine to come to the rescue. Eventually, quarantine is counter-productive as argues *Chih-yu Shih*. Thereafter, with vaccine, the virus in the form of antibody and the body are symbiotic. However, empirical evidence on how countries are fighting virus may contradict his view as some analysts argued.

Vaccine can be a great metaphor of solution. Antibody rebuilds an integral community of virus and mankind. In fact, electoral / partisan rivals often portray the other side of the divide as virus, something alien, obnoxious and contagious. This indicates democratic failure – refusing solidarity. Externalization of a political rival is exactly how we consider and strategize COVID-19. Vaccine practically re-internalizes virus. A political antibody is not unlike an in-between process that mingles mutually externalizing rivals. The incurrence of in-betweenness would explore and develop the potential of post-Westernness to deconstruct the divides and reveal, revise and restore the ecological relations that have already encompassed all sides. So, we may argue that:

* Virus and mankind are related and coexistent through antibody.

* They are ontologically relational wherever antibody develops and constitutes the people.

* Danger actually arises in the long run wherever lockdown dominates their relationship.

* Politics likewise relies on political antibody to accommodate differences, imagined as well as practiced.

* Without political antibody, electoral groups see and treat one another as virus.

* An electoral divide/cleavage is not democratic because it removes political antibody that constitutes all members of the society.

* Democracy is conducive to solidarity only if it produces political antibody of all kinds to relate different people.

* The relationality of antibody is a possible lesson of democratic theory we could acquire from the current pandemic.

* It is also a relational remedy to International Relations theory plagued by the myth of sovereign exclusiveness.

If we try to remove our COVID-19 antibody, (which is impossible) we would jeopardize our lives, the mothering ecology, and the viruses. *Chih-yu Shih* argues that Americans have developed China antibodies for centuries. All kinds of things and practices Chinese have been in the States. They are revisable and always transient and fluid. In the sense that Americans have encountered, adapt to, and transform Chineseness in various ways, they are already immune from the threat of Chineseness. In other words, Chineseness does not cause serious problems in America, believes *Chih-yu Shih*. American Chineseness is like vaccine that was initially acquired from encountered Chineseness. However, American leaders under the 2020 Administration advise that these China antibodies be removed in order to be independent from Chineseness. What would happen to the world is not difficult to tell. Not all Americans, participated in this discussion, agreed with *Chih-yu Shih's* arguments, but it is clearly, if developed further, we may argue that Russia per se is long ago has antibodies to China because of the long-term peaceful relationship thus subverting American arguments of the necessary geopolitical competition between Russia and China in a way this competition already started between the USA and China thus disproving also the argument of impossibility of solid Russian-Chinese partnership. So, an advice to deconstruct Russian-Chinese partnership may mean as well China antibodies be removed in order Russia be independent from Chineseness as argued *Alexei D. Voskressenski*.

A Chinese way to restore relations is, by comparison gift-giving and ritualizing reciprocal play, as was mentioned by *Chih-yu Chi*, who participated remotely through simultaneous e-mailing while his Zoom connection failed by unknown reasons. This has been consistently so throughout a history of several thousand years.

Richard Wietz disagrees with both *Chih-yu Shih* as well as *Eugene Rumer*. His point is

that regarding relations between Russia, China, and the United States, the most important near-term effect of the virus has been to weaken ties between the three countries. For example, the slowdown in economic activity in China combined with the restrictions on travel with China have reduced Chinese-Russian and Chinese-U.S. trade. Now the slowdowns in the US and Russia will have the same impact. Many of these reductions can be reversed as soon as the virus is under control, which may be in a couple years as *Richard Wietz* believes though *Alexei D. Voskressenski* doubts that this may be the case. *Voskressenski* argued earlier and also in a published form that just in contrary – the strengthening of economic ties between the two countries and the coordination of their policies on a regional level may be the economic remedy for the post-COVID-19 epoch. At the political level though, there has not been a major change in their relationship – China and Russia remain closely aligned even in military spheres while US relations with both remain bad. The Chinese and Russian governments have not criticized each other for their mutual restrictions on travel. We also don't see mutual accusations characterizing, for example, Sino-American on who's to blame for the crisis. Thus, for Russia a further globalizing China may be an additional support to overcome economic crises as well as for China to seek more technological independence from the West.

Richard Weitz is less pessimistic in his final conclusions thus disagreeing with his fellow-American *Eugene Rumer*: The crisis could have a greater long-term impact if one of the three states is more adversely impacted. Furthermore, there will be likely further decoupling of the China and U.S. economies, with the United States striving to reduce its dependence on China for its health care and other supply lines. The transatlantic alliance may be weakened due to the U.S.-EU lack of cooperation in their response to the crisis, falls in defense spending, and growing support in some quarters for an authoritarian response to the crisis. And Russian-Chinese partnership, as argued by *Alexei D. Voskressenski*, successfully survived pandemic.

Walter Lee has shared his view on the problem from the perspective of Chinese

international relations. China's transition may be described as the "Infinite Transition" as the Russian academics propose. However, that raises the question of what are the criteria for success or failure in present circumstances? Pandemic is of course tragic, but it is what humankind encounters from time to time in history. Viruses are part of nature. What truly matters in the COVID-19 case is that it comes at a time when the global society is falling deeply into the trap of protectionism, isolationism, populism, exclusion, and xenophobia. Now is not the time to point fingers to each other but to cooperate by strong political will in responding to our common interests in public health and global economy. Lee believes the success of China in fighting the first wave of COVID-19 has strengthened the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese government. This is evident from the very strong bottom-up nationalistic sentiment that people have during and after the crisis – despite people also got furious and frustrated about the mismanagement of the Wuhan and Hubei governments at the early stage of the outbreak, the suppression of free flow of information, and the death of "whistleblowers" such as Dr. Li Wenliang. The success of the China case is not just the result of effort made by the government and/or because of the advantages of the "China model" alone, but also that the people have been generally cooperative with and supportive for the very strict quarantine and other public health measures imposed by the authority plus the use of high-technology such as big data and artificial intelligence. This is an interesting lesson for Russia to consider.

As for future leadership of the world, it is still largely unknown. It may depend more on the result of the United States (US) presidential election 2020 than any other factors. Nevertheless, China's response to COVID-19 perhaps is an example to show us a society with solidarity will be able to rebound more quickly than a deeply divided society. A nation has to be strong inside in order to lead outside. If China, the US, and Russia all have solidarity domestically (though by very different means) and they can cooperate for humankind's common good, it would be hopeful that we are able to overcome pandemic. It is interesting that the

Chinese of the Greater China – HK and Taipei – are both more optimistic about the positive impact of China-USA-Russia cooperation for the humankind's common good than as well as some Russians than both Americans who participated in the round-table discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has a serious impact on Southeast Asia as well, argued *Ekaterina Koldunova*. Thus, the functioning of the intraregional production chains experienced a severe damage. Economic interaction with China is also at risk, she believes. In 2018, Southeast Asia became China's number two trading partner and the downfall of the economic activity in China because of the pandemic will resonate greatly in the region. In the recent months, Southeast Asia itself has been witnessing the symptoms of recession. Some countries like Thailand or Indonesia had to reassess their growth rates forecasts and to suspend military acquisitions. Others, like Vietnam, this year's ASEAN Chair, so far stay as still economically vibrant economies in the region. However, the expert assessments tend to subtract up to 4% of the regional growth against the pre-COVID-19 forecasts as *Koldunova* argues¹.

The current pandemic also puts forward a question about regional resilience among global turbulences. Earlier this year ASEAN found itself on the periphery of the US-China contradictions and the first phase of their trade deal struck in January 2020 definitely did not consider Association's interests.

One of the interesting conclusions of this discussion that one may have is the re-emergence of the three states – the US, Russia and China – at the forefront of international relations though the crucial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the international order generally heavily depends on how fast countries lift the lockdowns and the restrictions on people's movement and jump-start the economy. The speed of recovery is to put countries into better

¹ Leaders Support Establishment of ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund // *The Jakarta Post*, April 14, 2020. Mode of access: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/04/14/leaders-support-establishment-of-asean-covid-19-response-fund.html?fbclid=IwAR2ManmE8uswW5Xg3j7PhDdZwqbmI4pTcaMO-YT1bQvyRSvFitPEQ5v8luc>

or worse starting positions in the new round of international competition, and that has the full potential to accelerate the already palpable and long-term shifts in the world order. *Ekaterina Koldunova* believes that the rise of China, and isolationist trends in the US foreign policy most likely speed up during the coronavirus and even in the aftermath of the pandemic, seismic economic and political changes are likely to continue and occur, changing the geopolitical relations in the world.

However, personal leadership and later the outcome of the US presidential election might change the course of events or at least slowdown the shifts that are to be observed in the international order. And this likelihood is still there, since we cannot know whether China can efficiently exploit the opportunities deriving from the fact that it is still the factory of the world that can provide the world with medical supplies and the virus could be stopped first in China. Tough it must be admitted that a triumphant attitude of the Chinese could backfire and make the image of a responsible global leader incredible.

At the same time, as *Czaba Moldiz* argued, the question of how to go back to normal until the vaccine is available arises. It is a key question of whether using smartphone applications can help us to lift the restrictions on people's movement by linking free movement with personal health condition before the vaccine elaborated through international collaboration arrives, most likely, as he believes, in 18 or 24 months from now.

Eugene Rumer in this connection stressed that the known and predicted economic consequences of the pandemic have prompted speculation about its impact on the foreign policies of major powers. He raised pointed questions: Will China abandon its Belt and Road initiative? Will Russia pull back from Syria and end its war against Ukraine? Will the United States act more rapidly on its "America first" agenda? For Eugene the answer is probably "no, no, and yes." However, for *Richard Weiss* the answers may be different as for some other participants as well.

At this point, as *Czaba Moldich* believes, supported by *Walter Lee*, China is in a favorable position since Chinese firms are front-runners in

this technology, and the Chinese leadership has more maneuvering room to experiment in order to find the right solutions. And that gives China an advantage over the United States, at least for a while. So, their conclusion supports also all previous arguments of the Russian participants, at least at the moment. However, the distant future is unknown and unpredictable, and new factors may arise to influence the development of the situation.

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РОССИЯ, КИТАЙ, ЕВРОПА, ЕВРАЗИЯ И США:
COVID-2019 И ПОСЛЕ – КАКИМ МОЖЕТ БЫТЬ
НАШЕ БУДУЩЕЕ?

МАТЕРИАЛЫ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОГО
ОНЛАЙН КРУГЛОГО СТОЛА

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| <p>Об авторе: <i>подготовлено к публикации главным редактором журнала проф. А.Д. Воскресенским</i> e-mail: sravnitpolit@mail.ru</p> | <p>* Theme: Conference Zoom Alexei Voskressenski China, Europe, Eurasia and the USA: COVID-2019 and After – What Our Future May Be? Online Discussion 11.04.2020 05:00 PM Москва https://us02web.zoom.us/j/372427526?pwd=V1p0ZzF4aFRYbnlkL0ZGZjhWUExYdz09 Идентификатор конференции: 372 427 526</p> |
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