



The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Fragility Factor within the International System

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Note of Editor-in-Chief

This is the first Special issue of the journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc*. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Fragility Factor within the International System

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Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the international order. The analysis focuses mainly on the role of China, the country where the epidemic originated and the main protagonist of the global transformations of recent decades. Among the possible future scenarios, our reflection contextualizes the role of the Asian giant in the framework of an international order already affected by major processes of political and economic rebalancing.

Keywords: International Relations, Covid-19, China.

1. The pandemic. A new variable in an already precarious order

How – and how much – will the spread of Covid-19 change the world order? Many international relations experts and professionals have tried to answer this question in recent months. Since the virus has crossed the frontiers of China, its country of origin, conjectures about the changes that the epidemic will bring to the geopolitical balance have been relentless, almost on a par with the extent of the contagion. The question is not an easy one if we consider that the coronavirus crisis erupted at a time of great international fragility. Since at least the beginning of the new millennium, the retreat of the United States, increasingly incapable of continuing to dictate the rules of the international game, and the growing importance of China are the main agents and originators of the progressive decomposition of the political, economic and institutional system established after the Cold War. The unknowns engendered by this decomposition have already affected all the dimensions of the world order, from the distribution of power and international prestige to the geographical scale of relations, from the strategies between the actors to their level of cultural and institutional similarity (Colombo, 2011, p. 4). The changes occurred in these dimensions have fuelled worrying cohesion conflicts which, after having definitively revealed the decline of the West, anticipated by well-respected theoretical approaches (Bull, 1984), now risk finding an additional detonating fuse in the geopolitical impact of the coronavirus.

Articles, essays, speeches and editorials are thus giving rise to a plurality of interpretations, ranging between two opposing narratives. On the one hand, those who announces radical transformations for the international system, marked by the strengthening of individual States and an increase in tensions both inside and outside them. All this would exacerbate the antagonisms of world politics, by its nature already conflictive, to the detriment of those forms of cooperation that in recent decades have wished to present globalization as a mutually beneficial process for all those who embrace it. On the other hand, there is the narrative that sees the challenges of the pandemic as an opportunity from which to build a global infrastructure of multilateral cooperation. Once they have overcome an obvious phase of closure, dictated by the vulnerability to which they are exposed, the countries

would reopen to a new kind of internationalism, to the benefit of the entire world order¹.

Among those who foresee radical scenarios of de-globalization and those who imagine new dynamics of interdependence, there seems to be only one certain point: the diffusion of the coronavirus has proved to be an event of enormous historical importance, able to invest all the areas of interaction between the subjects of the international system. It would not be the first time that an epidemic has changed the terms of geopolitical relations. The Spanish flu, which broke out during World War I, has already shown how the spread of a disease can become a political phenomenon and affect the management of international processes (Spinney, 2017). Covid-19, qualified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, has now crossed the boundaries of the mere global health emergency and its impact on economic, political and even cultural dynamics at the international level will depend on its duration, intensity and dissemination.

The consequences of Covid-19 on the international order will also arise from countries' responses to the crisis and how States decide to redesign their constraints. While internally, the emergency has gradually become a stress test for national health services and governments' ability to restrict certain personal freedoms, externally, what has attracted the most attention has been the fragmentation triggered by the pandemic. Measures such as the closure of borders, the exaltation of traditional borders, the restriction or any kind of exchange and flows, although justified by the need to contain the contagion, have reinforced processes already underway such as the reappearance of heated nationalism, the rise of authoritarian sovereignty and the return to rigid forms of economic protectionism.

2. The Dragon's Disease

For obvious reasons, those who wonder about the possible outcomes of the pandemic have turned their eyes chiefly to China. The Asian giant is not only the centre from which the new viral strain has spread, but it is also the actor that in recent decades has contributed most to the transformation of global dynamics, to the point of becoming the main peer competitor of the United States (Colombo & Magri, 2020). The health of the Chinese economy depends to a large extent on that of the international economy. Indeed, since China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, its economic fate and that of the world, especially the western world, have been closely intertwined. The Dragon is today an essential supplier of intermediate goods for many sectors, it is the world's first customer of raw materials and, as if that were not enough, the economic progress of large regions, from Asia to Africa and Latin America, is subordinate to Beijing's investments (Sterling, 2017).

However, the crisis caused by Covid-19 has affected China's prestige and some of its efforts to achieve superpower status. The initial management of the epidemic,

¹ On these different interpretations, see, among others, the *Financial Times* editorial, "Coronavirus has put globalisation into reverse" (<https://www.ft.com/content/9393cb52-4435-11ea-a43a-c4b328d9061c>), the article in the British journal *New Statesman*, "Far from making nations more insular, the coronavirus outbreak will transform globalisation" (<https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/03/far-making-nations-more-insular-coronavirus-outbreak-will-transform>) and the analysis by some renowned international relations experts published on *Foreign Policy* on March 20, 2020, (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>).

with the authorities' attempt to hide the severity of the virus, cast new shadows on a regime still far from recognizing transparency as pivotal for government action. At the same time, the issue has tarnished the image of modernity with which China seeks to project itself at the top of world power. After Sars – pneumonia that in 2003 spread from small mammals to people – Covid-19 is the second epidemic of Chinese origin that jumps from animals to humans. These transmissions undeniably clash with the modern-country profile that Beijing is struggling to project; rather, they highlight the delays still to overcome (Dassù, 2020).

It is equally certain, however, that after its late reaction, China has responded to the epidemic with extraordinary initiatives. It is almost automatic to imagine with what “nonchalance” an autocratic regime manages to limit personal freedoms in order to impose drastic quarantine measures on millions of people to contain the contagion. But it is less obvious to take for granted the use of a surprising technological superiority pursuing the same objective. It is no coincidence that the images of the hospital built in just ten days to accommodate thousands of people have travelled around the world as an unusual example of organisational capacity and innovation level.

The adoption of these measures has favoured the construction of a regime narrative aimed at extolling successes against the virus. While part of the international community has renewed its criticism of Beijing, accusing it of concealing the true number of infections, China has shown the world the results of its measures. The rate of contagion in the country has been steadily decreasing and the authorities have proudly announced the closure of all temporary hospitals built to deal with the emergency. On March 10, President Xi Jinping officially visited Wuhan, the city in Hubei Province from which the virus had originated. Xi Jinping's visit was laden with meaning: as proof of the beginning of China's victory against Covid-19 and a sign that the Dragon was now convalescing. As proof of the recovery, the gradual reopening of economic and productive activities after about two months of paralysis was also decreed. The “Wuhan model”, with the rigid measures adopted to contain the spread of the disease, began to be celebrated by the government press and flaunted to the world as the example to follow to overcome the pandemic.

Apart from the regime propaganda, Beijing knows that the fight against the virus is not yet won and will last at least until a vaccine is available. However, while many governments, especially Western ones, are still struggling with critical contagion curves, China is showing that it wants to recover its ascending trajectory to the rank of superpower. The accusations of responsibility for the pandemic and the concealment of the number of infected have made this path more difficult; but with the worst (presumably) behind them, Chinese officials are determined to turn the crisis into an advantage and the national response to the coronavirus into an opportunity to relaunch the People's Republic as a trusted and responsible regime.

3. The Restart of the Asian Giant

In line with the main purpose of China's foreign policy – to build a human community with a shared future (Zhang, 2018) – Beijing has also flaunted its willingness to cooperate to overcome the pandemic. A first and important example in this regard came in mid-March, with the decision to provide Italy with one hundred thousand high-tech masks, twenty thousand protective suits, fifty thousand diagnostic kits, one thousand lung ventilators and two million face masks. Together

with this health material, partly offered by Beijing and partly paid for by Rome, China also sent Italy a team of qualified doctors.

Support for the Italian government is an action full of significance, as well as unknowns. At the beginning of March, Italy became the country with the most coronavirus deaths in the world after China and the first western state to decree a full-scale lockdown. But for Beijing, Italy is paramount for its plan for infrastructural and global economic expansion. The Peninsula is involved in the new Chinese vision of the ancient silk road (the *Belt and Road Initiative*) and one of its ports should allow the transit of goods from the Mediterranean to northern Europe. In March 2019, Rome and Beijing signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the promotion of the *Belt and Road Initiative*. On that occasion, many European partners criticized Italy's opening to the Asian giant and warned that China would increase its influence throughout the continent. The People's Republic aid to Italy in its fight against coronavirus, therefore, took on a deep political and strategic significance. The support, moreover, arrived precisely when Italy was feeling abandoned by the other European countries which, in the same days, were either closing their borders or rejecting Rome's requests for health equipment. The Chinese decision to help Italy has thus also highlighted the differences with which the European Union has dealt with the spread of contagion among member countries and the debate on the aid to be given to Community countries to contain the economic repercussions of the epidemic.

After Italy, the Dragon has also assured its support to other States, bringing aid to over eighty nations around the world. Even the United States had to accept China's assistance, thus enabling the country to exercise soft power across the Pacific and demonstrate its willingness to take world leadership in responding to the coronavirus. This hypothesis would naturally give new lustre to Beijing's international consequence and appears strategically consistent because of a dynamic that in recent years has affected the holding of global geopolitical balances and that the current pandemic seems to have only further confirmed: the United States' relinquishment of a leading role in world politics.

It is known how Donald Trump, now grappling with various re-election pitfalls, has accelerated US disengagement from crucial regional contexts and global challenges. The extemporisation and contradictions that have characterized Washington's international behaviour over the past four years have confirmed the "imperial fatigue" of the United States and the extent of its prestige crisis. This is a decline, experts point out, already evident after the disastrous decision of the war on Iraq in 2003 and aggravated by the ineffective instruments then put in place by Barack Obama's administration to remedy his predecessor's failures (Colombo, 2018). Nevertheless, in the face of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, the United States did not give up its leadership role, suggesting measures and political responses to the international community (Wulzer, 2017; Del Pero, 2017). This attitude was lacking, however, in the face of the pandemic. Washington initially minimized the severity of the virus, then backtracked in the face of soaring contagion and death rates, thus confirming that it prefers to focus on its borders and national interests rather than promote an international action plan. The White House has even managed to cause a stir among its partners, first by unilaterally deciding to suspend flights from the European Union, and then by offering millions of dollars to a German pharmaceutical company in a clumsy attempt to secure a monopoly on a Covid-19 vaccine.

The American withdrawal in the face of their hypothetical leadership against Covid-19 is confirmed by the importance with which traditionally less influential

subjects have found themselves pointing out to the world an alternative political-health strategy to the Chinese one. The representation of a “democratic model” of tracking contagion and isolating the populations, has been assumed by countries like Taiwan or South Korea, while the United States seems to have been satisfied almost exclusively with exasperating diplomatic tones with Beijing. The formulas that Trump and his Secretary of State used to refer to the pandemic (“the Chinese virus” and “the Wuhan flu”) have irritated the Chinese without bringing anything to the competition with the Asian giant, neither in terms of the public image nor in terms of leadership in the face of the crisis.

Beijing can, therefore, see in these errors and in the progressive disengagement of the United States opportunities with which it can recover the ground lost after the spread of the epidemic. The challenge, even in this case, is far from simple because it depends on a plurality of factors. Among the most important variables is, above all, the complex international economic and financial situation (aggravated, last March, by the disagreements between Russia and Saudi Arabia on the price of oil) which Beijing must look at with worrying forecasts on its growth estimates². The above-mentioned 2008 crisis, however, has already shown how China can combine an exceptional availability of resources with an authoritarian state structure to transform difficult moments into advantageous opportunities (Villezca Baccerra, 2015). To these, we can add an effective communication strategy that portrays the People’s Republic as a leader in the world fight against the coronavirus. If in this fight – or “war for health”, as some governments have rhetorically called it already (Jean, 2020) – the Chinese laboratories were to beat those of competing countries and announce an effective vaccine first, not only would the international image of Beijing be definitively strengthened, but the Dragon would most probably completely overtake the West, marking the beginning of an international system very different from that known so far.

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² For a first reflection on the issue, see “China’s Economy to Grow the slower Since 1976 this Year” (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-04/economists-cut-china-s-growth-forecast-on-coronavirus-impact>).

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