

A New Security Outlook Claimed by the COVID-19 Crisis

Ocean Policy Research Institute, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation

Kazumine Akimoto, Senior Research Fellow

According to the 3,300 years old “Gilgamesh Epic,” Gilgamesh, the king of the ancient city Uruk of Mesopotamia, with the help of his allied friend Enkidu, slew the forest god Humbaba and seized the Lebanese cedar forests. He cut down all most of the cedar trees and the forests turned to a desert. Enkidu, who instigated Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, was possessed by a god of plague and died of an epidemic plague. Afterward, Gilgamesh strove for ensuring eternal life.

The first-ever story in human history enlightens us about the relations between conflicts over interests, environmental destruction, and plagues --- last not least the importance of passing the baton of life, namely human security.

This article will discuss the possible impact of the Novel Coronavirus pandemic on globalism that has provided the stage for international security in the post-Cold War era and global warming that has emerged as one of the major issues for humankind in the 21st century.

1. Globalization and Pandemic

There is an interaction between globalization and epidemic outbreak or pandemic. This article takes up the Black Death (the pestilence) that fell on the Eurasian continent in the 14th century, and the Spanish Flu that spread to every corner of the world from 1918 to 1920.

The Black Death that caused a pandemic in the 14th century is said to have originated in China. According to a Chinese record, 5 million people fell prey to the evil epidemic spread in the Basin of Zhejiang Province in 1334. It was around 1347 that the Black Death began to spread into Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

Eurasia in those days was amid the “Eurasia Globalism” under the sway of the Mongol Empire. Under the Pax Mongolica, merchants like Marco Polo traveled up and down the Eurasian continent. A record left by one of such merchants refers to the plague rampant in Gaza Strip in Palestinian in 1347. The Black Death spread throughout Europe, the Middle East and North Africa so soon, and about one-third of the population perished. The Black Death, as is the case with the COVID-19, inflicted huge damage on Venice and Florence, which were then prosperous by the Mediterranean trade. As an aside, the word “quarantine” originally comes from the Venetian dialect.

The COVID-19 pandemic also is manifestly a product of globalization and the supply chain dependency on China. Under the current globalization, epidemics spread across national borders.

The Spanish Flu was in vogue during the period from 1918 to 1920 throughout the world and caused a pandemic. Its infection began around 1916 during the First World War and spread in France in 1916

and American garrisons in 1917. But since information control was applied by the warring states including Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, the reporting of the spread of the epidemic was regulated among the warring nations. Meanwhile, the infection in Spain, which held a neutral position in the war, was widely reported, and the epidemic came to be called “Spanish Flu,” even though it was not of the Spanish origin.

Reportedly, approximately 500 million people around the world were infected with the Spanish Flu. The number accounts for a quarter of the world’s population at that time. The First World War triggered by the 1914 Sarajevo incident lasted until 1918. During this period, battlefields around the world were crowded by more than 70 million mobilized military personnel. The Spanish Flu was made into a pandemic by the globalization of war.

2. Paradigm shifts in social and international structures caused by pandemics

Both the Black Death and the Spanish Flu brought about major changes in the principles that had governed society until then and the international structure.

The Black Death stormed the Europe of the Hundred Years’ War. But it was not accompanied by the drastic changes in geopolitical structures of the Eurasia Continent. Instead, the pandemic revolutionized agriculture and culture. The Black Death changed the power structure of Europe in the Middle Ages. The manorial system dependent on serfs crumbled, and the feudal status order was dismantled. Further, the Church’s authority was crippled and the religious reformation began, and the Renaissance bloomed all at once and progressed. The conventional regime of medieval Europe underwent significant changes.

The Spanish Flu pandemic began after the end of the First World War. It had a great impact on the reconstruction of the postbellum world. The boundaries of the territory in the sovereign states were consolidated, and people sought after strong political leadership. Support for populism political parties helped the rise of Nazism. In defiance of the idea of the “League of Nations” advocated by the US President Thomas Woodrow Wilson, the world proceeded to the formation of power blocks.

3. Will the COVID-19 herald paradigm shifts in social order and international structures?

What impact will the COVID-19 pandemic have on the existing social order and the international structure? What world will it help create? Answering these questions is essential in predicting the future security environment in the world. Further, it is more important for international community to discuss what social order and international structure should be created based on the predicted security environment.

Which country will lead the world after the COVID-19 pandemic ends?

The United States of today is a country led by a President yelling “America First.” Can we expect the United States to take the lead in building a world order?

China is aiming at world leadership. As the United States pursues “America First,” China may enhance its national prestige by adopting the traditional “Sino-Centric” ideology as its national ideology and strengthen its global influence.

The U.S. and China is escalating confrontation over the outbreak of the COVID-19. With regard to the origin of the virus, some American media reported a doubt that the outbreak originated at the laboratory in Wuhan. On the other, a spokesperson of Chinese Foreign Ministry mentioned that the virus was brought by the U.S. military personnel. Moreover, Chinese diplomats tend to strengthen propaganda. Chinese Consul General in Chicago sent a mail to Wisconsin State Senate Chairman attached a draft resolution text which praised China for its great effort to suppress the outbreak. Anti-China sentiment has been growing in the U.S.

As for military side, the Peoples Liberation Army strengthen force presentation and deployment in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, in the condition while the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt stays in Guam due to COVID-19 infection. Responding PLA’s provocative activities, the U.S. navy frequently conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in the South China Sea. The confrontation between the U.S and China seems to escalate and come into irreversible condition.

What about European countries? Major European Union states decided to adopt lockdown procedures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. There is concern that the idea of the EU will be endangered by city lockdowns that follow Britain's exit from the EU (Brexit). The 1648 Westphalian Treaties reconfirmed the exclusive national power and the balance of power among European states. Today’s Europe was built on the Westphalian sovereignty. It is often the case that history repeats itself.

The relationship with China in EU states is not monolithic. Italy participate in the member of the Belt and Road Initiative and is supported by China in controlling the Covid-19 infection. Contrarily, the United Kingdom and France take precautions against China’s so-called “Mask Diplomacy” as an intention of China’s influence expansion. The EU would be divided over the relations with China.

Globalization should not be stopped if we want to invigorate economic activity again in the world after the resolution of the COVID-19. What is needed then is the idea of re-shaping the globalization. To begin with, the current supply chain excessively dependent on China must be reviewed. In the globalized world, the balance of power theory is becoming less persuasive, while the balance of influence theory claims more attention. The powers of influence that can affect the future of globalization need to be skillfully balanced within the international community. What is important is to promote liberal democratic governance and to contain the influence of authoritarianism.

On the other hand, it is essential for international society to investigate and verify about for where is the outbreak place and for what procedures are suitable to control infection.

As the premise of the above, constitutional states that adopt liberal democracy and abide by international law should reconfirm the necessity of establishing a global security system in the new globalization world. The Ocean Policy Research Institute of Sasakawa Peace Foundation is currently

working on a three-year project from FY 2019 with research foci on the blue economy and maritime security --- envisaging the “Blue Infinity Loop” that circumnavigates the Earth’s oceans without interruption. Its purpose is to formulate the governance for new globalization. The research results will provide timely and useful information for the construction of a new globalization in the world that the Covid-19 is well controlled.

4. Pandemic as a security threat

Return to the “Gilgamesh Epic.” This first-ever story in human history inculcates that environmental degradation due to reckless development will give rise to serious security problems. Nowadays, people in the world are combating global warming caused by human-originated climate change, labeling it as “Climate Security.” Now, human society must add “Pandemic Security” into the broad security concept.

On April 15 this year, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced that atmospheric carbon dioxide content in northeastern America was reduced by about 30%. The suspension of movement and business activity for containment of the COVID-19 is considered to have contributed to the CO2 reduction. A similar trend is noticed in the world's major cities. Global warming is now surely stopped.

There is a climate analysis result that from the 14th century (the time of the spread of the “Black Death”) through the 19th century, the amount of carbon dioxide decreased and the earth became cool. This indicates that “Pandemic Security” and “Climate Security” are common agenda in the globalization world. We should incorporate “Pandemic Security” and “Climate Security” into the efforts of reconstructing globalization after the termination of the COVID-19. Human wisdom may be necessary to strike a good balance between “Pandemic Security” / “Climate Security” and economic development. If we can make the best use of our wisdom, we will be able to achieve the “Sustainable Development Goals” adopted by the United Nations.

The Ocean Policy Research Institute is working on “Climate Security” research, planning to hold an international conference in the spring of 2021. Its outcomes will serve as a proposal on “Pandemic Security” as well as “Climate Security”.

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