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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 COVID-19 pandemic will have such effects.

Observers who argue the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic could change the international security environment, whether the Trump 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 COVID-19 pandemic will have such effects. This report provides a brief overview of some potential implications the COVID-19 pandemic might have for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world, and a bibliography of CRS reports and other writings for further reading.

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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.

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. A separate CRS report discusses the question of whether the U.S. role in the world is changing as a result of factors other than the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

Overview of Potential Implications

Areas of potential change reflected in writings from observers who view the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic could cause or accelerate a decline or erosion in the U.S.-led liberal international order that has operated since World War II, in the international institutions and norms that contribute to it, and consequently in global governance.² A decline or erosion in the U.S.-led liberal order or the international


² 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 and Michael Moodie. As discussed in that report, the term international order or world order generally refers in foreign policy discussions to 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
institutions form part of it could set the stage for its replacement by a new or modified world order reflecting changed rules, norms, and practices, or by a more disorderly world.

**U.S. Global Leadership and Role in the World**

Some observers have focused on how, in their view, the COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating that the United States is maintaining or reasserting its role as global leader, while other observers suggest that, in their view, the COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating that the United States has chosen to withdraw from or is no longer capable of performing that role. The COVID-19 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. Related to this, some observers have focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic may be illustrating the strengths or weaknesses of the Trump Administration’s “America First” approach to the U.S. role in the world, or the merits of the U.S. system of government and economic model as potential examples for other countries to emulate.

**China’s Potential Role as a Global Leader**

Some observers have focused on how the COVID-19 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 so-called donation diplomacy or mask diplomacy—meaning China’s actions to send medical supplies and personnel to other countries, and the highlighting of these actions in statements from China’s government and state-controlled media—have become new elements of an 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 COVID-19 pandemic has become a significant element in U.S-China relations, and in U.S. great power competition with China and Russia, which the Trump Administration has placed at the center of its national security construct. For some observers, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for U.S.-China cooperation on an important international issue of common interest. For other observers, the COVID-19 pandemic is a new source of dispute and 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 how the COVID-19 pandemic provides a new factor in the discussion of whether the United States should decouple its economy from China’s and reduce its dependence on China

[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 night-makes-right behavior; resisted or rejected by certain states and non-state actors; and subject to various stresses and challenges.
for key materials and products, including hospital supplies and pharmaceuticals. Some observers have focused on whether the U.S. and Chinese responses to the COVID-19 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 how the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be challenging democratic systems in various countries and 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. As discussed in another CRS report, a key element of the traditional U.S. role in the world since World War II has been to defend and promote freedom, democracy, and human rights as universal values, while criticizing and resisting authoritarian and illiberal forms of government where and when possible.

**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 COVID-19 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. 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 COVID-19 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 be leading the world economy into a significant

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3 For additional discussion of the issue of the prevalence of democracy and authoritarian or autocratic forms of government around the world, see CRS Report R45344, *Global Trends in Democracy: Background, U.S. Policy, and Issues for Congress*, by Michael A. Weber.


recession—an effect that could contribute to the societal tensions mentioned in the previous point. Noting that the COVID-19 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, and it has been a matter of particular emphasis for the Trump Administration. 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic is creating tensions among the European Union member states, particularly in connection with actions they are taking to close their national borders, and what impact the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 situation 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 are currently 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 COVID-19 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 and International Debt Relief

Some observers have focused on the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic is providing a new lens through which to measure the value of U.S. foreign assistance and international debt relief 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic. Administration officials have warned other countries to not take actions during the COVID-19 pandemic to challenge U.S. interests around the world or otherwise test U.S. resolve or responsiveness on the thinking that the COVID-19 pandemic is distracting U.S. officials from other concerns or reducing U.S. capacity for responding to any such challenges.

Role of Congress

At least one observer has focused on the issue of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the ability of Congress to conduct oversight of the Administration’s foreign policy actions.

Further Reading

For further reading on the issues 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 COVID-19 pandemic for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world include but are not limited to the following:

- Will the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 actions is the Administration developing to respond to potential changes in the international security environment arising from the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 In Focus IF11480, *Overview: The Department of Defense and COVID-19*, coordinated by Kathleen J. McInnis.
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 COVID-19 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.

General/Multitopic


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

Maxine Whittaker, “How infectious diseases have shaped our culture, habits and language,” The Conversation, July 12, 2017.

World Order, International Institutions, and Global Governance


**U.S. Global Leadership and Role in World**


Joe Buccino, “The US Must Lead the World Out of This, If the Coronavirus Pandemic Only Causes Us to Look Inward, China Wins,” Defense One, April 7, 2020.


William J. Burns, “A Make-or-Break Test for American Diplomacy, The Post-Pandemic World Will Pose a Massive Test for U.S. Statecraft, the Biggest Since the End of the Cold War,” Atlantic, April 6, 2020.


Jackson Diehl, “Pompeo’s Pandemic Performance Ensures His Place Among the Worst Secretaries of State Ever,” Washington Post, March 29, 2020. (For a response, see the March 30, 2020, writing above by Michael Rubin.)


**China’s Potential Role as a Global Leader**


Nick Crawford and David Gordon, “China Confronts Major Risk of Debt Crisis on the Belt and Road Due to Pandemic,” Diplomat, April 10, 2020.


Edward Lucas, “China Was Once the Cradle of the Coronavirus Pandemic But It Has Bounced Back with Astonishing Speed, Writes Edward Lucas As He Reveals the Country May Have Won the War for Global Supremacy As Well,” *Daily Mail (UK)*, April 3, 2020.


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


Bradley A. Thayer and Lianchao Han, “Kissinger’s Folly: The Threat to World Order is China,” The Hill, April 19, 2020.


“Is China winning? The geopolitical consequences of covid-19 will be subtle, but unfortunate,” Economist, April 16, 2020. (This article does not list an author.)


Salvatore Babones, “In the Post-Coronavirus World, Chinese Power is Overrated, A Global Resurgence in National Self-Reliance Might Actually Be a Good Thing for America’s Place in the World,” Foreign Policy, April 14, 2020.


John Lee Cheong Seong, “Beijing Tried to Use the Coronavirus Crisis to Enhance Its Global Standing. It’s not working; Despite American Errors and Poor Leadership, the Pandemic Only Proves That the Foundations of Underlying Strength Are Still Solid for the United States and Fragile for China,” South China Morning Post, April 14, 2020.


Keith B. Alexander and Jamil N. Jaffer, “While the World Battles the Coronavirus, Our Adversaries Are Planning Their Next Attack,” The Hill, April 7 2020.


Tom O’Connor and Naveed Jamali, “As U.S. Struggles to Fight Coronavirus, China, Russia See Opportunity to Gain Global Power,” Newsweek, April 1, 2020.


**Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Autocracy**


Emily Schultheis, “Coronavirus Has Paralyzed Europe’s Far Right,” Foreign Policy, April 14, 2020.


Suzanne Nossel, “Don’t Let Leaders Use the Coronavirus as an Excuse to Violate Civil Liberties,” Foreign Policy, April 13, 2020.


Jacob Mchangama and Sarah McLaughlin, “Coronavirus Has Started a Censorship Pandemic,” Foreign Policy, April 1, 2020.


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


Armand Gosu, “Russia Needs an OPEC+ 2.0 Accord to Avoid a Crisis,” Middle East Institute, April 21, 2020.


James Jay Carafano, “Coronavirus and Regime Change—Will This Plague Topple Nations Great and Small?” Heritage Foundation, April 1, 2020.


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


Allied Defense Spending and U.S. Alliances


Stéphanie Fillon, “In Canada, Patience Wearing Thin Over Trump’s Antics, A Threat to Militarize the Border and Attempts to Hold Up Lifesaving Medical Supplies Have Roiled the Calmest of Countries,” Foreign Policy, April 14, 2020.


European Union


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


**U.S. Foreign Assistance and International Debt Relief**


**Non-state Actors**


Stratfor Worldview, “Coronavirus Could Lead To Lots of This in the Near Future,” National Interest, March 22, 2020. (The article discusses potential actions by non-state actors.)

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


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