

COVID-19: Potential Implications for International Security Environment— Overview of Issues and Further Reading for Congress

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COVID-19: Potential Implications for International Security Environment—Overview of Issues and Further Reading for Congress

In the earlier months of the COVID-19 pandemic, some observers argued that the pandemic could be a world-changing event with potentially profound and long-lasting implications for the international security environment. Other observers were more skeptical that the pandemic would have such effects.

In reports issued in March 2021, April 2021, February 2022, and February 2023, the U.S. intelligence community provided assessments of potential or observed impacts of the pandemic on the international security environment.

Observers who discussed whether the pandemic would be world-changing for the international security environment 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;
- 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;
- allied defense spending 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, international debt relief, and refugee policy;
- 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 include whether and how the pandemic has changed the international security environment and whether the Biden Administration's actions for responding to any such change are appropriate and sufficient. Congress's decisions regarding these issues could have significant implications for U.S. foreign and defense policy.

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Introduction

In the earlier months of the COVID-19 pandemic, some observers argued that the pandemic could be a world-changing event with potentially profound and long-lasting implications for the international security environment. Other observers were more skeptical that the pandemic would have such effects. This report provides a brief overview of some potential implications the pandemic might have for the international security environment, and appendices listing CRS reports and other writings for further reading.

Issues for Congress include whether and how the pandemic has changed the international security environment and whether the Biden Administration's actions for responding to any such change are appropriate and sufficient. Congress's decisions regarding these issues could have significant implications for 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.

Background

Assessments by U.S. Intelligence Community

In reports issued in March 2021, April 2021, February 2022, and February 2023, the U.S. intelligence community provided assessments of potential or observed impacts of the pandemic on the international security environment. Excerpts from these four reports are presented below.

March 2021 NIC Report on Global Trends

A March 2021 report of the National Intelligence Council (NIC)¹ on global trends—the 2021 edition of a report that NIC publishes every four years to serve as an unclassified strategic assessment on key trends that might shape the world over the next 20 years—includes a section on the potential impact of the pandemic, which states

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged globally in 2020, wreaking havoc across the world, killing more than 2.5 million people as of early 2021, devastating families and communities, and disrupting economies and political dynamics within and between countries. Previous global trends editions forecasted the potential for new diseases and even imagined scenarios with a pandemic, but we lacked a full picture of the breadth and depth of its disruptive potential. COVID-19 has shaken long-held assumptions about resilience and adaptation and created new uncertainties about the economy, governance, geopolitics, and technology.

To understand and assess the impact of this crisis, we examined and debated a broad range of our assumptions and assessments related to key global trends. We asked a series of

¹ The Office of the Director of National Intelligence states that the National Intelligence Council “supports the Director of National Intelligence [DNI] in his role as head of the Intelligence Community (IC) and is the IC’s center for long-term strategic analysis. Since its establishment in 1979, the NIC has served as a bridge between the intelligence and policy communities, a source of deep substantive expertise on intelligence issues, and a facilitator of Intelligence Community collaboration and outreach. The NIC’s National Intelligence Officers—drawn from government, academia, and the private sector—are the Intelligence Community’s senior experts on a range of regional and functional issues.” (Director of National Intelligence, “National Intelligence Council—Who We Are,” accessed July 9, 2021, at https://www.dni.gov/index.php/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=393&Itemid=778.)

questions: Which existing trends will endure, which trends are accelerating or decelerating because of the pandemic, and where are we likely to experience fundamental, systemic shifts? Are the disruptions temporary or could the pandemic unleash new forces to shape the future? Much like the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to produce some changes that will be felt for years to come and change the way we live, work, and govern domestically and internationally. How great these will be, however, is very much in question.

ACCELERATING, SHARPENING SOME TRENDS

The pandemic and corresponding national responses appear to be honing and accelerating several trends that were already underway before the outbreak. COVID-19 brought global health and healthcare issues into sharp relief, exposed and in some cases widened social fissures, underscored vast disparities in healthcare access and infrastructure, and interrupted efforts to combat other diseases. The pandemic also highlighted weaknesses in the international coordination on health crises and the mismatch between existing institutions, funding levels, and future health challenges.

Catalyzing Economic Trends. Lockdowns, quarantines, and the closing of international borders have catalyzed some pre-existing economic trends, including diversification in global supply chains, increased national debt, and greater government intervention in economies. Moving forward, the character of globalization may retain some of the changes from this crisis period, and debt, particularly for developing economies, will strain national capacities for many years.

Reinforcing Nationalism and Polarization. Nationalism and polarization have been on the rise in many countries, especially exclusionary nationalism. Efforts to contain and manage the virus have reinforced nationalist trends globally as some states turned inward to protect their citizens and sometimes cast blame on marginalized groups. The response to the pandemic has fueled partisanship and polarization in many countries as groups argue over the best way to respond and seek scapegoats to blame for spreading the virus and for slow responses.

Deepening Inequality. The disproportionate economic impact of COVID-19 on low-income earners has caused them to fall further behind. When COVID-19 is finally controlled, many families are likely to have experienced further setbacks, especially those working in the service or informal sectors or who left the workforce to provide dependent care—predominantly women. The pandemic has exposed the digital divide within and between countries while spurring efforts to improve Internet access.

Straining Governance. The pandemic is straining government capacity for services and contributing to already low levels of trust in institutions in countries that have not effectively handled the response. The pandemic is exacerbating the confusing and polarized information environment that is undermining public confidence in health authorities, particularly in open societies. Illiberal regimes in some countries are using the pandemic as a pretext to more severely crack down on dissent and restrict civic freedoms, conditions that may outlive the disease.

Highlighting Failed International Cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses and political cleavages in international institutions, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations, and called into question countries' ability and willingness to cooperate multilaterally to address common challenges beyond infectious disease, particularly climate change. The WHO, which has faced significant funding difficulties and resistance to mandatory surveillance regimes, is facing its gravest shock in nearly two decades. The crisis, however, may ultimately lead actors to make deeper reforms, standardize data collection and sharing, and forge new public-private partnerships.

Elevating the Role of Nonstate Actors. Nonstate actors, ranging from the Gates Foundation to private companies, have been crucial to vaccine research or retrofitting equipment to mass produce medical supplies and personal protective equipment. Nonstate networks will complement national and intergovernmental action in future health crises, including early warning, treatment, facilitation of data-sharing, and vaccine development.

WHILE OTHERS DECELERATE OR REVERSE

COVID-19 is slowing and possibly reversing some longstanding trends in human development, especially the reduction of poverty and disease and closing gender inequality gaps. The longest lasting reversals may be in poverty reduction across Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, followed by losses in gender equality. The resources devoted to fighting COVID-19 and social restrictions could reverse years of progress against malaria, measles, polio, and other infectious diseases by consuming key financial, material, and personnel resources.

The COVID-19 emergency may bring regions together in ways that previous crises have not.

Although European countries early in the crisis imposed restrictions on border traffic and exports of critical medical supplies, the European Union has rallied around an economic rescue package and other emergency measures that could bolster the European integration project going forward. COVID-19 could also lead to redirection of national budgets toward pandemic response and economic recovery, diverting funds from defense expenditures, foreign aid, and infrastructure programs in some countries, at least in the near term.

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

The unanticipated second- and third-order effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have reminded us how uncertain the future is—both in the long and short term. As researchers and analysts, we must be ever vigilant, asking better questions, frequently challenging our assumptions, checking our biases, and looking for weak signals of change. We need to expect the unexpected and apply the lessons of this pandemic to our craft in the future.²

April 2021 DNI Threat Assessment

An April 9, 2021, report from the Director of National Intelligence (DNI)—DNI’s annual threat assessment for 2021—includes a section on the pandemic that states (emphasis as in the original):

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life worldwide, with far-reaching effects that extend well beyond global health to the economic, political, and security spheres. We expect COVID-19 to remain a threat to populations worldwide until vaccines and therapeutics are widely distributed. The economic and political implications of the pandemic will ripple through the world for years.

The pandemic is raising geopolitical tensions, and great powers are jockeying for advantage and influence. States are struggling to cooperate—and in some cases are undermining cooperation—to respond to the pandemic and its economic fallout, particularly as some governments turn inward and question the merits of globalization and interdependence. Some governments, such as China and Russia, are using offers of medical supplies and vaccines to try to boost their geopolitical standing.

The economic fallout from the pandemic is likely to create or worsen instability in at least a few—and perhaps many—countries, as people grow more desperate in the face of interlocking pressures that include sustained economic downturns, job losses, and disrupted supply chains. Some hard-hit developing countries are experiencing financial

² National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2040, A More Contested World*, March 2021, pp. 11-13.

and humanitarian crises, increasing the risk of surges in migration, collapsed governments, or internal conflict.

- Although global trade shows signs of bouncing back from the COVID-19-induced slump, economists caution that any recovery this year could be disrupted by ongoing or expanding pandemic effects, keeping pressure on many governments to focus on internal economic stability. In April, the International Monetary Fund estimated that the global economy would grow 6 percent this year and 4.4 percent in 2022. This year's forecast is revised up 0.5 percentage points relative to the previous forecast, reflecting expectations of vaccine-powered strengthening of activity later in the year and additional policy support in a few large economies. The global growth contraction for 2020 is estimated at 3.3 percent.
- The resurgence in COVID-19 infections early this year may have an even greater economic impact as struggling businesses in hard-hit sectors such as tourism and restaurants fold and governments face increasing budget strains.
- The effects on developing countries—especially those that rely heavily on remittances, tourism, or oil exports—may be severe and longer lasting; many developing countries already have sought debt relief.
- The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with conflict and weather extremes, has driven food insecurity worldwide to its highest point in more than a decade, which increases the risk of instability. The number of people experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity doubled from 135 million in 2019 to about 270 million last year, and is projected to rise to 330 million by yearend.

The COVID-19 pandemic is prompting shifts in security priorities for countries around the world. As militaries face growing calls to cut budgets, gaps are emerging in UN peacekeeping operations; military training and preparedness; counterterrorism operations; and arms control monitoring, verification, and compliance. These gaps are likely to grow without a quick end to the pandemic and a rapid recovery, making managing conflict more difficult—particularly because the pandemic has not caused any diminution in the number or intensity of conflicts.

COVID-19-related disruptions to essential health services—such as vaccinations, aid delivery, and maternal and child health programs—will increase the likelihood of additional health emergencies, especially among vulnerable populations in low-income countries. As examples, the pandemic has disrupted HIV/AIDS treatments and preventative measures in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as measles and polio vaccination campaigns in dozens of countries. World populations, including Americans, will remain vulnerable to new outbreaks of infectious diseases as risk factors persist, such as rapid and unplanned urbanization, protracted conflict and humanitarian crises, human incursions into previously unsettled land, expansion of international travel and trade, and public mistrust of government and health care workers.³

February 2022 DNI Threat Assessment

A February 7, 2022, report from DNI—DNI's annual threat assessment for 2022⁴—refers in its foreword to “the continued global disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic” and further states in the foreword:

³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, April 9, 2021, pp. 17-18.

⁴ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, February 7, 2022, 30 pp.

The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to strain governments and societies, fueling humanitarian and economic crises, political unrest, and geopolitical competition as countries, such as China and Russia, seek advantage through such avenues as “vaccine diplomacy.” No country has been completely spared, and even when a vaccine is widely distributed globally, the economic and political aftershocks will be felt for years. Low-income countries with high debts face particularly challenging recoveries and the potential for cascading crises leading to regional instability, whereas others will turn inward or be distracted by other challenges. The IC [U.S. intelligence community] continues to investigate the concerning incidences of Anomalous Health Incidents and the danger they pose to U.S. personnel. (Page 4)

The report includes a section focusing on the impacts of the pandemic that states (emphasis as in the original):

INFECTIOUS DISEASES AND THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has killed millions of people and disrupted life worldwide, with far-reaching effects extending well beyond global health to the economic, political, and societal spheres. Although the most severe health impacts of COVID-19 are lessening as global vaccination coverage increases and natural immunity builds, countries worldwide will continue to grapple with COVID-19 during the next year. The socioeconomic and political implications of the pandemic will ripple through the world for years.

The economic fallout from the pandemic is likely to continue to challenge governments and hold back human development and wellbeing, particularly in low-income countries. Societal discontent resulting from these conditions could worsen instability in some countries and fuel surges in international migration, as people grow more desperate in the face of interlocking pressures that include sustained economic downturns.

— The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to increase debt burdens, constrain government spending by poor countries, and cause persistent job insecurity, in turn undermining economic and political stability, particularly in low-income countries. Although global trade shows signs of bouncing back from the COVID-19-induced slump, economists caution that any recovery this year could be disrupted by ongoing or expanding pandemic effects, keeping pressure on many governments to focus on internal economic stability.

— The economic fallout from COVID-19, combined with conflict and weather extremes, has driven hunger worldwide to its highest point in more than a decade, which increases the risk of instability. The number of people facing acute food insecurity doubled from 135 million in 2019 to more than 270 million in 2020, and is projected to continue rising.

COVID-19 is likely to continue to strain health systems and create conditions that could facilitate the spread of other infectious diseases globally, including to the U.S. homeland.

— The pandemic has significantly disrupted essential health services—for example, causing healthcare worker shortages, delays in non-emergency procedures, or avoidance of healthcare facilities because of fears of becoming infected with COVID-19—which are likely to worsen health outcomes and continue to hamper countries’ abilities to control disease, particularly low and middle-income countries.

— Influenza and other seasonal respiratory diseases could surge to abnormally high levels in 2022 with the reduction of COVID-19 mitigation measures, which have dampened circulation of these diseases since early 2020, and in turn reduced the level of population immunity to these infections.

Countries globally remain vulnerable to the emergence of a novel pathogen that could cause a devastating new pandemic. Drivers for disease emergence persist and are on the rise, including deforestation and other human encroachment into unsettled land, wildlife harvesting and trade, livestock production, and climate change. These drivers are

compounded by factors that facilitate global spread, such as international travel and trade, inadequate global disease surveillance and control, distrust of public health authorities, health disinformation, and health system strain brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging agricultural diseases—even those that do not harm humans directly—threaten to cause immense economic damage and disruption to food supplies if they spread globally or into new regions. (Pages 18-19)

The report elsewhere includes additional statements that refer to the pandemic, including the following (emphasis as in the original):

- “We will see continuing potential for surges in migration from Afghanistan, Latin America, and other poor countries, which are reeling from conflict and the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.” (Page 5)
- “China will continue spreading COVID-19 misinformation and downplaying its early failures while casting blame on the West. Its misinformation includes claims that the United States created COVID-19.” (Page 8)
- “Russia also uses its capabilities in COVID-19 vaccine development and civilian nuclear reactor construction as a soft-power tool in its foreign policy.” (Page 11)
- “[North Korean leader Kim Jong Un] probably does not view the current level of pressure on his regime, the economic hardships resulting from sanctions and his domestic COVID-19 countermeasures as enough to require a fundamental change in approach.” (Page 16)
- ***“The IC continues to investigate how SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, first infected humans.... Beijing continues to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information, and blame other countries, including the United States.” (Page 19)***
- ***Global shortcomings in preparedness for the pandemic and questions surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 virus and biosecurity may inspire some adversaries to consider options related to biological weapons developments.***
 - As China, Iran, and Russia continue to publicly tout individual or collaborative efforts to improve biosecurity, they have pushed narratives that further drive threat perceptions, including linking U.S. laboratories abroad to COVID-19 origins, breaches in biosafety, untrustworthy vaccines, and biological weapons. This messaging probably will be amplified in the lead up to the once-every-five-years Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, tentatively slated to convene in mid-2022. (Page 19)
- ***“In the Western Hemisphere, factors such as longstanding poor socioeconomic conditions, perceived changes in U.S. immigration policy, and employment opportunities in the United States will continue to drive migration to the Mexico-U.S. border; a growing number of people from around the world see transiting Mexico as a way to reach the United States..... Eased COVID-19-related travel restrictions and perceptions of greater job opportunities in a recovering U.S. economy are contributing to a rise in migration. These dynamics, along with perceptions of U.S. immigration policies, will determine the flow of migrants this year.” (Pages 24-25)***
- ***“Economic disparities and the effects of conflict and extreme weather will encourage internal and international migration and refugee flows. Migration and displacement will heighten humanitarian needs, increase the risk of political upheaval, exacerbate the risk of other health crises, and aid***

- recruitment and radicalization by militant groups—particularly as COVID-19 strains global humanitarian response mechanisms.***” (Page 25)
- “A majority of Afghans are suffering food insecurity because of the effects of conflict, drought, and COVID-19 disruptions, and further deterioration almost certainly will increase internal displacement, which could lead to international migration. Refugee flows could spike if the Taliban attempted to relieve pressure by allowing larger populations to leave Afghanistan or conditions sharply deteriorated.” (Page 28)
 - ***“The Middle East will remain a region characterized by persistent conflict, with active insurgencies in several countries, sparring between Iran and other countries, and terrorism and protest movements sparking occasional violence. Domestic volatility will persist as popular discontent and socioeconomic grievances continue to rise, particularly as the region contends with the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the risk of internal or international conflict that would threaten U.S. persons and national security interests.”*** (Page 29)
 - “Burma’s security and economic conditions probably will continue to deteriorate because both the regime and the opposition are relying on the use of force in an attempt to break the ongoing political stalemate and advance their respective positions. Both sides remain entrenched in their positions and neither are able to decisively prevail. Economic deterioration and ongoing violence in addition to the ongoing COVID-19-pandemic will amplify the country’s deteriorating humanitarian conditions, such as population displacement, food insecurity, and a poorly functioning health care system.” (Page 30)
 - “Latin America and the Caribbean almost certainly will see hotspots of volatility in the coming year, undermining or distracting reliable U.S. partners from improving living conditions, tackling illicit flows, addressing climate change, and warding off foreign influence. In many cases, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified high levels of public discontent with worsening longstanding poor socioeconomic conditions and public services that manifested in large anti-government protests. Elevated levels of U.S.-bound migration from Latin America and the Caribbean region will persist into at least mid-2022 because the underlying economic and insecurity drivers will remain unchanged, and migrants view the U.S. labor market and immigration policies and enforcement as favorable.” (Page 30)
 - “Sub-Saharan African governments will exhibit clear agency in their foreign affairs as the international community recognizes the importance of the region to its economic and security interests. Large numbers of U.S. citizens will be at risk from conflict in several countries. As the region seeks to reinvigorate its upward trajectory following the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will continue to face unstable commodities prices, poor service delivery and endemic corruption, stresses of extreme weather events, and insecurity because of terrorism, insurgency, sectarian violence, and political instability.” (Page 30)

February 2023 DNI Threat Assessment

A February 6, 2023, report from DNI—DNI’s annual threat assessment for 2023⁵— includes a section focusing on the impacts of the pandemic that states (emphasis as in the original):

INFECTIOUS DISEASES AND THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Now entering its fourth year, the COVID-19 pandemic remains one of the most significant threats to global public health, at a cost of more than 6.5 million lives lost and trillions of dollars in lost economic output to date. Despite the gradual decline of the most severe health effects of COVID-19 because of the greater availability of vaccines globally, increased natural immunity, and better treatments, significant challenges remain as countries now are responding to new variants, waning vaccine protection, gaps in vaccine coverage, challenges in management of public health safety measures, and growing misinformation campaigns aimed at sowing doubt and discrediting public health institutions worldwide. *In addition to direct effects of the pandemic, resultant economic, human security, political, and national security implications of COVID-19 continue to strain recovery efforts, presenting both known and unforeseen challenges that probably will ripple through society and the global economy during the next year and for years to come.*

— During the next year, pandemic-related higher debt burdens, constrained government spending, and ongoing employment disruptions and insecurity are expected to heighten the risk of financial instability and poverty, particularly in low-income countries and those recovering from the most severe economic effects of COVID-19.

— The combination of economic and human security challenges resulting from COVID-19 probably will further strain capacities of governments to meet public demands during the next year and for years to come, particularly when combined with the need to address similar challenges arising from climate change. The potential for public discontent and societal divisions will grow, and risks to democratic governance, political stability, and migration fluctuations in some countries will increase.

— Despite some improvement during the last year, pandemic effects continue to challenge the delivery of essential health services—in some cases because of healthcare worker shortages, delays in non-emergency procedures, or avoidance to seek healthcare because of misinformation or fears of becoming infected with COVID-19. The factors probably will continue to contribute to poor health outcomes and hamper countries’ abilities to control disease, particularly low- and middle-income countries.

Countries globally remain vulnerable to the emergence or introduction of a novel pathogen that could cause a devastating new pandemic. Drivers for disease emergence persist and are on the rise, including climate change, deforestation, human encroachment into previously undisturbed habitats, wildlife harvesting and trade, mass food production, and lack of international consensus on biosafety norms. These drivers are compounded by factors that facilitate global spread, such as international travel and trade, inadequate global disease surveillance and control, distrust of public health authorities, health disinformation, and health system strain brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging agricultural and livestock diseases and antimicrobial resistance—although not necessarily involving pathogens of pandemic concern—threaten to cause immense economic damage and disruption to food supplies if they spread globally or into new regions.

— A lack of global field biosafety standards and protective measures continues to raise concerns of viral spillover worldwide. Increased interest in field sampling and advanced biological research since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, poor training, and lack of

⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, February 6, 2023, 39 pp.

international inspection and standardized regulatory requirements have all been implicated in contributing to the risk of contamination and/or breaches in biocontainment.

Our Assessment of the Origins of COVID-19

The IC continues to investigate how SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, first infected humans, maintaining a Community of Interest across agencies. All agencies assess that two hypotheses are plausible explanations for the origin of COVID-19: natural exposure to an infected animal and a laboratory-associated incident.

— Beijing continues to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information, and blame other countries, including the United States. (Pages 24-25)

The report elsewhere includes additional statements that refer to the pandemic, including the following (emphasis as in the original):

- “Russia has used its capabilities in COVID-19 vaccine development and the nuclear power export industry as foreign policy tools.” (Page 13)
- “North Korea’s COVID-19 restrictions and reliance on the Korean People’s Army (KPA) to enforce and execute some pandemic countermeasures probably have caused overall KPA combat readiness to decline in the near term, but key units probably will remain capable of executing their wartime missions.” (Page 20)
- *“Global shortcomings in preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns with biosecurity, fabricated public claims about U.S. biological weapons development fueled by U.S. adversaries, as well as continued questions surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 virus, may inspire some adversaries to consider options related to the development of biological weapons.* China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia continue to publicly push false narratives that may drive global threat perceptions of biological weapons, including linking U.S. laboratories abroad to COVID-19 origins, breaches in biosafety, untrustworthy vaccines, and biological weapons.” (Page 25)
- *“Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has aggravated COVID-19-related fragilities in the global economy, raised commodity prices, fueled market volatility, and contributed to food insecurity and financial instability, particularly in low-income countries.”* (Page 28)
- “Russia’s war in Ukraine coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic has increased poverty, hindered economic growth, and widened inequality, raising the conditions that are ripe for domestic unrest, insurgencies, democratic backsliding, and authoritarianism.” (Page 34)
- *“Russia’s war in Ukraine coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic has increased poverty, hindered economic growth, and widened inequality, raising the conditions that are ripe for domestic unrest, insurgencies, democratic backsliding, and authoritarianism.”* (Page 38)

Overview of Areas of Potential Implications

Areas of potential change reflected in writings from observers who have discussed whether the pandemic will be a 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 focused on whether 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.⁶ 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.

In the earlier months of the pandemic, 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. 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 chose 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.

Other observers argued that the U.S. response to the pandemic focused international attention on what they view as a need for reform at the World Health Organization (WHO), demonstrated the strength and innovativeness of the U.S. scientific and pharmaceutical establishments in terms of developing and manufacturing vaccines, and demonstrated 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 were tailored to local conditions.

Some observers, including some foreign observers, argued that the U.S. domestic response to the pandemic demonstrated weaknesses in U.S. democracy, governance, and public health, particularly in comparison to how certain other countries responded to the pandemic within their own borders, and that this could 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. As vaccines became more widely available in the United States, some observers argued that the United States should export larger numbers of vaccine doses to other countries that need them so as to demonstrate U.S. global leadership and help protect U.S. public health and the U.S. economy by helping to end the global pandemic more quickly.

⁶ 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 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.

China's Potential Role as a Global Leader

Some observers focused on whether the pandemic provided insight into whether China desires and is working to become a global leader on par with (or in the place of) the United States, to what degree China has a capacity for doing so, and how other countries might view China acting in such a role. China's transparency, particularly regarding the origin of the COVID-19 virus, China's actions in the early days of its COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, trial data on the efficacy of China's vaccines, as well as China's actions to send vaccines, other medical supplies, and medical personnel to other countries, perhaps for political or diplomatic purposes, became elements of a broader ongoing discussion regarding China's capacity or suitability for acting as a global leader.

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

Some observers focused on how the pandemic became an element in U.S.-China relations, and in U.S. great power competition with China and Russia. For some observers, the pandemic presented an opportunity for U.S.-China cooperation on an important international issue of common interest. For other observers, the pandemic became a source of dispute and an arena of competition between the two countries, and contributed to a hardening of U.S.-China relations into a Cold War-like adversarial situation.

In the earlier months of the pandemic, some observers focused on what they viewed as a competition or race between the United States, China, Russia, and other countries to develop, manufacture, and administer effective vaccines, and thus be able to restore their economies to full operation sooner than other countries. Some observers focused on whether China and Russia were attempting to use exports of their vaccines as levers to gain advantages in their relations with recipient countries. The terms *vaccine nationalism* and *vaccine diplomacy* were used by some of these observers to refer to such perceived activities. Some observers 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, manufacture, and administer effective vaccines and thereby prolong the global pandemic.

Some observers 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. Other observers 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 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. Other observers focused on whether the pandemic provided 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 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, or could destabilize and perhaps cause the downfall of governments, akin to the effects of certain past world-changing events, such as World War I.⁷ 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 focused on how the pandemic could change the world economy, perhaps in ways that could influence the international security environment. Noting that the pandemic affected world trade volumes and disrupted and altered global supply chains, they focused on the question of whether economic globalization would as a result be slowed, halted, reversed, or otherwise changed. Some observers monitored or discussed how such effects could influence or be influenced by U.S. trade policy.

Allied Defense Spending and U.S. Alliances

Particularly during the earlier months of the pandemic, some observers focused on the possibility that costs incurred by U.S. allies—particularly NATO allies in Europe—to support their economies during stay-at-home/lockdown periods could lead to offsetting reductions in their defense expenditures. More generally, some observers during the earlier months of the pandemic asked whether reductions in economic growth caused by the pandemic could lead to reductions in the defense budgets of U.S. allies in both Europe and Asia.

European Union

In the earlier months of the pandemic, some observers focused on the question of whether the pandemic was 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 and its ability to take effective actions on the international stage.

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

Some observers focused on whether the pandemic would (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

⁷ For brief discussions of the impacts of World War I on societies and governments, see, for example, Robert Wilde, “The Consequences of World War I, Political and Social Effects of the War to End All Wars,” *ThoughtCo.*, July 10, 2019; John Horne, “The First World War: the Aftermath, The Years Following the End of the War Were Marked by More Wars, Political Upheaval and Deep Social Change,” *Irish Times*, April 24, 2018; Steven Mintz, “Historical Context: The Global Effect of World War I,” *History Now* (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History), undated, accessed April 16, 2020; Margaret MacMillan, “World War I: The War That Changed Everything,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2014; Steven Erlanger, “The War to End All Wars? Hardly. But It Did Change Them Forever,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2014; Jay Winter, “How the Great War Shaped the World,” *Atlantic*, World War I issue (September 29, 2014); Kathleen Haley, “100 Years after WWI: The Lasting Impacts of the Great War,” *Media, Law & Policy* (Syracuse University), July 28, 2014; “Aftermath of World War I,” Wikipedia, updated April 11, 2020, accessed April 16, 2020.

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.

U.S. Defense Strategy, Defense Budget, and Military Operations

Particularly during the earlier months of the pandemic, some observers focused on the question of whether large federal expenditures made in response to the domestic U.S. economic effects of the pandemic, and the impact of these expenditures 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 additionally focused on the question of whether responding to such increased constraints would (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 focused on the question of whether the pandemic provided 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 focused on how non-state actors such as international terrorist and criminal organizations were 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 the Pandemic

Particularly during the earlier months of the pandemic, some observers focused on whether responding to the pandemic was affecting the time and resources that U.S. leaders and agencies could devote to addressing other international issues of concern to the United States that predated but continued to exist in parallel with the pandemic. In the earlier months of 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 was distracting the U.S. government from other concerns or reducing U.S. capacity for responding to any such challenges.

Role of Congress

In the earlier months of the pandemic, a few observers focused on the issue of how the pandemic had affected Congress's activities for conducting oversight of the Administration's foreign policy actions.

Appendices with CRS Reports and Additional Writings

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:

- Has the pandemic change the international security environment, and if so, in what ways? What insight into that question, if any, can be provided by past major world events such as World Wars I and II and the 1918 influenza pandemic?
- How should the United States respond to changes in the international security environment that may have been caused by the pandemic?
- What has the pandemic demonstrated 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 did the Administration develop to respond to changes in the international security environment that may have been caused by the pandemic? Did Congress have sufficient visibility into these actions? Were these actions appropriate and sufficient? What metrics should Congress use to assess them?
- What implications, if any, do changes in the international security environment that may have been caused by the pandemic have for the role of Congress in setting and overseeing the execution of U.S. foreign and defense policy, or 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:⁸

- CRS Insight IN11198, *Bolivia's October 2020 General Elections*, 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 IF11532, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact in Africa*, coordinated by Alexis Arieff.
- CRS Report R46209, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic: CRS Experts*, by Matthew B. Barry. (Includes a section listing CRS experts on international response activities relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.)
- CRS Report R46354, *COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)*, by Susan V. Lawrence.
- CRS Insight IN11496, *COVID-19 and Emerging Global Patterns of Financial Crime*, by Liana W. Rosen.
- 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 In Focus IF11575, *COVID-19 and Global Food Security: Issues for Congress*, by Alyssa R. Casey 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 IN11279, *COVID-19 and U.S. Iran Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.
- CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10424, *COVID-19: An Overview of Trade-Related Measures to Address Access to Medical Goods*, by Nina M. Hart.
- CRS Report R46633, *COVID-19 Vaccines: Global Health Issues*, coordinated by Sara M. Tharakan.
- CRS Report R46304, *COVID-19: China Medical Supply Chains and Broader Trade Issues*, coordinated by Karen M. Sutter.
- CRS Insight IN11387, *COVID-19: Defense Production Act (DPA) Developments and Issues for Congress*, by Michael H. Cecire and 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.

⁸ 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 IN11280, *COVID-19: Industrial Mobilization and Defense Production Act (DPA) Implementation*, by Michael H. Cecire and Heidi M. Peters.
- CRS Insight IN11481, *COVID-19 International Responses: Resources for Comparison with U.S. Policies*, by Hannah Fischer and Sara M. Tharakan.
- CRS Insight IN11583, *COVID-19 International Responses: Resources for the 117th Congress*, by Hannah Fischer and Sara M. Tharakan.
- CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10436, *COVID-19: International Trade and Access to Pharmaceutical Products*, by Nina M. Hart.
- CRS In Focus IF11525, *COVID-19: National Security and Defense Strategy*, by Kathleen J. McInnis.
- CRS Video WVB00330, *COVID-19 Public Health Series: Global Health and Development*, by Sara M. Tharakan et al.
- CRS Insight IN11435, *COVID-19-Related Suspension of Nonimmigrant Entry*, by Jill H. Wilson.
- CRS Report R46342, *COVID-19: Role of the International Financial Institutions*, by Rebecca M. Nelson and Martin A. Weiss.
- CRS Insight IN11273, *COVID-19: The Basics of Domestic Defense Response*, coordinated by Michael J. Vassalotti.
- CRS In Focus IF11434, *COVID-19: U.S.-China Economic Considerations*, by Karen M. Sutter and Michael D. Sutherland.
- CRS Insight IN11470, *Defense Production Act (DPA): Recent Developments in Response to COVID-19*, by Michael H. Cecire and Heidi M. Peters.
- 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 Legal Sidebar LSB10467, *Foreign Sovereign Immunity and COVID-19 Lawsuits Against China*, by Jennifer K. Elsea.
- CRS Insight IN11493, *Global Economic Growth Forecasts: Impact of COVID-19*, by James K. Jackson.
- CRS Report R46430, *Global Democracy and Human Rights Impacts of COVID-19: In Brief*, coordinated by Michael A. Weber.
- 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 IF11796, *Global COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution*, coordinated by Sara M. Tharakan.
- CRS Report R46270, *Global Economic Effects of COVID-19: Overview*, by James K. Jackson.
- CRS Video WVB00380, *Impact of COVID-19 on Health Systems in Africa: A Dialogue with Experts*, by Tiaji Salaam-Blyther.
- CRS In Focus IF11537, *Intelligence Community Support to Pandemic Preparedness and Response*, by Michael E. DeVine.

- CRS Insight IN11732, *International COVID-19 Data and Vaccine Distribution: Selected Resources*, by Hannah Fischer.
- CRS In Focus IF11581, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19*, by Mark P. Sullivan et al.
- CRS Insight IN11535, *Mexican Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations amid COVID-19*, by June S. Beittel and Liana W. Rosen.
- CRS Insight IN11619, *New COVID-19 Defense Production Act (DPA) Actions: Implementation Considerations*, by Michael H. Cecire, Nina M. Hart, and Heidi M. Peters.
- CRS Insight IN11593, *New Presidential Directives on the Defense Production Act (DPA) and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, by Michael H. Cecire and Heidi M. Peters.
- CRS Report R46319, *Novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19): Q&A on Global Implications and Responses*, coordinated by Tiaji Salaam-Blyther.
- CRS In Focus IF11822, *Origins of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, coordinated by Tiaji Salaam-Blyther.
- CRS In Focus IF11480, *Overview: The Department of Defense and COVID-19*, coordinated by Kathleen J. McInnis.
- CRS In Focus IF11858, *Potential WTO TRIPS Waiver and COVID-19*, by Shayerah I. Akhtar and Ian F. Fergusson.
- CRS Insight IN11662, *Potential WTO TRIPS Waiver and COVID-19*, by Shayerah I. Akhtar and Ian F. Fergusson.
- CRS Insight IN11365, *President Trump Criticizes VOA Coverage of China's COVID-19 Response*, by Thomas Lum and Matthew C. Weed.
- CRS In Focus IF11880, *Sovereign Debt and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, by Martin A. Weiss.
- CRS Insight IN11231, *The Defense Production Act (DPA) and COVID-19: Key Authorities and Policy Considerations*, by Michael H. Cecire and Heidi M. Peters.
- CRS Insight IN11337, *The Defense Production Act (DPA) and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Recent Developments and Policy Considerations*, by Michael H. Cecire and Heidi M. Peters.
- CRS In Focus IF12013, *The U.S. Government's Role in Domestic and Global COVID-19 Vaccine Supply and Distribution: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Sara M. Tharakan and Taylor R. Wyatt.
- 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 Insight IN11325, *U.S. Travel and Tourism and COVID-19*, by Michaela D. Platzer.
- CRS In Focus IF11494, *Wildlife Trade, COVID-19, and Other Zoonotic Diseases*, by Pervaze A. Sheikh and Katarina C. O'Regan.

- CRS Report R47231, *World Trade Organization: “TRIPS Waiver” for COVID-19 Vaccines*, by Shayerah I. Akhtar.
- CRS In Focus IF11513, *WTO: 12th Ministerial, COVID-19, and Ongoing Issues*, by Cathleen D. Cimino-Isaacs and Rachel F. Fefer.

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 most 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.

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