When the only certainty is uncertainty

LI Jialin. International Department of Shandong Experimental High School

DOI: 10.47297/wspceWSP2516-251906.20210501

Future always hits us something like sleep. I mean, if we try to get it too hard, we won’t.

The only thing that is certain about the world is uncertainty. For those of us who have just experienced 2020, we may better appreciate the meaning of this statement.

We have had many predictions and expectations when it comes to the international political situation. But the facts do not always seem to test the validity of our so-called rational models.

We have predicted freedom and democracy, and the German magazine Der Spiegel has argued that If China wants to eradicate this new coronavirus, the remedy is not some Western vaccine or Chinese herbal medicine, but freedom and democracy. But in the face of the challenge of this coronavirus, the Chinese government, once deeply criticized by the West, has achieved the most effective control and counterattack. The United States has fought against authoritarian states - Japan and Germany during World War II, and North Korea and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. However, in the early stages of the fight against this disease, authoritarian regimes always had the upper hand, and they are able to dictate to society as a whole from the top down (Lachapelle, 2020). At the same time, the United States has not done as well as it could have in fighting this epidemic. Of course, it is not that democracy and freedom are inferior directions of development - after all, South Korea, Japan, and New Zealand have done much better than the United States - but we should not use these two concepts as a template to explore the problem in a general way. Once there was a trend denying the rationality of government intervention and just emphasizes the total withdrawal of government from the mar-
When the only certainty is uncertainty

ket. Under the influence of this trend, European countries have adopted “small government, big market, big society” as the guiding principle of governance. However, after the spread of the epidemic to Europe, European countries generally had insufficient government authority, insufficient decision-making power, and ineffective actions, and the government’s performance in distributing supplies and controlling border personnel was unsatisfactory. In addition, the “herd immunity” strategy proposed by British politicians under the influence of neoliberal views has also been criticized. As the risks of too little government intervention are revealed, there are growing calls for more government intervention in the UK and in many European countries (Haug, 2020).

We once believed in the closeness of the relationship between Europe and the United States. However, some EU leaders are now proposing to build an EU without U.S. support and to form their own “European army” to deal with possible mishaps. In the wake of the epidemic, the estrangement between Europe and the United States has increased again (Wall, Stephen, 2020). Immediately after the epidemic, the United States announced the closure of borders to travelers from many EU countries, including Italy, during which there was also a forced interception of European countries to fight the “epidemic” supplies, an act that German officials called “modern piracy. A German media report said that Europe in need of U.S.
support to fight the "epidemic" when Trump is trying to attract German scientists to the United States to engage in scientific research activities with high funding, and plans to buy the German pharmaceutical companies and the exclusive rights to the scientific research results related to the epidemic. This move has aroused strong dissatisfaction among German officials (Briond, Joshua, 2020). Some European media commented that the pneumonia outbreak crisis has shown a larger shift in global political relations, and for Europe, the U.S. response has been frustrating.

We have sought and hoped for openness, democracy and peace in the Middle East, but a 30% drop in global energy demand due to this epidemic in 2020, coupled with a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia in March 2020, led to continued low international oil prices.


Lagging development had been a major source of unrest in the Middle East from 2011 to 2019. Now the international oil prices, at a new low level, have made the Middle East unable to make ends meet. Meanwhile, many leaders are even heading towards the path of repression, such as Egypt’s Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, who even blocked the media and crushed civil society. In addition, the outbreak of the
COVID-19 virus will further weaken the image and prestige of the Middle East governments in the hearts of the people, and the unrest will be more difficult to be resolved. At the same time, geopolitical competition has never been more intense. Turkey, Iran, Israel and other non-Arab countries are competing for regional dominance. At present, Turkey is involved in almost all regional hotspots and conflicts in the Middle East; Iran is gradually expanding its regional influence; and Israel is trying to break up rival states. The geopolitical competition has led to the emergence of “low-intensity conflicts” in the Middle East and a certain degree of jungle politics (Kaldor, Mary, and Saskia Sassen, 2020).

We have judged that the basis of international cooperation lies in the game and balance of interests between different countries, but beyond the issue of global climate change, the concept of the community of human destiny has been strengthened again by the coronavirus, and thus a new trend in international relations has emerged: science diplomacy. The role of science and science diplomacy is exemplified by the fact that governments have sought advice from the scientific community more frequently than ever before since the outbreak of this coronavirus. Stanley Maphosa, manager of international and national liaison for the South African Academy of Sciences, suggested that there is a need to improve the existing system of scientific institutions and to fill some local gaps in scientific institutions. At the same time, countries around the world should integrate science into their national and foreign policy systems in the future.

Pierre-Bruno Ruffini, professor of economics at the University of Le Havre, France, claimed that the epidemic is a powerful example of science diplomacy because it raises questions about both the key words science and diplomacy. On the scientific side, there is uncertainty about the origin of the virus, the long-term effects of infection on human health, and the effectiveness of vaccines; on the diplomatic side, there is uncertainty about the impact of the epidemic at the global level and how to combat this global threat with collective global action. The more this happens, the stronger the correlation between the fight against the epidemic and science diplomacy.

And in such a paradigm, global interests will to some extent reconcile individual national interests and therefore more or less challenge the notion of national
sovereignty, such as the WTO panel that was only recently allowed into China to investigate the virus after a long period of resistance. This is also a critical moment for global cooperation. This pandemic demonstrates that the major challenges facing all of our countries, including climate change, cannot be addressed by any country alone. We need regions and countries to work together to find pragmatic solutions.

We have had a strong belief in the pace of globalization, but the layout of the global supply chain is changing dramatically after the epidemic, with a much stronger trend toward reverse globalization from the industry chain. The short-term adjustment of the global industrial chain is extremely difficult and stressful (Bui, 2020).

After the end of the Cold War, the developed Western countries, led by the U. S. and Europe, believed that there were no more rivals in politics and institutions, and only the problem of promoting economic development remained globally, and believed that with the development of economic globalization, other political and religious issues could be assimilated by the economic tide. But such inferences are now seen to be problematic.

The problems exposed in the process of economic globalization are mainly the transfer out of low-end manufacturing, which has increased the gap between the rich and the poor in developed countries. Globalization has not brought as much benefit to the low and middle income people in developed countries as it has to the people in developing countries. This has led to the intensification of internal conflicts in the U.S. and Western countries, resulting in the concentration of black swan phenomena such as Britain’s “Brexit”, especially the direct competition between China and the U.S., which has led the U.S. to the pace of reverse globalization.

The prevention and control of the epidemic has also deepened our understanding of this counter-globalization. The prevention and control of the epidemic is conducted on a national basis, similar to a state of emergency in times of war, and can disregard the rules of contract in economic transactions. As a result, there are a large number of incidents of interception of epidemic prevention materials from
other countries, and even in the United States, there is the phenomenon of the federal government withholding relief materials from other states, which triggers a new understanding of government and sovereignty among countries (Luff, Jennifer, 2020). In the wake of the epidemic, countries need to control and distribute strategic materials to protect the basic interests of their people, so after the epidemic, countries will reflect and consider their future supply of strategic materials, at least the hidden pain and warning brought to governments and people by this epidemic will last for a longer period of time.

In this state, it will be the first choice of each country to control its own production capacity of core strategic materials, shorten the length of the supply chain, and lay out the supply chain in a regionalized manner. Even if such a layout is detrimental to economic efficiency, the supply chain risk is relatively reduced, which is conducive to the control of the country, so the practice of reverse globalization will be understood and recognized by the people of the country. Whether you choose to shift the supply chain to the domestic or decentralize the deployment of a country’s supply chain, the country is still moving closer to closure. Such closure is not only due to risk considerations, but also stems from political pressure from some companies.

In addition, the epidemic may bring new political pressure to some large companies, such as some U.S. manufacturing companies that were originally dependent on overseas supplies of some key components, but are now shifting to a greater reliance on domestic supplies in order to raise wages for U.S. workers and restore labor force participation (Donthu, Naveen, and Anders Gustafsson). The supply chain is shifted to domestic or, the country that originally provided cheap labor faces the risk of high unemployment, and when one country cannot benefit from another country’s cheap labor market, it may directly restrict the treatment originally given to another country such as high-tech intellectual property rights. In short, it is the trend of reverse globalization.

Of course, international exchange will not die out in the future, but it is likely to become more regionalized and virtualized.

The pandemic has plunged both the supply and demand sides into crisis, caus-
ing the worst recession in the global economy in over 100 years. Economist Ken-
neth Rogoff warns that everything depends on how long the epidemic will last, and
the epidemic, if prolonged, will surely be the source of all financial crises.

In the geopolitics aspect, we have predicted the deepening of European union,
yet the epidemic is reshaping European national subjectivity. Since the end of
World War II, there has always been a game in Europe between two forces repre-
senting national sovereignty and representing the interests of capital. As the latter
increasingly prevailed, breaking sovereign national borders and promoting the free
flow of capital became the new theme of Europe, which started the integration pro-
cess of driving economic integration with monetary integration and promoting po-
itical integration with economic integration (Tilly, 1992). In recent years, the out-
break of the European debt crisis, the European refugee crisis and the frequent ter-
rorist attacks have led to a rapid rise in Euroscepticism. The role of the EU in this
pneumonia epidemic is quite criticized. On the one hand, the EU facilitates the free
movement of people and goods between member states, resulting in the prevention
and control of the epidemic becoming extraordinarily difficult to cope with the
trend of European geopolitics and China in the post-epidemic era. On the other
hand, as a super-sovereign union of states, the EU has prompted the upward shift
of central government power in European countries, but failed to play an effective
role in epidemic prevention and control in member states due to factors such as
lack of health policy coordination among EU member states (Duarte, 2020). The
failure of EU emergency management shows that sovereign states are still the ba-
sic element in the current international political ecology. Europe, where the mood
of leaving the EU was originally strong, may face a new round of anti-European
trend in the post-epidemic era.

On the other hand. We had looked at Europe and the United States, but after
the epidemic, we see the rise of Asia and the further manifestation of geopolitical
power. The ten ASEAN (ASEAN) countries and Australia, China, Japan, New Zea-
land and South Korea reached the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
Agreement (RCEP). Asia is now the world’s number one manufacturing center.
And by 2030, Asia will certainly be the world’s technology center as well. This is
the role that Asia will play in the future.

https://seasia.co/2020/05/03/10-countries-with-the-highest-industrial-outputs-in-asia

As Marx conveyed to us in Das Kapital, any social science considers itself to be a true science, but it starts from empirical facts and places social reality in a logical framework of a set of categories and related concepts; if something goes wrong with a social system, it is considered to have deviated from the rational logical system it is thought to have constructed, and therefore argues loudly about what went wrong and tries to suggest ways to correct it (Gerring, 2001).

Logic is lovely and seems to give us a sense of security, but often it is not credible. We should cleanse the categories and return to the facts themselves. So what exactly are facts?

The fact is that social power, as an objective presence of gravity in general, can lead to social fragmentation in today’s capitalist phase of development, and exacerbate struggles and conflicts that are absolutely irrational and unpredictable.

And if the global market is damaged after the epidemic and the space for capital proliferation is further compressed, perhaps we will move to the next stage of human civilization, communism. Of course this will take a long time, and until then we will have to continue to experience uncertainty.

“Uncertainty is the only certainty there is,” Paulos said. “And knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security.”
The Christian worldview tells us that the lifespan of a nation, of a civilization, is really just a moment (Lewis, 2001), and how we can achieve peace and eternity in the midst of the fleeting and the ever-changing may be precisely the time to give up our arrogance, our mere arrogance, and to do our job in the spirit of the most basic moral law.

After the epidemic, global political relations will be fragmented, but to what extent, how, and what the fragmentation will look like, we cannot know.

We as individuals and nations as countries are really very small, and no one can live completely independently on his or her own. We have to accept our finiteness to be able to break that fear.

Epictetus, a Roman slave, said this: We must know in this life what we can do, and we can only do what we can do within our capacity. We stay optimistic about what we cannot change; we stay cautious about what we can control.

When we say tomorrow will be better, we’re really just lying to myself. Tomorrow is not necessarily better, because for many people, you put your hope in tomorrow and you only dash it one hope at a time. And so you will go to complete nihilism.

We don’t have the ability to control tomorrow, we can only live today.

References


