



Will Trump's Pandemic Response Help or Harm U.S. Power?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Emma Ashford: Good morning, Matt! How is social distancing treating you? I started stress-baking last night, so I'm glad to have this discussion as a distraction.

Matthew Kroenig: I've been avoiding the grocery store, and we are down to frozen vegetables and leftover chicken. But, yes, I always look forward to our discussions.

EA: Well at least we're still in touch over the internet, unlike Joe Biden, who appears to have just disappeared since he essentially clinched the Democratic nomination. Any idea what's going on there?

MK: It is amazing. You could almost forget it's an election year. But we are in crisis mode with everyone in lockdown and people fearing for their own lives and the lives of loved ones. Electioneering in these conditions would be unseemly. Or do you think Biden should be using this crisis as an opportunity to contrast himself with President Trump?

EA: I'm not a huge Biden fan, and it may be in his interest to just sit back and wait. But I have to admit, it would be nice to see some kind of leadership from anyone during this crisis.

I can't believe how badly the White House is botching this situation. More Americans have now died of the coronavirus than died on 9/11. It sort of makes a mockery of the amount of lives and money the country wasted on the global war on terror in the last two decades.

MK: Well, I think we were right to take necessary steps to prevent another major terrorist attack on U.S. soil. And, despite a slow start, the U.S. government is now putting in place a more comprehensive response to the coronavirus. In the wake of 9/11 and now with COVID-19, we've seen rally-around-the-flag effects with Donald Trump's approval ratings hitting record highs in recent days. So, I don't think this is necessarily a winning election issue for Biden.

EA: Rally-around-the-flag effects are pretty transitory. And approval ratings today are pretty much meaningless when it comes to November. I think we're about to see a lot more death and destruction in the coming months, unfortunately.

MK: There is another 9/11 comparison that doesn't hold up: This wasn't an intelligence failure. The intelligence community has been warning about a possible pandemic since the early 2000s, and the Dark Winter simulation showed that the United States and its health system were

unprepared for a biological attack. (Whether inflicted by man or nature, the effects of a pandemic are pretty much the same.)

EA: True, but that raises the question of what an intelligence failure is. Yes, the intelligence community did predict a pandemic. The National Security Council was pushing for a stronger response to the coronavirus in January and February. The president ignored them, for fear of spooking the markets. That's a massive governmental failure, and one that Donald Trump bears full responsibility for. If there are 100,000 to 200,000 deaths, they're on him.

MK: In hindsight, the government response was too slow. But it wasn't initially obvious that the solution was to shut down the entire country. During the SARS pandemic in 2003, the United States did very little, and it turned out to be the right move. Trump was even criticized for restricting air traffic from China back in January. Sure it's been a patchwork and halting approach, but I prefer that to the Chinese government welding people inside their homes.

EA: That argument has been driving me crazy. There's a middle ground between the China option and nothing. Even if we'd just started sourcing medical equipment and telling people to wear masks in February, we'd be in a much better position today.

But maybe we should get back to discussing foreign policy?

MK: Good idea. With all of the focus on pandemics, it was nice to get a bit of good news this week. NATO expanded to include North Macedonia. This will strengthen the most successful alliance in history and reinforce the message to Russia that it will not be granted a veto over the foreign and defense policies of small European states.

Moscow tried to keep North Macedonia out of NATO by intervening in a referendum there in 2018, but this week's news demonstrates that Russia's interference has failed. This also challenges the notion that the Trump administration is anti-NATO; after Montenegro, North Macedonia was the second country to join the alliance under his watch.

EA: I'm so grateful that the world-renowned military might of North Macedonia is here for us if Russia or China ever decides to start a war!

This is just silly, Matt. North Macedonia adds no strategic value to the NATO alliance, though at least it doesn't come with big strategic risks like Georgia or Ukraine. And sure, it's nice that Russia can't veto North Macedonian foreign policy. But I don't see why it's in our interest to carry the burden of defense for North Macedonia just to annoy Russia.

Why is it in U.S. interests to constantly expand NATO?

MK: I see it as part of the broader U.S. and allied project since 1945 of creating and defending a U.S.-led, rules-based system. According to almost any objective measure, the world is more peaceful, prosperous, and free than in 1945, and that is due in large part to this system.

EA: I'd agree with you if we're talking about the Cold War. But in the post-Cold War era, NATO expansion has weakened the security of existing members, riled up Russia, and left us with an alliance that's too unwieldy to defend. We've expanded almost to Russia's borders, so it's no surprise that Moscow feels threatened.

Russia's choices to invade Georgia and Ukraine were in many ways a response to the prospect of NATO membership for these states. And NATO's new members bring territory that we need to

defend but rarely add any military strength to the alliance. NATO needs reform, not further expansion.

MK: NATO expansion moved the central front in Europe 750 miles east from Berlin to Kyiv. That strengthened the security of existing members—Germany is certainly safer now than it was in the 1980s. And at a time when many signs point to a weakening of this order, it's nice to see a data point in the other direction.

EA: Germany is safer than it was in the 1980s because the Soviet Union is gone! And despite all the talk about NATO spreading Western values, the results haven't been good. Hungary and Poland weren't consolidated democracies when they joined, and now they're moving backward. Look at what happened in Hungary this week, for goodness' sake. It's now an autocracy, and there's no legal mechanism to remove it from NATO.

MK: I wouldn't want to kick Hungary out of NATO. Leaders should have frank discussions behind closed doors about democratic backsliding, but the United States should aim to keep our friends as our friends, especially at a time when Russia and China are actively aiming to weaken our alliances in Europe and elsewhere.

EA: Let me ask you a blunt question: What is it that we're trying to do with these alliances? Is NATO about protecting Western values and democracy? Or is it a collective security arrangement? You mention Russia and China, but neither is a threat on the order of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

A major outbreak and looming recession in the United States has transformed the 2020 campaign—and could have major consequences for the future of great power politics.

MK: I disagree. China could be a greater threat than the Soviet Union. This is the first time in a century that the United States has faced a rival with greater than 40 percent of U.S. GDP. We can't simply outspend China like we did with the Soviets.

But to answer your question on alliances, the United States has an interest in preventing hostile, autocratic states from dominating important geopolitical regions. We defend against Russia and China in Europe and Asia so we don't have to do it here.

Security and stability promote prosperity in Europe and Asia that makes Americans richer. And it advances freedom and good governance globally, which helps to protect American democracy at home.

Let me ask you a blunt question: Do you think the average American would be better off if we granted Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping autocratic spheres of influence in their regions? And why would they stop there?

EA: Hang on. Russia and China already have de facto spheres of influence. If alliances advance freedom and good governance, then why is democracy in decline for the 14th year in a row? Why do we have at least two NATO members, Hungary and Turkey, backsliding into autocracy? And, though this is more speculative, I have to wonder if the way things are going with tariffs and trade wars it's possible that in a few more years we won't even be able to make the economic prosperity argument about alliances anymore.

MK: Russia has a de facto sphere of influence over a couple of small, former-Soviet states, but Putin would prefer that it include much of Europe. Actions like North Macedonia's accession to NATO are valuable defenses against Russian expansionism.

The shine has come off the American model in the eyes of many people around the world, and lots of would-be autocrats find China's authoritarian state-led capitalist system appealing. I agree that trade wars with allies do not make sense when it is unfair Chinese practices that are the major threat to the global trading system. The solution to these problems is more, not less, U.S. global engagement.

EA: It's kind of hard to argue that the United States has been less engaged in recent years. There are more U.S. troops stationed in the Middle East—by an order of magnitude—than in 1989. NATO has expanded from 16 to 30 countries in less than 30 years. And U.S. troops are fighting terrorism on at least three continents.

The last few weeks have shown that Washington is perfectly able to hurt other states, through military force and sanctions. Just look at the impact of our sanctions on Iran's health crisis today. But we're not very good at helping or cooperating.

China and Russia seem to have been doing a better job of sending aid to our alliance partners than we have. China sent masks, medical equipment, and experts to Italy when other EU states weren't helping. And a cargo plane of Russian aid landed this week at JFK in New York. Sure, that's a PR stunt, but it's an effective one.

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MK: Ask governments in Poland and Japan if we help or cooperate, especially on defense. Sure, the United States should have had more robust diplomatic engagement with Europe to deal with the pandemic, maybe through the creation of a Countering Coronavirus Coalition. Fortunately, the autocrats have largely bungled their attempts to fill the vacuum, with promises of Chinese aid turning into Chinese companies profiteering by selling faulty medical equipment to Europe. Several countries have now rejected and returned dud coronavirus testing kits.

EA: Thank goodness we can rely on the incompetence of autocrats.

Look, I'm not saying that all alliances are useless. But the current U.S. approach is to keep all the old alliances, keep expanding NATO, and make a bunch of new alliances. There is no coherent theory of how it's actually supposed to improve the security of existing members. If NATO was truly concerned about autocracy, Washington would push to change the rules to expel Hungary. And if it's about defense, NATO wouldn't be admitting North Macedonia. You can't keep doing it all.

MK: I still maintain that these alliances advance U.S. interests. But we disagree, and I'm sure we'll revisit it soon. For now, let's turn back to something upon which we apparently agree: the incompetence of autocrats.

EA: They're not totally incompetent, though. There has been at least some PR success for China in Europe. Countries like Serbia are cozying up to China. And Washington's major European allies are now engaged in sanctions-busting with Iran through Instex, a mechanism that allows trade with Iran through barter while protecting European companies from U.S. sanctions.

MK: Calls from within Europe and the United States to lift sanctions on Iran for humanitarian reasons are misguided. If Tehran really cares about the well-being of its people, it can receive sanctions relief any time by simply dismantling its illegal nuclear and missile programs and ceasing its support for terrorism.

EA: And I'd like the ayatollah to bring me a pet unicorn, but it's not going to happen! If we don't lift some sanctions and help Iran get a handle on its coronavirus outbreak, it could spiral out of control and be far worse for the West than the risk of the Iranian government getting a few more dollars.

MK: The United States has always allowed a humanitarian and medical exception to its sanctions policy, and it is fine with Europe's Instex transactions because they will be used solely for that purpose. I don't see how giving the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps more resources helps combat the coronavirus. Many calling for the lifting of sanctions are simply opposed to Trump's maximum pressure strategy.

EA: I don't think any of these developments are particularly problematic for U.S. foreign policy in general. But they're self-inflicted wounds. If the Trump administration hadn't dialed up sanctions on Iran against European wishes, Instex wouldn't exist. If the White House had been more forthcoming with aid, China wouldn't have had this opening. The myopic focus on military alliances undermines U.S. diplomatic ties—and actually weakens American security.

MK: Autocrats have some strengths, but as I argue in my new book out this week ([final plug I promise](#)) they are more than outweighed by their weaknesses. Already it's clear that Russia and China's disaster diplomacy has proved to be less effective and the medical equipment more defective than some Western observers predicted.

EA: But you could make the same argument about the United States. America has so many sources of strength, from the private companies developing coronavirus test kits to the people sewing masks at home. But the country's weaknesses are increasingly visible: a top-heavy, incompetent administration and a focus on military solutions to every problem. This administration pushed a \$700 billion military budget, while cutting the office devoted to pandemic preparedness.

MK: The process is slow and messy, but generally the end result is more considered and effective than dictates from the Politburo. Democracies, such as Taiwan, that were hit hard by SARS learned their lesson and adapted to be ready for the coronavirus. I suspect these are the same conclusions we will draw about the U.S. coronavirus response years from now.

EA: Right! Democracy is messy. So is the free market. But it's still better than anything else. I just wish all America's so-called allies agreed with us, rather than ushering in a new era of dictatorial rule in Central Europe.

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