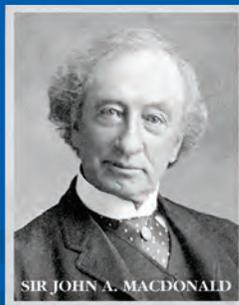
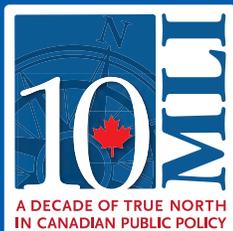


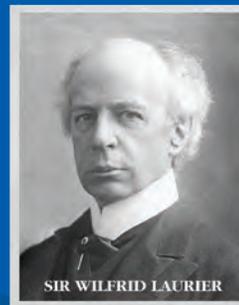
After the Pandemic

**Confronting a New Geo-Strategic
Environment in the Post-COVID-19 Era**

Richard Shimooka



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Executive Summary

The aftermath of COVID-19 will invariably produce a new geo-strategic environment. To prepare for it, policy-makers in Canada and elsewhere need to understand the interaction between current political, strategic, and military trends and the consequences of the pandemic. This paper argues the most influential will be the economic and military dimensions of the post-COVID-19 reality.

The pandemic coincided with a fundamental realignment in defence and foreign relations, including resurgent nationalism, the rise of China as a major power, and the fraying of Cold War alliances and multilateral organizations. Previously, the US, Canada, and their Asian and European allies had remarkably cohesive national interests. However, the rules-based economic system has come under stress as several states challenge it for their perceived gain. Populism and nationalism have upended the existing political consensus, particularly in foreign policy. In international trade, bilateral and mega-regional trade groups have emerged. Multilateral political and security bodies, such as NATO and the EU, are facing questions over their relevance and durability. The withdrawal of key parties from arms control treaties and reduction in defensive alliances all contribute to a growing instability in international relations. All this is happening against the backdrop of a renewed great power competition between the US and China (and, less so, Russia).

A clear manifestation of this emerging era of global power competition is evident in the military sphere. A dramatic modernization effort has been undertaken by major military powers in the past decade, resulting in a reorientation toward conventional, high-intensity conflict between near-peer adversaries. New technologies have increased the lethality and potential ways to use force, which is both an opportunity and threat to modern militaries. The significant increase in defence spending in gross terms, with China accounting for a large proportion of the growth, testifies to an ongoing arms race.

In short, international relations have become less stable and predictable, exacerbated by changes in the military balance and due to the growing re-

assertion of national interests in the international system. This is likely to continue or even accelerate in the post-COVID-19 world.

The pandemic will also have a profound impact on global economics, including second- and third-order effects concerning defence and security. The EU, US, and Canada are undertaking massive economic stimulus programs in response to the pandemic. The increase in their debt loads and other challenges, be it demographics, political polarization, or already high debt levels, coupled with the existing disinterest in Western societies toward foreign involvement, will limit their ability to assume a leadership role internationally and conduct foreign policy for the foreseeable future. Russia and China also face significant economic challenges. They, however, are likely to find more opportunities to pursue their national interests.

Russia has a long-standing interest in undermining the existing international order and was quick to spread pandemic-related propaganda against Western states. China similarly has sought to exploit the pandemic to enhance its international position and started to pursue aggressive diplomacy, which may signal a permanent shift to China's more assertive foreign policy posture.

“ *Foreign and defence policy may serve as an area of greater political agreement among Western democracies.* ”

One particular area of concern is the effect on military modernization trends. Several states are already planning to curtail defence spending in response to the pandemic's grievous economic damage. When defence spending trends in the United States and its allies are considered vis-à-vis China, it is likely that the gap in military capability between the two parties will narrow. Conflicts between major powers could emerge in areas of regional instability and potential state collapse, where actors and their proxies may employ military capabilities to assert their interests.

In the face of the destructive forces of nationalism and populism, foreign and defence policy may serve as an area of greater political agreement among Western democracies. Reinforcing this agreement would create a bulwark against populist impulses in foreign policy and may be the first step to rebuild the relationships and multilateral groupings that have frayed over the

past decade. Greater coherence and consistency in government messaging is essential for successfully countering disinformation efforts. Governments should also resist the temptation to redirect defence budgets to prop up their fiscal balance sheets. China seems unlikely to curtail its spending significantly, while new technologies and doctrines have lowered the bar for the use of force and the lethality of existing force structures. With fewer resources to become available, there is no room for different parts of government to be working at cross-purposes; de-politicization is a must if states hope to adapt to the changing international environment.

Considering the difficult fiscal, political, and military situation we will face in the next decade, Western states have to make smart decisions on resources expended on security, defence, and foreign policy. Failing to do so could magnify the pandemic's consequences from a public health and economic crisis to a collapse of the Western position within the international system.

Sommaire

Immanquablement, un nouvel environnement géostratégique naîtra des suites de la COVID-19. Pour s'y préparer, les décideurs politiques au Canada et ailleurs doivent comprendre les interactions entre les tendances politiques, stratégiques et militaires actuelles et les conséquences de la pandémie. Selon cette étude, ce sont les forces économiques et militaires qui seront les plus influentes dans l'après-COVID 19.

La pandémie a coïncidé avec un réalignement fondamental de la défense et des relations extérieures, comme l'indiquent la résurgence des nationalismes, l'ascension de la Chine en tant que puissance majeure et l'affaiblissement des alliances de la Guerre froide et des organisations multilatérales. Précédemment, les États-Unis, le Canada et leurs alliés asiatiques et européens avaient fait preuve d'une remarquable cohésion en ce qui concerne leurs intérêts nationaux. Depuis, le système économique fondé sur des règles s'est trouvé en difficulté, contesté par plusieurs États sur la base de leur perception des gains réalisés; le populisme et le nationalisme ont ébranlé le consensus politique existant, tout particulièrement en matière de politique étrangère; divers groupes bilatéraux et méga-régionaux ont fait leur entrée dans le commerce international; les organisations politiques et de sécurité multilatérales comme l'OTAN et l'UE font maintenant face à une remise en question de leur pertinence et de leur pérennité; le retrait de partenaires clés des traités sur la maîtrise des armements et la décade des alliances militaires contribuent à accroître l'instabilité des relations internationales. Tout cela survient dans le contexte de la nouvelle concurrence de grande puissance entre les États-Unis et la Chine (et, à un moindre degré, la Russie).

Cette nouvelle ère de concurrence pour le pouvoir mondial apparaît claire-

ment dans la sphère militaire. Les grandes puissances militaires ont consenti des efforts de modernisation spectaculaires au cours de la dernière décennie, ce qui a favorisé les conflits conventionnels de forte intensité entre « quasi-pairs ». De nouvelles technologies ont accru la létalité et les moyens potentiels de recours à la force : à la fois un avantage et une menace pour les forces militaires modernes. Enfin, l'augmentation notable des dépenses de défense en termes bruts, proportionnellement plus importante en Chine, témoigne de la course actuelle aux armements.

En clair, les relations internationales sont devenues moins stables et prévisibles, exacerbées par les changements de l'équilibre militaire et la réaffirmation croissante des intérêts nationaux au sein du système international. Cette tendance devrait persister ou même s'accélérer dans l'après-COVID 19.

“ *La politique étrangère et de défense pourrait être le lieu d'un plus large consensus politique entre les démocraties occidentales.* ”

La pandémie aura également un profond impact sur l'économie mondiale, y compris de second et de troisième ordre en matière de défense et de sécurité. Pour y répondre, l'UE, les États-Unis et le Canada mettent en place des programmes de relance massifs. L'aggravation du fardeau fiscal et des défis à surmonter – sur le plan de la démographie, de la polarisation politique et de l'endettement déjà élevé – limitera, compte tenu du présent désintérêt de l'Occident pour l'intervention étrangère, la capacité de ces pays à jouer un rôle de premier plan à l'échelle internationale et à mettre en œuvre leur politique étrangère dans un avenir prévisible. D'importants défis économiques se poseront également pour la Russie et la Chine. Cependant, elles profiteront sans doute de plus d'occasions d'affirmer leurs intérêts nationaux.

La Russie, qui cherche depuis longtemps à saper l'ordre international existant, n'a pas tardé à diffuser de la propagande anti-occidentale centrée sur la pandémie. La pandémie a également été utilisée par la Chine pour renforcer sa position internationale. En outre, cette dernière a commencé à miser sur une diplomatie agressive, indice d'un changement permanent en faveur de sa politique étrangère très affirmée.

Les répercussions sur la modernisation militaire en cours préoccupent tout particulièrement. Plusieurs États envisagent déjà de réduire leurs dépenses

militaires en conséquence des graves dommages infligés à l'économie. Si l'on se fie aux tendances réciproques en matière de dépenses, l'écart sur le plan de la capacité militaire entre les États-Unis et ses alliés d'une part et la Chine d'autre part ne pourra que s'amenuiser. Des conflits entre les grandes puissances pourraient survenir dans certaines zones d'instabilité régionale ou à risque de subir la faillite de l'État, là où tant les acteurs que leurs mandataires peuvent recourir à l'arsenal militaire pour affirmer leurs intérêts.

Face aux forces destructrices du nationalisme et du populisme, la politique étrangère et de défense pourrait être le lieu d'un plus large consensus politique entre les démocraties occidentales. Le renforcement de ce consensus élèverait un rempart contre les impulsions populistes en politique étrangère et pourrait constituer la première étape vers la reconstruction des relations et des groupements multilatéraux qui se sont affaiblis au cours de la dernière décennie. Il est essentiel d'accentuer la cohérence et l'uniformité des messages gouvernementaux pour contrer la désinformation. Les gouvernements devraient également résister à la tentation de réduire leurs budgets de défense pour assainir leurs bilans budgétaires. Tandis que la Chine semble peu disposée à réduire ses dépenses, les nouvelles technologies et doctrines ont abaissé le seuil du recours à la force et la létalité des structures de forces existantes. Compte tenu de la baisse des ressources disponibles, aucun secteur gouvernemental ne peut travailler à contre-courant; la dépolitisation s'impose comme un incontournable pour permettre aux États de s'ajuster à l'évolution de l'environnement international.

Compte tenu de la difficile situation fiscale, politique et militaire qui les attend durant la décennie à venir, les États occidentaux doivent prendre des décisions avisées en ce qui concerne l'allocation des ressources à la sécurité, à la défense et à la politique extérieure. Dans le cas contraire, les conséquences de la pandémie risquent d'empirer, leur gravité allant d'une crise de santé publique et économique à un effondrement de la position occidentale au sein du système international.

“When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuban. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!”

– Lijian Zhao (2020), spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China

“Every place I go, every foreign minister that I talk to, they recognize what China has done to the world. I’m very confident that the world will look at China differently and engage with them fundamentally different than they did before this catastrophic disaster.”

– US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo
(Macias 2020)

Introduction

Over 10 months into the COVID-19 pandemic, there continues to be significant uncertainty as to its long-term consequences. Even the outcome of immediate public health fight against the pandemic remains clouded. Key questions include the effectiveness of public health measures to curb its spread, or various vaccines and treatments currently under trial. The answers to them will shape societies worldwide for the immediate future.

That said, it is possible to make some preliminary observations about the future strategic and political environment. The pandemic and its economic consequences have taken place during a fundamental realignment in defence and foreign relations, including the rise of China as a major global power, the fraying of Cold War alliances and multilateral organizations, as well as resurgent nationalism in many states. These international dynamics and core national interests are unlikely to change, and some trends – such

as Sino-American strategic competition – may even be accelerating. One area where these dynamics are particularly evident is in military affairs, where major powers are engaged in a large arms race. Its character has been heavily defined by emerging technologies, which have altered the military balance between states in significant ways.

Strategic planners, in Canada and elsewhere, need to better understand the interaction between these political, strategic, and military trends, as well as the emerging post-COVID-19 economic realities. Likely to be the most influential are the economic dimensions of the pandemic. Accumulation of large debts can have persistent and predictable impacts on a state's ability to undertake foreign relations, especially when considered with other fiscal measures. The military dimension similarly will be affected by economic, political, and social changes, which must be discussed. The final section will provide conclusions and suggestions for future action.

Political and Strategic Trends

For the past decade, the international system was undergoing several fundamental shifts that saw the fragmentation of longstanding political, economic, and military arrangements. Previously, the national interests of Western states, such as the US, Canada, and their Asian and European allies, were remarkably coherent. During the Cold War, they were largely based on maintaining the security of a rules-based, capitalist economic order, in the face of the growing threat posed by Communist states led by the USSR.

To advance these interests, a series of interlocking political, military, and economic bilateral relationships, alliances, and multilateral groupings were established. These included the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Economic Community (later the European Union (EU)), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Bretton Woods institutions. By the end of the Cold War, and into the 1990s, the promotion of liberal political values, such as freedom of expression, poverty reduction, and democracy promotion, became increasingly an important part of these states' interests. The international institutions transitioned to these new objectives as well.

The post-Cold War unipolar moment, as coined by the late Charles Krauthammer (1990), has seemingly given way to a renewed great power competition between the United States and China, and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The coherence of national interests among states has frayed, with many commentators questioning the relevance of the liberal international order (Daalder and Lindsay 2018; Maull 2019). This is evident in how the rules-based economic system has come under stress, as multiple states challenge its aspects

for their own perceived gain. The alliances and economic arrangements that had successfully prosecuted the Cold War have witnessed similar challenges, with many states questioning the security guarantees provided and their perceived value.

These trends have been driven in part by the growing assertiveness of national actors in international relations. In particular, populism and nationalism have emerged as powerful forces within nation-states, which has upended the existing political consensus, particularly with regards to foreign policy. Their growth is variously blamed on historic lows in public trust in governing institutions, declining economic prospects, and rapidly changing societies, among other causes (E. Jones 2019). Manifestations include President Trump's "America First" strategy, presidents Modi, Bolsonaro, and Duda of India, Brazil, and Poland, respectively, or the rise of the Five Star Movement in Italy. This is not limited to right-wing parties; many so-called progressive groups have questioned many of the pillars of the geo-strategic architecture, such as multilateral security alliances, military spending, and trade agreements (Sitaraman 2019; Nexon 2018).



*Populism and nationalism
have emerged as powerful
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One area where these disparate sides of the political spectrum have come together is economic policy. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, a general consensus emerged in many Western states surrounding tighter fiscal policies to reduce deficits, limiting role of government in the market and decreasing tariffs through trade agreements. However, the past decade has seen their repudiation, even among conservatives, who once viewed them as core tenets. Deficit spending, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, has ballooned. This extended well past the subsequent recession and recovery, becoming a tenet of economic policy for many states.

One area where these national changes have had a profound impact is in international trade and the rise of regional trade agreements (RTAs). Globalization has all but halted with the collapse of the Doha Round of trade talks. Instead, bilateral and mega-regional trade groups have emerged. There are several reasons for this shift in trade. The first is the broader political-economic interest. Bilateral agreements and RTAs were comparatively easier to negotiate, as they typically are more focused on comparative areas of shared economic interest; they have facilitated supply chain integration, which pro-

vided a strong incentive to successfully conclude agreements (Bown 2016). Second, the shift in trade relations is occurring in concert with changes in international relations. RTAs and bilateral economic relations are also being utilized to further reinforce political alliances among like-minded states. This includes ensuring the propagation of norms (Obama 2016) as well as helping to cement the existing ge-ostrategic architecture in these regions (Perlez 2015).

As noted above, multilateral political and security bodies have not been immune to these challenges. NATO and the European Union have been two pillars of the Euro-Atlantic security alliance, and both have faced significant challenges over the past decade, including questions over their durability in the face of external and internal challenges (Smith-Windsor 2020). This was no better illustrated than by President Trump's questioning whether NATO should come to the defence of Montenegro if it were attacked – seemingly undermining the core principle of collective defence in the *North Atlantic Treaty* (Wagner 2018).



Non-Western powers, most notably Russia and China, have also increasingly worked against the post-Cold War status quo.

Nationalist skepticism toward international entanglements has extended toward arms control treaties, such as the Conventional Forces Europe, Open Skies, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaties. Collectively they served an important role in stabilizing the international relations late in the Cold War era and in its immediate aftermath – by setting expectations between potential adversary states, controlling arms spending and potential for conflict, among other uses. While some of the utility of these arrangements had waned due to strategic and technological shifts, they arguably still retained some value into the present era.

In the case of the INF Treaty, the United States withdrew from the treaty, citing both Russian violation of its terms as well as a desire to develop systems to counter Chinese missile capabilities, the latter not being a party to the treaty (Sanger and Wong 2019). This enabled Russia to reintroduce an entire class of land-based intermediate-range cruise missile, such as the SSC-8, that improved its overall military capability against its adversaries. The withdrawal from these arms control treaties and diminution of defensive alliances all

contribute to a growing instability in international relations.

Non-Western powers, most notably Russia and China, have also increasingly worked against the post-Cold War status quo. Particularly troubling is their ability to implement destabilizing policies to achieve their policy ends. This includes usurping political systems through a mix of policy instruments – coercive economic measures, corruption, influence operations, active measures, and even direct intervention (see Conley et al. 2016, 2019). The Russian Federation has been particularly adept at weakening groups by identifying divisions within them, whether they be political, economic, or ethnic, and magnifying them. Nascent democratic systems are especially susceptible to some of these instruments, as their underdeveloped civil societies and political system can be exploited by other states. Indeed, these destabilizing policies have placed much of the progress achieved at the end of the Cold War surrounding human rights and political and economic development at risk.

“ *Beijing has worked deliberately to mould the international system in an even more ambitious way.* ”

As noted above, Russia has been a particularly active state in employing these measures, undertaking increasingly brazen efforts to undermine Western states and their interests. The most visible example was interfering in the 2016 US presidential election, as well as supporting other friendly right-wing political groups, such as *Front Nationale* (renamed *Rassemblement national* in 2018) in France or *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany (Polyakova et al. 2016). The Kremlin’s focus is not limited to state units: Similar efforts have been employed on multinational alliances or groups such as NATO and the EU, as well as subnational units, such as political parties or armed groups (ibid.). It has exploited areas of weakness by building relationships with political groups and non-state actors supportive of their aims, as shown by recent reports of bounties being placed on NATO and US soldiers in Afghanistan. This is also evident in Syria, where Russia cemented its regional position by protecting and stabilizing the Assad regime, to the detriment of other foreign actors.

These moves have been effective at challenging the existing security architecture, such as NATO, the EU, and other bilateral and multilateral relationships. In particular, the Kremlin has achieved some success identifying weaknesses among its adversaries and employing relatively inexpensive strategies to ex-

exploit them. The latter reflects the relatively weak economic position of the Russian Federation, which has a smaller GDP than Canada, and therefore must resort to these strategies to meet its foreign policy objectives. Many of its actions, however, are fraught with risk and have incurred significant political costs. For example, supporting covert efforts to undermine the Ukrainian government, including annexing Crimea in 2014, resulted in broad economic sanctions, which may have curtailed Russia's GDP growth by as much as 0.2 percent in each year since (CRS 2020).

China has not been as brazen as Russia in the use of military force to acquire territory, such as in Crimea. And it has so far refrained from undertaking the type of expeditionary military operations that Russia has employed in Ukraine and Syria, although China's military activities in the South China Sea and at the Sino-Indian border do bear at least some similarity. Yet, perhaps more importantly, Beijing has worked deliberately to mould the international system in an even more ambitious way.

China's primary objective has been to undermine the existing order, and replace it with one that is more aligned with its own interests and ambitions. There are two broad prongs to this effort. The first relates more to its immediate domestic sovereignty concerns. This includes aggressively asserting its control along its periphery, most notably related to pre-existing sovereign disputes around the South and East China Seas. Many of these moves are designed to work in concert with efforts to strengthen domestic stability, such as repressive efforts in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, as well as increasing draconian measures against political opponents.

China also has a more developed view of the international system it wishes to construct. It seeks to usurp the existing Euro-American-dominated international economic and political order, in order to build a new system that allows Beijing to better control and accrue power and wealth, while safeguarding its autocratic system.

A key part of this is the Belt and Road Initiative, a major effort to construct a broader economic network throughout Eurasia to rival the Euro-American-centred system. This includes investments in strategic infrastructure and key resources internationally. In addition, China has attempted to usurp existing multilateral structures as well as create parallel ones, in order to gain greater influence in these fora (Ikenberry and Lim 2017). Examples include establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (a counterweight to the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank) and such groups as the Boao Forum for Asia and the Beijing Xiangshan Forum (counterweights to the Davos Forum and the Shangri-La Dialogue, respectively), as well as its increasingly dominant role in the International Civil Aviation Organization, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Telecommunication Union, and other institutions (Feng 2016; Tung and Yang 2020). One fre-

quent objective is to diplomatically isolate Taiwan, by denying it membership in multilateral institutions.

Military Trends of the Emerging Multipolar Era

One of the clearest manifestations of this emerging era of global power competition is evident in the military sphere. The political and strategic environment that emerged over the past decade is the primary driver for this shift. It entails a reorientation toward conventional, high-intensity conflict between near-peer adversaries, such as between NATO and Russia or between the US and its allies and China, following nearly two decades of stabilization and counterinsurgency operations against asymmetric adversaries in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

“ *Technological advances are starting to affect force structures in a meaningful way.* ”

Over the decade, a dramatic modernization effort has been undertaken by major military powers, encompassing increases in funding, reorientations in force postures, and the fielding of new systems and capabilities. As noted earlier, the United States' withdrawal from the INF Treaty has permitted the US Army to develop a new series of long-range precision fire capabilities. These systems include conventional and hypersonic surface-to-surface missiles with ranges up to 1600 kilometres, which were in part designed to counter Chinese capabilities in East Asia (McPherson 2020).

Although geopolitics is at the heart of these shifts in the strategic landscape, its character has been coloured by a series of new and emerging technologies and their doctrinal implications. The breadth of technological advances arguably sets this period apart from earlier eras: It covers not only narrow capabilities, like hypersonic and directed energy weapons, but also such fundamental systems as artificial intelligence and additive manufacturing methods. This has increased the lethality and potential ways to apply force, which is both an opportunity and threat to modern militaries. These are not strictly limited to military capabilities – political and economic systems are at risk due to the development of cyber warfare and disinformation capabilities.

At present, many of these technologies are early in their maturation cycle, and their implications are not fully understood. Some are still in their infancy and at the moment have limited practical applications on the battlefield. An example of this might be directed energy weapons, which are only now entering limited service but hold significant promise for the future (Freedberg 2020). Many of them are vast improvements over existing systems or have no preceding analogue. In some cases, they vastly lower the resources required to undertake action, as they are force multipliers for existing capabilities, and have been used to significant effect in ongoing conflicts. As an example, small unmanned aerial vehicles (SUAVs), used by ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria and Ukrainian separatists in the Donbas, have been employed to provide cheap battlefield reconnaissance assets, spotting indirect fires, and even directly attack targets with small ordnance (Schmidt and Schmitt 2016; Friese, Jenzen-Jones, and Smallwood 2016). Whereas before the introduction of these systems, asymmetric conflicts saw one side dominate airspace and accrue all of its benefits of air dominance, SUAVs undermine this dynamic and provide some of the benefits to the lesser party at a much lower cost.

Technological advances are starting to affect force structures in a meaningful way. One example is the US Marine Corps' Force Design 2030, which would dispense with much of the service's heavy equipment for a more distributed autonomous force with high levels of survivability and lethality (USA 2020b). The Russian Federation has started the development of entire combat formations made up of UAVs, in a concept known as the "Maker" (Bendett et al. 2020, 45).

Further responses to these new doctrines and technologies are also emerging. Returning to the discussion above, the threat posed by SUAVs, among others, has resulted in a proliferation of new air defence systems designed to counter them. The US Army alone has five new major conventional air defence weapon and radar programs ongoing at the moment, whereas there was only one a decade ago.¹

For systems where no direct counter is possible, states have invested in systems that provide a deterrent value. An example of this is strategic hypersonic delivery systems, which are much more flexible and survivable than existing nuclear strike capabilities. China and Russia are developing and deploying new weapons, which, as the US general John Hyten made clear in his 2018 testimony as the US Strategic Forces Commander, can only be deterred:

Our defense is our deterrent capability. We do not have any defense that could deny the employment of such a weapon against us. So our response would be our deterrence force, which would be the triad of nuclear capabilities that have to respond to such a threat. (USA 2018)

His successor, Admiral Charles Richard, elaborated on this in his 2020 Senate

Armed Services Committee testimony:

Offensive hypersonic strike weapons will provide conventional capabilities to ensure the Joint Force can deter aggression in contested environments short of nuclear use. ... Fielding advanced hypersonic capabilities will allow us to tailor our strategies and plans with an expanded range of conventional options. While not a replacement for nuclear weapons, new classes of hypersonic weapons will complement and enhance strategic deterrence and can deliver surgical strikes to provide effects or be integrated into larger campaigns, increasing the effectiveness of our warfighting advantages. (USA 2020a)

As this statement makes clear, the development of hypersonic weapons is seen by the United States as a way to increase the strategic stability between the major powers, so that adversaries cannot exploit potential vulnerabilities. Yet, developing such capabilities comes at a serious cost.

Taken as a whole, the global situation displays elements of a clear arms race behaviour by a number of states, covering a number of different capability areas. Although specific examples were discussed above, the best broad evidence of the military competition is the significant increase in defence spending in gross terms. According to the Stockholm International Peace Institute, worldwide defence spending hit US\$1.9 trillion in 2019, up from US\$1.5 trillion in 2015. A large proportion of the growth occurred in China, which has resulted in a “meteoric military progress in recent years that has not simply narrowed the gap in limited niches, but has in fact pursued parity and even selective superiority” (Erickson 2020).²

However, even with regards to Western states (especially the United States), there has been a shift in defence spending as combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down and funding is shifted to capital spending, much of which incorporates new technologies.

The emergence of new military technologies may not in itself be destabilizing, however, as Caitlin Talmadge (2019) recently argued:

Emerging technologies are more likely to function as intervening variables; they may be necessary for escalation to happen in some cases, but they alone are not sufficient, and sometimes they will not even be necessary. The strongest drivers of escalation will actually lie elsewhere, in the realms of politics and strategy. As a result, concern about new technologies is warranted, but determinism is not. An over-emphasis on the dangers of technology alone ignores the critical role of political and strategic choices in shaping the impact of technology.

This thesis is particularly relevant to the present circumstances. As discussed

earlier, the international security environment was already undergoing significant dislocation due to the politics and strategies of Russia and China. The military dimensions of this era certainly reify much of the ongoing geopolitical changes discussed in the first section. The growing reassertion of national interests in the international system has resulted in international relations becoming far less stable and predictable over the past decade, which has been further exacerbated by changes in the military balance over this time. While none of them were preordained to continue in the future, as we will see, the COVID-19 pandemic has likely ensured they will remain relevant.

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The Consequences of the Pandemic

Of its many effects, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for foreign relations will be far reaching, but will not necessarily undermine the existing trajectory. Politically, COVID-19 has reinforced many of the negative trends discussed in the first section. It has clearly encouraged nationalistic sentiments in most states, partly since national governments have become the primary organizational actor involved in the public health response. This has come at the expense of multilateral or global health actors, such as the European Union and World Health Organization, respectively.

An example of this was the suspension of the *Schengen Agreement*, which created an effective border-free zone among 26 European states. There have been local temporary suspensions prior to the pandemic, such as during the 2016 Syrian migrant crisis, which was met with significant controversy at the time (BBC 2016). During the current pandemic, nearly all Schengen states re-imposed national borders within several months of the first outbreak. While nationalist sentiments have risen, this has not necessarily translated into increased support for government. In some circumstances, national authorities' ineffective response has undermined trust in state institutions, causing political instability. Even effective response has invited criticism as populaces chafe under restrictive policies to control the virus's spread.

In addition to these political shifts, the pandemic will have an immense impact on global economics. This will have significant second- and third-order effects concerning defence and security considerations for all states. All major governments have decided to undertake a massive financial stimulus program in response to the pandemic and subsequent lockdown – on some scales, the largest economic mobilization since the Korean War. While this may stave off the worst-case scenarios of economic collapse, there will be long-term consequences as states struggle to manage the debt, which the World Economic

Forum estimated to be anywhere between US\$8.1 and US\$15.8 trillion worldwide (Schwalb 2020).

The situation facing Western states is fairly mixed. European states have aging demographics, high tax burdens, and political systems that are committed to high levels of social program. This has left little fiscal room to manoeuvre. Furthermore, there are significant disparities in the level of debt held by various countries, which will likely complicate the European Union's ability to operate as a cohesive unit. These moves have been exacerbated by other responses to the pandemic, including the suspension of the *Schengen Agreement* and the advance of illiberal policies such as those pursued by Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

One of the few positive signs has been the recent agreement among the EU members for a pan-European reconstruction fund that is financed through a common borrowing facility – a first of its kind, which may herald a more politically and economically united European Union (*Economist* 2020; Neuman 2020). Nevertheless, given the likelihood of cross-continent austerity measures in order to cover the cost of their stimulus measures, and political dysfunction within the EU, the ability for European countries to play a leadership role internationally is limited.

The United States' situation is significantly different. It too has increased its debt load over the past decade and a half, reaching over US\$23 trillion, which is set to grow significantly as a response to its fiscal measures put into place during the pandemic (Lastrapes 2020). In addition, while the spread of the virus had abated in Europe for much of the summer before rising once again in the fall, the US has remained a consistent global hotspot since the spring – one that, due to its haphazard and piecemeal response, continues to surge. As such, it could face a more prolonged economic downturn and might require additional fiscal measures. Its federal debt load has already increased by around 10 to 20 percent since the start of the crisis, which will provide a major drag on the economy in the coming years.

At the same time, there are several positive factors that militate partly in America's favour. The country has fairly good demographics with a large workforce and a strong inflow of immigration, despite ongoing controversies with the Trump administration. Taxation levels are also at historic lows across the country, and could be raised to fill the fiscal gap. However, while this is a potentially positive opportunity, this requires a difficult compromise that may not be politically palatable in the partisan environment.

Canada is among the more vulnerable states. While the Trudeau government has been keen to emphasize that it has not increased its debt-to-GDP ratio over its time in office, even if the gross debt has increased, this ignores the broader problem facing the country. Canada is a federal system, with substan-

tial provincial liabilities, as well as relatively high corporate and personal debt levels. Considered together, its total debt is among the highest in the Western world, and this greatly complicates the government's ability to manoeuvre. Several economists have suggested the situation will provide a significant drag on growth in the coming years (Snyder 2020).

Russia faces similar issues, but with different challenges. While its demographic situation has improved significantly since the 2000s (Kofman 2020), the country remains highly dependent on its resource sector, and its petrochemicals in particular. As a result it was already in a precarious situation due to the downturn in the global economy during the pandemic. However, the situation has been exacerbated by the oil price war it had initiated with Saudi Arabia earlier in the year. This has significantly damaged its fiscal position, the consequences of which will remain with the country for some time.

“ *While state collapse has so far not occurred, the potential for one is high.* ”

China's outlook is similarly mixed. While it was the first country to reopen its economy following its initial COVID-19 outbreak, with a partial economic bounce back, it also has a high accumulation of debt. Unlike other OECD nations, the largest proportion of China's debt exists within corporate entities, specifically state-owned enterprises (Lee 2019). This has been a concern for the past decade, as the state has been forced to continually prop up these uncompetitive industries to maintain political and social stability. Although it has taken steps to reform the sector over the past several years, the present economic circumstances will likely cause significant economic challenges to maintaining momentum (Listerud 2019).

One area of significant concern is how less developed states will manage the pandemic challenge. While state collapse has so far not occurred, the potential for one is high. A number of states may not possess a robust economy or political system that can weather the pandemic's economic consequences. In many cases, their instability is being exploited by outside actors for their own ends. One example is Lebanon, which has been in the midst of a political crisis since October 2019, stemming from widespread dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation – not least a 150 percent debt-to-GDP ratio and a fiscal deficit of around 10 percent (M. Jones 2019), with the country quite close to defaulting on its debt obligation. This situation has precipitated an economic collapse and mass demonstrations, which have only been magnified by the COVID-19 crisis, with citizens unable to purchase even basic

necessities (Bahout, Bissat, and Momtaz 2020). The recent dramatic accident with unsafely stored fertilizers on the Beirut waterfront will only exacerbate the challenges facing the state.

This does not mean the Lebanese state will collapse, although such a possibility cannot be discounted. But it does mean the scale of the pandemic and its economic effects – especially in the months and years ahead – will increase the possibility of state failure in the international system. Lebanon is just one possible case, but a number of countries in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere are also possibilities. This will increase instability and present an additional challenge for major powers to manage.

Even if interest rates remain relatively low, the financial situation facing states will be precarious as they struggle to regain fiscal balance. A University of California, Davis study published in March 2020 suggested that the economic consequences may be felt for over a decade based on historical data of previous pandemics (Jorda, Singh, and Taylor 2020). This will limit the ability of all states to conduct foreign policy for the foreseeable future. It also plays into the existing disinterest in Western societies toward foreign involvement. Nevertheless, countries like Russia and China have adapted their foreign and trade policies to this new reality and even found opportunities to assert their existing national interests.



Russia has a long-standing interest in undermining the existing international order.

Russia has a long-standing interest in undermining the existing international order and weakening Western states. This strategy was observable during the 2008 subprime crisis, when then US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson was informed of a Russian plan to sell their combined holdings in US government mortgage lending agencies.³ This would have inflicted grievous harm on the US and global economic system. Yet, so far at least, Russia's response to the pandemic has been relatively restrained. This may be in part due to domestic concerns such as its recent constitutional referendum, which would allow Putin to remain in office until 2036. It may also be due to the fact that, unlike China, Russia is currently in the midst of fighting a growing COVID-19 epidemic in its own borders.

That being said, Russia has still been quick to spread propaganda on the pandemic, which has “consistently emphasized weak democratic institutions

and civil disorder, and offered different conspiracy theories about the pandemic” (Rebello et al. 2020). For instance, Russian state media have posited that the virus either originated in Latvia or was concocted by wealthy Western philanthropists like Bill Gates or George Soros. Meanwhile, Russian “aid” to countries such as Italy has often proven to be of questionable value, instead resembling influence and espionage missions rather than aid operations (Weiss 2020; Kolga, Shahrooz, and Majumdar 2020). More recently, Russia has also indicated plans for military bases and enhanced troop levels in several African countries, including Egypt and Sudan, in what many people see as complement to its current military role in Syria and Libya (Balestrieri 2020; also see Schmitt 2019).

Like Russia, China has sought to exploit the pandemic to enhance its international position. It has leveraged its position within the WHO to limit negative coverage of its response, conducted “pandemic diplomacy” through the donation or the sale of medical supplies, many of which have proven to be defective (Lancaster and Rubin 2020), and also employed disinformation tactics and false narratives to deflect blame for the virus’s initial spread. With the virus having ravaged through Europe and now the United States, China has attempted to position itself as the global leader in the fight against COVID-19 – as opposed to the country whose initial coverups had led to the pandemic in the first place (Rebello et al. 2020). Indeed, by spreading conspiracy theories that the virus originated in Italy or from a US bioweapons lab, China has adopted openly aggressive disinformation tactics that are much more commonly associated with the Kremlin.



China has attempted to position itself as the global leader in the fight against COVID-19.

At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has moved quite decisively to take advantage of the situation around the pandemic – by pushing through controversial legal reforms to curtail Hong Kong’s autonomy, deploying People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops in a territorial land grab in Ladakh along the Sino-Indian border, or stepping up its naval and maritime activities in the South China Sea, among other actions. China has also demonstrated a more aggressive, blustering form of diplomacy, dubbed “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, where its diplomats have been quick to threaten such countries as Australia, the UK, or Canada with retaliation if they adopt policies that are not seen as sufficiently pro-China. These efforts are set to continue in the future, as many commentators note that this may be a permanent shift to a more

assertive foreign policy posture from its previous relatively non-interventionist perspective, enumerated in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper 2020).

The spread of COVID-19 has accelerated many of the trends in international relations that existed prior to the crisis. It is particularly apparent in the weakening of multilateral security and trade architectures that have underpinned the global system since the end of the Second World War. While major increases in debt loads will likely curtail the potential range of action that states may be able to undertake, it has not altered the national interests that guide their actions. Instead, the pandemic may offer states like China and Russia new opportunities to express their interests, such as through pandemic diplomacy.

Washington's abject failure to either bring the virus under control in its own borders or take the lead in combatting this global public health threat has certainly raised questions from allies and enemies alike about US global leadership. That alone may have led countries such as Russia and China to try to take advantage of evident US weakness in order to make risky political moves abroad. Furthermore, the increasing reticence of major Western powers to intervene in foreign relations, like the United States under President Trump, may also alter the calculus of action for states interested in upending the existing political order.

In addition, the possibility of state collapse means there may be an increased demand for foreign intervention. This is particularly problematic given the low trust in international organizations and the ongoing reticence toward foreign interventions. The situation is somewhat reminiscent of the mid-1990s, when a number of major crises, such as the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Zaire/Congo, were allowed continue with limited to no international involvement, resulting in humanitarian catastrophes.

With all these considerations in mind, the defence and security policies of states will have a heightened relevance in the post-COVID-19 environment. While the immediate concerns are currently focused on managing the direct public health consequences of the pandemic, the focus will switch in time to more traditional measures of security and defence. The final section will explore the military dynamics of this emerging era.

The Military Dimension

As with politics and international relations, the military and defence sphere will see dramatic shifts due to the pandemic. Still, they will likely develop along existing trends, with the economic consequences significantly altering the military landscape. Most worryingly, the pandemic and its economic con-

sequences will likely affect modernization trends. Already, several states have stated that they plan to curtail defence spending in light of the pandemic's grievous economic damage. South Korea, arguably one of the least affected developed states, has announced a 3.6 percent cut in their defence budget, with approximately half coming out of its modernization accounts (Oh 2020). In addition, the EU has announced budget cuts for its two flagship defence programs: the European Defense Fund and the Military Mobility Initiative, though individual European countries have so far not announced any defence cuts (Morcos 2020). Meanwhile, other countries, like Canada, have also not made any cutbacks as of yet, though some analysts suggest this may occur given the ballooning deficits

Others have attempted to use defence spending as a form of stimulus funding, by increasing or accelerating planned purchases of equipment. One example is France, which has suggested that it will increase the number of armoured vehicles and other capabilities purchased (Ouest-France 2019). Similarly, Australia moved to hire several thousand reservists full time and improve base infrastructure after the wildfires earlier in the year (Packham 2020). The corollary here is that most of the investments are for domestic purposes and may present little to no improvement in their actual military capability. However, as the history of other major downturns suggests, these are only temporary measures and likely to be curtailed in the coming years as fiscal austerity takes hold.

Large military powers, such as the United States, are likely to follow suit to some degree. An April 2020 RAND analysis suggested that, at a minimum, the US military would face budgetary cutbacks on the scale of the sequestration of the 2011 *Budget Control Act* – this “would result in available resources for the DoD that are \$350 to \$600 billion lower than current plans over the next 10 years” (Egel et al. 2020). Reports from Russia suggest a 5 percent cut to its military spending over the next three years (Reuters 2020). Importantly, however, China is not likely to see an outright cut in their budget, rather a reduction in growth that had been previously planned (Yeo 2020).

In any case, states will need to adjust to this new fiscal reality. Many of these modernization programs are likely to be curtailed or cancelled outright. For example, the initial effort by the US Department of Defense (DoD) was to shift US\$5.7 billion to hypersonic and nuclear modernization programs, US\$200 million of which it would pull from chemical and biological warfare development (Donnelly 2020). Both are areas of arms competition with other near-peer opponents: Russia maintains large stocks of such weapons, while China's military funds a large biological weapons research program, with many of its quasi-official statements and materials describing new avenues of warfare, including weapons capable of “specific ethnic genetic attacks” (Kania and Vorndick 2019).

If the planned DoD cuts are implemented, it will be an example of where budget cuts have curtailed a potential technological response to a threat, leaving the United States potentially vulnerable to an attack (Sechser, Narang, and Talmadge 2019). Considering the scale of the budgetary issues facing the US and other foreign governments, it is almost certain that other major development and acquisition programs may be curtailed, leaving other areas of vulnerability and risk. Furthermore, it may also drive up the costs of existing development programs. As an influential Institute for Defense Analyses report found in 2016, periods of constrained funding climates are correlated with significantly increased cost growth in programs (McNicol 2018). Consequently, existing programs are likely to cost more, putting further strain on tight defence budgets.

When these defence spending trends in the United States and its allies vis-à-vis China are considered together, it is likely that the gap in military capability between the two parties will narrow. Considering China's emboldened foreign policy since the start of the pandemic, the potential for conflict may increase given the unstable military balance. One such place where this is evident is Taiwan. The People's Republic of China's growing military prowess has provided it with more tools for enforcing its interests over the island, with potentially problematic consequences, as Brendan Taylor (2019, 65) recently argued:

As China's power grows, its range for addressing the "Taiwan problem" is also expanding. That said, Beijing remains highly inexperienced at employing many of the new instruments now at its disposal. This inexperience, in turn, heightens the prospects of mishandling, miscalculation and misperception on all sides.

Taylor goes on to note a number of potential scenarios where conflict can occur, such as Taiwan's crossing an ill-defined redline established by China over the island's political independence. With a more equitable balance of military power between Taiwan and the US vis-à-vis mainland China, there may be less reticence among the CCP's leaders to utilize coercive tools to achieve their objectives, leading to an inadvertent escalation. The potential for other areas of conflict, such as the South China Sea and the Diayou/Senkaku islands, is just as evident.

While the possibility of a major conflict breaking out has increased, it remains a low-probability event. Instead, conflicts between major powers are more likely to emerge in areas of regional instability and state collapse, where actors and their proxies may employ military capabilities to assert their interests. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia and Iran have shown willingness to usurp the existing order in the Middle East and the Levant by supporting factions friendly to their interests. Moreover, there has often been a lack of discrimination in regards to the employment of weapons or their pro-

liferation. This is evident in the suspected Iranian passing of cruise missiles to Houthi rebels in Yemen in their struggle against Saudi Arabia (Hinz 2019).

China has not been inclined to undertake this sort of military adventurism, at least outside the South and East China Seas and along the Sino-Indian border, preferring instead “sharp power” influence operations (Cole 2018) in areas beyond its immediate horizon. This may change in the near future, given the extension of its interests through such global projects as the Belt and Road Initiative. China has also historically been a major arms exporter internationally, and may decide to better instrumentalize the use of such exports in its foreign policy aims.

The new political and military realities of such conflicts mean that their risk for intervening forces will be much greater than before; they also increase the challenge in successfully stabilizing these states. This uncertainty, combined with an international security environment facing significant political and strategic instability, will lead to conflict and violence becoming increasingly a likely outcome.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As with all sectors of society, the emergence of COVID-19 has created a significant dislocation in foreign policy and defence spheres. The emergence of COVID-19 and its effects have both reinforced and fundamentally altered existing trends in international relations. Its most significant consequence will likely be the excessive debt load accumulated through unprecedented financial stimulus measures designed to mitigate the pandemic’s damage. Although this may have been successful at sparing states from the worst-case economic scenarios, the consequences are dire nonetheless.

The debt load’s consequences are unlikely, however, to fundamentally alter the political and strategic aims of major players, particularly China and Russia. Rather, they will offer more opportunities to pursue these interests, especially as weaker states suffer the hangover of the economic stimulus measures. The pandemic comes at a time when the instruments of foreign and defence policy were already undergoing significant changes, reflecting the changing geo-strategic situation as well as technological innovations in the civil and military spheres. While austerity measures may not fundamentally alter the trajectory of this progress, they will create new asymmetries or magnify existing ones for states willing to employ these capabilities.

The destructive forces of nationalism and populism are not easily addressed by simple policy prescriptions. As noted earlier, the European Union has worked assiduously to counter anti-democratic forces in places such as Hun-

gary and Poland, which has been met with limited success. The incoming Biden administration in the US may provide a key inflection point, altering the tone and providing the leadership to counteract some of these anti-democratic trends.

That being said, foreign and defence policy tends to be an area where greater political agreement among actors seems to exist in Western democracies. One can point to bipartisan efforts in the US congressional assemblies or de-politicization efforts within the UK, French, or Australian governments. Reinforcing these efforts, which creates a greater bulwark against populist impulses in foreign policy, as well as encourages the development of professional foreign policy groups in the operation of government policy-making in these areas, might be an avenue to explore (Wittes and Rauch 2017).

This may also address the incoherence in national interests that has emerged within Western states over the past decade, with parties working to define a common set of foreign policy aims for the state. Furthermore, developing greater international relations expertise within a consensus-based group may enable better and more consistent policy-making. With fewer resources to become available, there is no room for different parts of government to be working at cross-purposes. De-politicization would also enable states to become more fluid to adapt to this changing international environment. This may lead to clear-eyed assessments as to what a state's national interests are, the threats and challenges facing them, as well as the means to ensure their successful prosecution.

There are other benefits to this approach. As has been evident over the past few years, political influence operations exploiting social media and other new technologies have become increasingly common within international relations. They provide low-cost but potentially high-reward approaches, which are not easily countered by traditional governmental tools. However, greater coherence and consistency in government messaging is an essential condition for successfully disrupting these efforts. It is an approach that has seen significant success in Taiwan, as discussed in a recent paper by J. Michael Cole (2020) on the island's experience with Chinese political warfare.

Greater coherence within states on their foreign policy-making can enhance the ability of states to implement foreign policies that can manage this emerging era. It may be the first step to rebuild the relationships and multilateral groupings that have frayed over the past decade. It may help to avoid embarrassing policy reversals due to changes in governments in some countries, such as various positions on trade deals. Coordinated action will enable states to enhance their limited foreign affairs resources. This need is evident in the recent popular demonstrations in Belarus against the country's longtime leader, Alexander Lukashenko. The lack of a coordinated Western response arguably ensured that the president could outlast the internal pop-

ular discontent, with Russia's assistance. Another particularly fruitful area for coordination is in economic measures, particularly sanctions. Better coordination can greatly magnify these instruments' efficacy, such as in the imposition of Magnitsky sanctions on Russian actors. This may extend military and intelligence cooperation where multinational alliances can also collectively enhance the capabilities of individual states.

One potential avenue of diplomatic agreement might be arms control. Despite the recent failures of existing regimes, such as the INF Treaty, a number of potential areas of cooperation exist. This is partly due to the political circumstances: the burgeoning range of costly emerging military systems, the instability these new systems can create, as well ethical concerns surrounding some of them. However, it may take time and a concerted diplomatic effort to achieve successes in this area.

Finally, the defence and security sectors require significant attention by Western states. New and emerging weapons and doctrinal concepts threaten to upend traditional metrics of military power and capability. States must adapt to these new realities, as they may outmode existing force structures. Governments should resist the temptation to raid defence budgets in order to prop up their fiscal balance sheets. China seems unlikely to curtail its spending significantly, while new technologies and doctrines have lowered the bar for the use of force and the lethality of existing force structures. Furthermore, the pandemic has ravaged a number of already weak economies among developing states, which may require Western states to intervene.

The unprecedented scope and effects of COVID-19 have significantly altered the overall state of international relations. Yet, as this paper has shown, in many areas this largely represents continuity with existing trends. Considering the difficult fiscal, political, and military situation Western states face in the next decade, there is a strong necessity to make smart decisions on the resources that we need to support our security, defence, and foreign policy. This requires states to balance spending to ensure that they have adequate means to respond to existing and emerging threats. To do otherwise risks magnifying the pandemic's consequences from a public health and economic crisis to a collapse of the Western position within the international system.

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Endnotes

- 1 The five programs are IM-Shorad, Army Integrated Air and Missile Defense (AIAMD), Lower Tier Air and Missile Defence Sensor (LTAMDS), IFPC, and Sentinel Radar, compared to MEADS in 2010.
- 2 As the Pentagon's latest China Military Power report makes clear, superiority can be found in terms of Chinese shipbuilding (including 130 major combatants), land-based conventional cruise and ballistic missiles, and integrated air defence systems (see USA 2020c).
- 3 Russia likely reasoned that the resulting outcome would be to their benefit, despite the collateral damage inflicted on their economy. While China declined to be a part of this outcome, this incident illustrates Russia's willingness to exploit such crises for their benefit (see Guha 2010).



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