

PANDEMIC, VACCINES AND POWER

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The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated geopolitical dynamics that were in place before the pandemic. The global centre of gravity has shifted towards Asia, with China's status as a great power strengthened and India's steady rise continuing. At the same time, multilateral institutions are being challenged.



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A year ago our way of life changed drastically. Some of these changes will have permanent effects. But have international relations changed to the same extent? Have the balances of power been altered? Is there more cooperation or more conflict? Most indicators suggest that, unlike the changes to interpersonal dynamics and economic relations, at international level pre-existing trends are being accelerated.

The pandemic has sped up the shift of the global centre of gravity towards Asia and reinforced China's status as a great power. As a result, the other actors in the system are being defined by the type of relationship they want with Beijing. In Europe, for example, the pandemic has brought new nuances to the pre-existing doctrine according to which, depending on the issue or moment, China is a partner, a competitor or a systemic rival. The new US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, shares this line of thinking. China poses the main geopolitical challenge to the United States, he says, and the US will cooperate with China when possible and compete when necessary.

For an increasing number of developing countries, China was already their largest trading partner, holder of debt and investor in strategic connectivity projects. Now it appears ready to provide the vaccines countries cannot buy on the international market and which multilateral mechanisms have yet to provide.

India's steady rise is another factor that recalls the global dynamics of the pre-Covid world. It generates less media noise and less distrust in the West than China, but New Delhi is unsatisfied with being a mere regional power, and is looking to get on an even footing with the other great global powers. Even before the pandemic, it was exploring alliances with Japan, Australia and Western countries to provide counterweights to China in the Indo-Pacific, and its foreign policy horizons

were extending towards the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa. India's investment in technology has been its surest way of gaining ground. Now it deploys its diplomacy leading the developing countries within the World Trade Organization (WTO) framework to demand patents be temporarily suspended, while donating vaccines it has produced to neighbouring countries (Sri Lanka, Bhutan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and the Seychelles) and the small Caribbean states.

When it comes to Russia, what we witness is a continuous exercise in national reaffirmation. We might call it vaccine patriotism (choosing the name Sputnik is a clear statement of intentions), as Russia is also using its vaccine to re-establish itself as a global power. Hence, its notable activity in Latin America, a distant continent geographically, which the United States has traditionally considered its backyard. Again, this is the consolidation of a trend that existed prior to the pandemic, as Russia had already become a decisive supporter of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. Its efforts to divide European partners also look familiar. Where it has previously used gas, today it deploys vaccines. Moscow's old new friends like Hungary can prove very useful when the talk turns to sanctions.

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The positioning of these three actors, China, India and Russia, in the global health league also reinforces the idea of a multipolar world, or polycentric as Russia prefers to call it. This is a world in which the West still matters, but in which it has lost relative weight. In this competitive system, which is in the process of being rebalanced, the re-emerging powers have unashamedly added vaccines to their toolkit for projecting their status, and maintaining and extending their areas of influence.

But competition is not the only driver of international relations in the pandemic. Cooperation exists at global level within, for example, the framework of the World Health Organization – now with renewed US involvement – and Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, which leads the COVAX programme to get vaccines to countries with fewer resources. Cooperation also occurs between members of certain regions, as we have seen with the European Union's joint purchasing programme and the coordination efforts rolled out by the African Union. The problem is that the multilateral mechanisms have been placed under great strain and not all have risen to the challenge. Donald Trump's jibes against the WHO were the most resounding, but various international institutions have been subjected to harsh criticism, and a number of members of such organisations are tempted to go it alone, as we are seeing in real time in the European Union.

And yet the cooperative reflexes remain. The idea that this crisis can only be solved globally has slowly been getting through, but ambition is lacking, as it is on the world's other great crisis – the climate. These two emergencies – health and environment – go hand in hand, and this year we will have to keep an eye on whether climate commitments speed up, consumption habits change, and research and development on clean energies and less polluting materials is strengthened.

This overview of international relations has a blind spot: conflicts and humanitarian crises. Engrossed in the management of the pandemic, insufficient attention has been given to this other source of suffering, which is unevenly distributed and, unlike the pandemic, mainly affects the countries of the Global South. Agreement was not reached on the global ceasefire UN Secretary-General António Guterres requested while the world addresses the pandemic. Not only have the wars already underway continued, but frozen conflicts have thawed in the Caucasus, the Sahara and Tigray in Ethiopia. Old and new conflicts add to humanitarian crises for which there is less aid and more difficulty delivering it. All of this takes place in a context in which the pandemic has pushed hundreds of millions of people towards poverty, including in the countries of the Global North.

Vaccines have become part of the global power game, affecting the balance of an international system that struggles to reconcile cooperation with competition when facing the major challenges of a violent, unequal world. The pandemic is a significant factor in international relations to the extent that it reveals contradictions, modifies agendas and reinforces pre-existing trends like multipolarity, the shift of the centre of gravity towards Asia and the questioning of multilateral institutions.