



## **Pandemic Sets the Stage for a Western-Asian Ideological Contest**

**by Emil Avdaliani**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As the shock from the coronavirus pandemic decreases over the coming months, both China and the West are likely to record successes in the economic and political realms. The crisis has set the stage for an ideological struggle between the West and China that will play a crucial role in determining the destiny of Eurasia throughout this decade and the next.

As the scale of the coronavirus pandemic grew more and more apparent, apocalyptic scenarios quickly multiplied. Many expected the world to undergo structural changes primarily affecting the global economy. Others believed the entire fabric of the geopolitical world order would be reshaped.

Many of these forecasts are exaggerated. The world will probably continue to operate in more or less the same way it did before the pandemic. However, some trends that had already started to evolve before the virus may accelerate: interest in changes to supply chains; pursuit of effective mechanisms in the supranational organizations to battle future pandemics; growth in the belief in the primacy of state sovereignty and its interests over those of union entities (for example, the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union [EEU]); and a further strengthening of the authoritarian style of leadership across the Eurasian states.

We should expect the pandemic to drive a wedge between the West and China. There are calls among the US elites to decouple the American economy from its entanglement with Chinese trade. These calls were already present before the pandemic, and they will be amplified both during the crisis and in its aftermath.

Calls for a disentanglement from China will likely grow louder in Europe, too, where the stance on Beijing has hardened considerably over the past couple of months. As in the US, this follows a trajectory that was already visible before the pandemic. In 2019, the EU institutions characterized China as a “systemic rival.”

Thus the pandemic will further increase calls for a tougher approach to China and its economic model for relations with the Eurasian states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Whereas China has been a divisive issue for US and EU politicians that has damaged trans-Atlantic ties over the past several years, the coronavirus will likely unite the West in promoting common policies targeting Beijing’s influence across Eurasia.

But there is a larger picture: the extent to which China has been bolstered by the economies of East Asia. It is fashionable to talk about how the pandemic might benefit a rising China, but in reality it is not only China that has risen in recent decades. In a collective Asian rise, dozens of states neighboring China have also experienced exponential economic growth. When the 2008 financial crisis struck, the southeast Asian states served as a cushion for China while western economies reeled.

The coronavirus will likely have a similar effect. The West should experience more protracted difficulties than China and its surrounding states in terms of healthcare, the economy, and the ideological realm. It is not just China that has emerged with greater power but the entire Asian continent. Europe and the US, meanwhile, continue to struggle to find economic and political cures to their problems.

In modern scholarship on geopolitics and international relations, the topic of China’s rise is arguably the most debated. Much remains unanswered, but it can certainly be said that the pandemic and the ensuing troubles have set the scene for wider competition between the West and a China propped up by the economies of east and southeast Asia.

Definitive arguments cannot be made for whether Beijing or the West will achieve world domination or preserve its current position. It is possible, however, to lay out possible trends for the 2020s-early 2030s.

One scenario could be that a propped up China gains influence in Eurasia by providing major amounts of medical aid to hard-hit states (for example, Iran, Iraq, Tajikistan, etc.). Large economic packages in the form of investments through the BRI could follow, which would increase Beijing’s position in the eyes of central Asia, Iran, and the rest of the Middle East. The conditions for

such a scenario are ripe, as the West is distracted by internal political divisions and economic troubles.

A second scenario could be that the West regains confidence through sharp measures undertaken to prop up its currencies and provides support to a number of Eurasian states. A further aligning of visions on China could take place in Washington and major European capitals, which could enable the US to score a geopolitical win by pushing China's 5G out of the European continent and limiting the BRI's chances for expansion among the EU nations.

Both these scenarios are radical in a way. It is possible that what will transpire will be more balanced, with China and the West each having only partial success. Indeed, even if China increases its influence in Tajikistan or Pakistan, it will not significantly increase Beijing's global posture. What China needs for its geopolitical clout to grow is divisions among EU member states and, ideally, a wider rift in trans-Atlantic ties.

At the same time, the West will not be able to properly challenge Beijing's BRI. On the map of Eurasia, there is a large vacuum of economic power between China's western province of Xinjiang and the EU, where, barring moves by Russia's not very successful EEU, Beijing's BRI could make significant inroads.

Over the coming months, the West is likely to address the need for a consensus on an economic remedy for the EU and possibly a compromise on thorny issues that besiege trans-Atlantic relations.

We are entering an age of heightened competition between the West and a China cushioned by the enhanced might of other east Asian states. Both will have success in the economic and ideological spheres, but tensions are likely to rise. Coronavirus sets the stage for an ideological struggle that up to now has rarely emerged as a topic for open discussion among western political elites. China's economic power is unlikely to decrease, and a battle for the hearts and minds of Eurasian nations is likely to unfold as the West attempts to limit Beijing's geopolitical strength.

*Emil Avdaliani teaches history and international relations at Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University and is a non-resident associate at the BESA Center.*