



Science and Politics in the COVID Age

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the limits of international cooperation despite the vast potential of available technological means. The debate about the relationship between science and politics is not new, but is now placed in the context of unprecedented international challenges and growing uncertainty about the direction of the world. The Western democracies have to set the tone and persuade the public of the advantages of international cooperation on the scientific front.

The creation and approval of COVID-19 vaccines generated optimism that the world might return to normal in the second half of 2021. But with that said, international cooperation during the pandemic was not very impressive. Though the nations shared a common purpose, they did not use the unprecedented technological means at their disposal in the spirit of cooperation, a failing that may have delayed the jointly desired outcome.

When Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in 1929, he could not rely on the combined experience of Chinese, Russian, and American researchers. The situation today is—or should be—quite different. In October 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said the pandemic was [a wake-up call](#) for a better relationship between science and policymaking, more effective international technology collaboration, and the building of public trust in science.

Critical dilemmas in the debate on the intersection of technology and politics have gone unresolved for some time. In a [recent interview with *Die Welt*](#), Henry Kissinger discussed the urgency that societies “find a way of combining their extraordinary technology with a reflection about their directions.” Kissinger outlined, among other things, the risk of a large-scale war that could erupt due to ongoing tensions between China and the US. This

could have devastating consequences, as both powers have developed cutting-edge military technologies.

While the scenario of a military conflict is not likely at this time, the Sino-American competition is being played out in the field of technology itself. Technological innovation is a guarantee of economic power, and the world's technological leader has the potential to achieve global supremacy. This is the main reason why President Donald Trump has endeavored to restrain China's rise by implementing policies that put obstacles in the path of Chinese companies like Huawei. Beijing has responded to the so-called decoupling by initiating its "[dual circulation](#)" concept, the main objective of which is to unleash innovation demand domestically and define supply chains—even in sectors where it lags, such as the semiconductor industry.

It is now commonplace in the international discourse [to evoke a Cold War framework](#) with an emphasis on technology. It is impossible to predict whether the ongoing competition will evolve into a permanent phenomenon or will act as a catalyst pushing Chinese and American leaders toward negotiating agreements that balance the relationship.

Obviously, the two superpowers will not be alone in this. Third parties might play a role. The EU, for example, seems committed to striving for [technological autonomy](#) despite relatively good prospects for the transatlantic partnership under Joe Biden. In the interim, other countries might refrain from taking sides in the Sino-American technological rivalry, or do careful acrobatics between geopolitics and economics.

Modern technologies pose challenges that were inconceivable just a few years ago. China's technological development and the Sino-American standoff are only parts of the equation. The discussion in the West, principally in the US, focuses on the ability of its "systemic rivals" to meddle in election processes, spread fake news, and conduct cyberattacks. But this discussion needs to go further in the COVID-19 era.

The inconvenient reality is that China, where the virus was first detected and reported, managed the problem better than Western countries, despite serious mistakes and delays at the outset. In so doing, [the country actively leveraged digital technologies](#) like artificial intelligence (AI), big data, cloud computing, blockchain, and 5G. Its applications of these technologies, for example its surveillance techniques, are constantly criticized in the West for human rights reasons.

The question is how Western values might be safeguarded in so complex an international environment. The answer cannot come only through tough

competition, decoupling scenarios, and fierce criticism. International cooperation remains the mode by which democracies can prove their advantages over other governance models. The insistence on more transparency, civic participation, and openness, along with the forging of a tangible understanding that modern technologies can serve the interests of societies when used wisely by democratically elected leaders, will enhance the position of the West in world governance.

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