

# The Outlook of the World Order during the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

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## Abstract

The Coronavirus phenomenon should be considered as an issue that will cause damage to other countries in the context of international interdependence. At the same time, the structure of the international system has placed a responsibility on China, as well as on international organizations and other countries in the fight against this transnational threat. China wants to change its international face, from security and disruptive acting to economic-security acting and protesting the existing international order. As a result, such events tend to have the least impact on the country's international relations and, above all, at the international level, overcoming this crisis will benefit it. At the international level, given China's position in the international economy and the interdependence of many countries, while overcoming this dependence on other areas and the interaction of the economy of all international countries, the Corona crisis is a matter of cooperation and convergence. Currently, under the auspices of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, countries are trying to do their utmost to help reduce this devastating phenomenon. The US approach so far, unlike Japan, which has been trying to resolve the crisis, has been more concerned with China's fear and instrumental use of the crisis to compete with China and define itself as a superpower. In contrast, pro-multilateralist countries, especially US allies in Europe, have used a pragmatic approach to focus on their national interests and help resolve the international crisis.

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## **Introduction**

The fact that international risks of today's world trespass the natural borders of countries and engage all societies at a universal scale indicates a kind of political maturity in all international actors. The politicization of economic issues, increasing importance of environmental pollution and its hazards to communities influence international relations and thereby indicate the vulnerability of states and societies to events and currents that are created in the territory of other countries. Under these conditions, the main characteristics of the international system are complex, numerous and interconnected relations, conflict and cooperation. The Coronavirus, now officially known as COVID-19, is a phenomenon from which, according to the head of the World Health Organization, "no country could think it may evade. This notion is not only wrong, but also it will be irremediable. The virus does not respect international borders (Lovelace, 2020)." This transnational phenomenon has challenged all international actors and has forced all of them to turn to cooperation and convergence to keep the crisis under control.

With the spread of COVID-19, in addition to the fatalities in China, the country's economy has also faced its most difficult challenge since the 2008 global economic crisis (Jie, 2020). Some analysts state that if the coronavirus is controlled within three months, the country's GDP will be reduced by 0.8%, and if it is controlled within nine months, the GDP be reduced by 1.9% (McCloskey and Heymann, 2020). However, compared to the outbreak of SARS in 2003, currently, China's economy is more fragile and more government measures are required (Jie, 2020).

Like any other country, China does not intend to hurt its people and its economic interests. The outbreak of the virus has emerged outside the control of the Chinese government, and even according to the World Health Organization, the source of the outbreak is still unknown. However, China's position in the international system is such that the country's misfortune has propagated rumors of its recklessness. Travels, high population numbers, economic mutual effects, etc. are issues that make China's role in the world significant, but at the same time, they increase the costs of such events for other states. In this case, identification of the source of the outbreak, preventing its spread, management and accumulation of the necessary resources to fight the disease and eradicate it is firstly a responsibility of China and related international specialized institutions, and then, that of other governments in an interconnected global system.

### **I. The international response to the coronavirus outbreak**

The international response to the coronavirus shows that when the spread of the epidemic threatens the economy and credibility of countries globally, the complex link between public health, science and politics finally shows up. Reactions to the emergence of coronavirus at the national, regional and international levels can be examined. At the national level, each country has developed its own experiences, which are varied greatly. At the regional level, especially in Europe, cooperation and convergence occur before the involvement of international organizations, but at the global level, we need to look at the approach of the United Nations and its affiliates, which have entered the scene very strongly. Also, the role of the international media could not be denied, which is considered both positive and negative.

**The role of the United Nations:** In a situation where criticism of international institutions, especially the United Nations, has become a pervasive trend and there is a kind of mistrust to this organization and its affiliates, the coronavirus showed the benefits of the United Nations and its affiliates and

proved that multilateralism is still a prerequisite in the world for maintaining international security and peace (Boniface, 2020). Within the framework of international institutional order, international governments have reciprocal rights and responsibilities. In a crisis such as the coronavirus, which is not limited to a specific geography and has particularly affected one of the world's largest economies, the need for cooperation, multilateralism and the strengthening of regional and international cooperation is felt more than ever. In this crisis, mutual rights and responsibilities have been set out between the WHO and China, between the WHO and other countries, and between China and other countries.

**The role of the World Health Organization:** In the meantime, the report by World Health Organization has played one of the most important roles in combating the corona phenomenon. By declaring Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and subsequently, announcing special travel restrictions and bans, the Organization has an important responsibility in controlling international infectious diseases. Although, according to the news, many countries have imposed restrictions on travels to and from China before the announcement of World Health Organization, the announcement of this situation will make the issue more global and official.

**WHO Subordinate Institutions:** The World Health Organization learned from the outbreak of SARS and is aware of the absolute need for empowerment to coordinate international resources during an epidemic and focus resources in order to identify priorities and find solutions to the problems, and finally, provided tools to deal with SARS. At present, these institutions have expanded even more and have higher synergies with one another. These organizations include: The Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R), and The Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID) (McCloskey

and Heymann, 2020). The role of the collection of countries committed to multilateralism: The use of these tools will be fruitless except with a mindset that requires international cooperation and participation in the global information network. It should be clear that actors are committed to their international obligations; for example, some European countries or some others in the southwest Asia have demonstrated their commitment to international cooperation to play a facilitating role in strengthening the cooperative mentality. In return for the assistance of the WHO, China has committed itself to show the maximum international cooperation. Similarly, China's neighbors have been tasked with cooperating with both the WHO and China.

**The role of international media:** It should be said that international media and social networks are the most important sources for information, showing both positive and negative effects. There is a need for cooperation between national and international surveillance systems to find information about the coronavirus countermeasures. The existence and synergy of national and international surveillance systems allow scientific information about the disease to be used in epidemic diagnosis in a timely manner and prevent outbreaks, correct clinical encounter with patients, and help with modeling and understanding the possible future directions and useful interventions (Heymann, 2020). At the same time, the media may cause fear and insecurity and mental uncertainty in communities and provoke reactions that make the crisis more difficult to manage by creating cluster problems (such as reducing crisis control devices, in this case, medical masks). In general, China's crisis management methods and its cooperation with the World Health Organization, accompanied by the rapid delivery of information, showed that the "World Network" and the international associations that currently exist can gather experts from around the world to facilitate the focus of research and development efforts on crisis, in order to maximize the impact (Boniface, 2020). According to many experts, as a specialized institution, the WHO has performed well

in its mission to work with China. The organization's management of international-scale epidemics not only shows that the organization is functional, but also highlights its essential role and inevitable position. As a result, once again it became clear that in the face of a global threat, only a multilateral response focusing on the role of international institutions may be sufficient. This important result, which has been accepted at the operational and medical levels, should also be considered at the strategic and policy-making levels (Boniface, 2020).

## **II. The international level**

Not only the spread of the COVID-19 is not limited to health care section, but also it is not limited to only one country. This is a multidimensional and international issue that is, in general, effective in six aspects (Brown, 2020) of the international affairs in the short- and the long-run:

- Impacting global economy: This crisis will impact the global economy because it has caused a major stagnation in China's economic activity, and of course, economic effects of international travel restrictions must also be taken into account. Therefore, this will slow down the world's second-largest economy, which is the driving force of the growth of global economy. The World Bank estimates that the crisis could cause up to a 5% drop in global GDP or, in other words, a loss of \$3 trillion, affecting all countries in the world.

- Interference in the global supply chain: The second problem is the interference in the international supply chain, because China is the largest manufacturer in the world who takes part in almost all sectors of the global economy and holds about 30% of global value-added in production.

- Reduction of China's diplomatic commitment: The coronavirus crisis could overshadow international meetings, such as the EU-China summit in Beijing in March, although Xi Jinping has taken steps to be able to take part in appointments such as the trip to Japan.

- Influencing on countries involved in the “One Belt, One Road” initiative: Given the closure of roads and travel restrictions and bans, China will not be able to deliver the goods required for production to countries involved in the initiative. So, there will be a break in the form of idle capital, which will affect all partner countries in this project and their partners.

- Possibility of damage to the international reputation of the Chinese government: As the crisis the “China’s delays in public information” may be further emphasized, questioning the credibility of the Chinese government as a responsible actor in the international system, in the sense that other countries can no longer be prevented from reacting to restrict or remove China from their political relations circle.

- Possibility of a decreasing dependence on Chinese goods: The crisis not only has caused a deferment in Chinese exports in the short run, it may also cause a reduction in the countries’ dependence on Chinese goods. Of course, these two are only assumptions that may not be very accurate in the real-world economy.

According to the above, the coronavirus is a phenomenon that will cause damage to other countries in the context of international interdependence. In 2003, China accounted for 4% of the global GDP, and today it accounts for 17%. The country also accounted for 70% of the world's economic growth last year alone, and it is clear that the economy is something that affects all international affairs by creating sectional convergence, that is, the crisis in China will affect the whole of world (Huang, 2020).

### **III. Coronavirus, and damaged multilateralism**

With the awareness of the principal of the national interests, the compass of foreign activities, as well as US “competition” with China at all economic, military, political and technological levels, the US has been criticized that it has ignored the multilateralism approach to dealing with the crisis, or at least, it can be said that the country has tried to use it in opposition to China. Clearly,

identity debates shift the existing realities which should be treated in a pragmatic manner to the value debates which create the never-ending game of blaming, accusation and fear. In conflict with the coronavirus, the world, especially Europe and the United States, has been plagued more by rumors than the disease. People change their route on the streets to avoid confrontation with the Chinese. This behavior brings to the mind that all Chinese are infected with the virus and it turns them into unloved “others” Some US media outlets have used headlines to inform about the Corona virus which are obviously directed toward China: “Coronavirus Is a Bigger Threat than Terrorism (Boniface, 2020)”, “Don't Buy China's Story (Mosher, 2020)”, and so on. However, the Professor David Heymann, one of the top officials at the WHO for 22 years has stated in his article: “China has quickly (within a day) shared information with the World Health Organization (WHO) and has formulated a coordinated response to it at the national and international levels, which is a clear indication of the lessons it learned from the outbreak of SARS.” In his view, the criticism of China's reputation [and other countries involved] at the international level, especially if these criticisms are void, will be detrimental in itself, especially in the context of the next crisis (McCloskey and Heymann, 2020). So, in Heymann's view, the question is whether American critics want better or worse human conditions. This selection is a fateful challenge for the human beings, which specifies the future boundaries of countries and their intention to converge and cooperate to improve the international problems. There have been lots of debates about the US president's unilateral behavior, especially given that the country is in the midst of the next presidential election, but with more than 50 positive cases of COVID-19 (according to the World Health Organization) in the country, and the probability of the spread of the virus, it remains to be seen what the government will plan for.

#### IV. Convergent and Divergent Forces

In addition to the spatiality of the corona crisis and its effects on international security, the temporality of the issue should also be considered, at a time when we observe a confrontation between the supporters of the pessimistic attitude and those of the optimistic attitude towards the cooperation between the great powers. From the pessimistic perspective, this cooperation could be regional, including that between China and ASEAN, to create and strengthen international regimes in order to curb the security threats. On the other hand, there is a pessimistic view that there should be a resistance to globalization of the economy and communications by closing borders and looking inward to avoid the damages of globalization. This approach will do its best to put pressure on other countries and international institutions and regimes by various structural pressure power tools to make them weaker. The timing dimensions of this crisis can be considerable for us. In fact, by addressing the timing of the crisis, in this paper, we are to understand the type and nature of interactions between the great powers, because these interactions and the environment in which the great powers act and react can be effective in resolving the security crises.

**Rivalry Among the Great Powers:** As mentioned in this paper, the perception has always been around that the globalization in economy and communications among countries in the global community increases dependence and convergence between governments, and on the other hand, the vulnerability resulting from these dependencies has increased during a security crisis, including the outbreak of infectious diseases. Following this notion, the international observers believe that countries, especially the great powers, are forced to take co-operative approaches because of these dependencies and in order to reduce the level of security threats and vulnerabilities they face. Attitudes toward such taking these approaches and actions by the great powers and their willingness to deal with the spread of contagious disease in the form of soft security threats are optimistic attitudes,

especially at the present time, and these should indeed be viewed from a pessimistic perspective. Looking at the current peculiarities, we will observe that countries are incapable of adopting a cooperative approach. The reason for this notion, i.e. taking a pessimistic view toward the cooperative approach and strengthening international institutions and regimes among the great powers and the lack of willingness to resolve threats to international security, relies on the acquisition of temporal peculiarities or, in other words, temporality of the crisis. The reality is that the United States, as a superpower in the world has taken an aggressive approach toward other countries and its rivals, as well as in international agreements and treaties during the past four years and since Trump took the office. American strategists explain this approach under the framework of "the age of power competition." They know the countries that they believe are trying to challenge America's dominant power as their strategic rivals. Regardless of how the United States treats the other global agents, including its competitors, and the intensification of its competitiveness with them over the past few years, the weakening of international institutions and regimes which is considered a kind of consolidating factor for the Americans is on the agenda. Withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran, known as JCPOA, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, withdrawal from the so-called Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty "INF", withdrawal from UNESCO, and disputes on the Euro-Atlantic axis over security issues such as the NATO Pact, or the JCPOA, are among the issues that have resulted from US aggressive approach over the past four years.

In such a situation, which is caused by the aggressive actions of the global dominant power, the situation has not been favorable for other actors in this system; for example, the European Union is going through a difficult period since its formation; on the other hand, Britain has left the union, and on the other hand, member states are facing internal problems such as the ambiguous future of immigrants and asylum seekers, budget deficits and the

emergence of extremist right parties in their countries, which has widened the gap between the union's member states. Players outside the Euro-Atlantic axis are also not in a better position than the countries on the axis. The prominent country outside this axis is China. American strategists see China as a strategic competitor to the United States. Therefore, during the past four years, China has come under structural pressure from the global dominant power, the United States. The European Union also sees China as a systematic rival, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) considers the country a political and military threat to the union. China, on the other hand, has found that the West, led by the United States, pursues only a policy of containment and siege against Beijing. Russia is also trying to free itself from the US and European pressure strategy while consolidating its superpower position and its ability to influence global issues. By presenting such temporal peculiarities of the crisis, it should be said that the outcome of these peculiarities, and of course the type of interactions between the great powers based on competitive and aggressive approaches, will be nothing but the spread of anarchy and instability at the global system level.

In such situations, the concerns and interactions among the great powers on the issue of international security are related to the topics and agendas which are generally hardware issues. The point is that in this situation, soft security threats in various fields and dimensions will not only insignificant, but also will turn into a tool for the divergent forces, by which they are to weaken the convergent forces in terms of cooperation strengthening and international regimes. Based on such peculiarities, it should be concluded that divergent forces, which have a pessimistic view of the globalization of the economy and communications and are only pursuing their own interests in this chaotic and unstable environment, will have an upper hand over the pro-cooperative forces, both at regional and international levels. The international community is now facing the spread of a contagious disease called the COVID-19 in the form of a soft security threat that has

emerged in China. Such a crisis in China requires countries and major powers to work together to combat and control the virus and its international consequences. However, in terms of temporality of the crisis, the virus is spreading at a time when divergent and anti-globalization forces have an upper hand over the forces who believe in collective cooperation to resolve international crises. The sensitivity of the issue for the two sides during the outbreak of the coronavirus is because of the main target of this incident in China.

In the confrontation between pro-divergence and convergence forces, the main basis in the argument between the two sides is that China's development in terms of global communications and globalization over the past few decades have led to its global economy and communications to become dependent on the country; more than anything else, the Chinese could Chinesize the world. Now the spread of the virus and its global consequences have given a tool to the pro-divergent sides to be used against China and to develop Sinophobia. It is of significance here that on January 30, 2020, with the increase in the number of fatalities from corona, the World Health Organization declared an emergency situation. However, the head of the organization told a news conference that the organization had not advised the countries to impose travel and trade restrictions, and that the organization was opposed to these restrictions, while having confidence in China's control and containment of the situation. Then, we observed serious travel and trade restrictions between China and various countries.

In fact, a reflection of the upper hand of the pro-divergence forces against the pro-convergence ones can be seen in the statement of the World Health Organization as well as the reactions of other countries to the organization's recommendation. The reality of the international politics is that countries and governments with independent and separate sovereignty are the ultimate decision-makers in implementing measures to counter the threat of soft security threats, including the spread of contagious

and deadly diseases, because it deals with the life of humans and citizens. In addition, there is a belief among many countries that by taking special measures, specifically the flight and travel restrictions, the spread of the virus could be prevented. To what extent these approaches and measures will have fruitful results is beyond the scope of this article, but the reality is that adopting the approaches and measures aiming at protecting the lives of citizens against the deadly virus is one thing, and trying to politicize the matters and adopt a self-centered approach by the pro-divergence forces against the spread of a deadly and contagious virus is another. Speaking at the 56<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2020, Tedros Adhanom, President of the World Health Organization, called on world leaders not to politicize the outbreak of the deadly virus. "We have to give up the hatred," he told in the conference. "It's easy to blame, it's easy to politicize, but the hard thing is to deal with a problem and find common solutions to overcome it. We will all learn from the spread of the virus, but now is not the time to politicize the issues." Wang Yi, the foreign minister of China said on a trip to Germany and in the security conference in Munich: "It has been proven that the epidemic can be controlled and largely treatable. He said: "Any impact that the coronavirus may have on the Chinese economy will be temporary. China's economy is in a good position to overcome all the risks and challenges." China's foreign minister is the country's first high-rank official who has traveled abroad since the outbreak of Coronavirus in order to try to reassure the world at this important security forum that China has the ability to overcome the virus and that stability will return to the economy.

The interactions of the great powers in the current situation and the dominance of competitive approaches toward each other as well as the rise of divergent forces at the global level have made it impossible for these powers to face the soft security threat at this time. Regardless, given the current atmosphere and the emergence of divergent actions from US aggressive behaviors over the past four years, pro-divergence forces are trying to make

the most of existing atmosphere and inflict tensions on pro-convergence forces in resolving the important international crises. This is now true in US-China relations: one side is the dominant power in the global system, and the other, is its major strategic rival and, of course, it tries to counter the threat of this rival. In the meantime, there will be a tense and conflicting atmosphere in my relations between the two great powers; as we may have observed tensions in the relations between the two countries in various fields over the last three years (from economics and trades to politics and security), and the Chinese and Americans are suspicious of each other.

**Coronavirus and the Phenomenon of Sinophobia:** Now the spread of a deadly virus in China and its spread to other countries, in the midst of political and economic turmoil in China's relations with the West, and especially the United States, has grabbed the attention of the public and international observers. In the relations between China and the United States, US officials are now trying to fish in troubled waters and intensify their political pressure on China, given the outbreak of the deadly coronavirus in China. In the wake of the US-led spread of anti-China propaganda using a problem such as the Coronavirus could be an attempt to continue the so-called "Sinophobia" phenomenon in the Western world, which seeks to put China in a difficult psychological and propaganda war under the framework of the so-called "Chinese threat" theory. It is a common phenomenon in international politics that the two countries are both the world's great powers, each trying to advance their own interests with the various tools at their disposal and seize every opportunity to take over the other. But the transmission of this interaction model between these two great powers and how they deal with a soft security threat, which has been manifested in a contagious and deadly virus, is a worrying sign for the international community, that indicates the strengthening of trends related to pro-divergence tendencies at the domestic political level and its spread to the international system, increasing the skepticism of the agents of this system towards

each other, closing the borders and weakening international cooperation to resolve the crises. Over the past three years, the US government has sought to consider China and its behaviors in various dimensions and areas (including the economy, trade, and information technology) as a threat to global security. These efforts now appear to have doubled since the outbreak of the COVID-19, and in the following, on the basis of several senior US political officials, the perceived threat of China is going to be analyzed. During a visit to London on January 30, 2020, US Secretary of States, Mike Pompeo, in a meeting with his British counterpart Dominic Raab, called the Chinese Communist Party a major threat at the present time. Also in a presentation at the 56<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2020, the Secretary of State enumerated the threats of China to the West and the US without referring to the coronavirus, and announced that despite the skepticism and tactical disagreements on the Euro-Atlantic axis, the West will overcome Russia and China.

Speaking at the Security Council, Mark Spencer, the Secretary of Defense described China as an emerging threat against the world order and said: The most populous country in the world robs the West of its technology, intimidates its small neighbors, and seeks superiority at any cost. The two remarks by two high-ranking US officials, amid China's involvement with the Coronavirus, show that the United States continues to use political and security pressure on China and the Communist Party, even when it is threatened by a soft security threat, i.e. the prevalence of the deadly and contagious virus, and so, it could have serious consequences for the health of citizens of other countries. In an interview with Fox Business on January 31, 2020, Wilbur Ross, the US Secretary of Commerce took a stand against the outbreak of the coronavirus. He believes the spread of the virus could have a positive effect on the North American job market, namely the United States and Mexico. "The fact is that this is a thought-provoking issue for the supply chain," he said. "So I think that will help accelerate the return of jobs to North America." The

statement goes on to say that trade and commercial pressures have intensified in the wake of the US trade war against China, which recently reached a ceasefire by concluding the first phase of trade agreement. In a report on February 13, 2020, CNBC quoted a senior US government official as saying that the United States has no confidence in China in terms of the information that the country gives on coronavirus. The US official added that China still rejects US offers to help the country. This report quoted Reuters and Larry Kudlow, Director of the United States National Economic Council at the White House, as saying that China did not appear to be clear about the outbreak of the coronavirus. White House National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien also previously warned of China's rejection of the offer. It is not clear exactly why China rejected or ignored US assistance offers to deal with the spread of the virus. However, since the outbreak of the virus in late January, China has repeatedly criticized the United States for its behavior and intimidation of Corona. The United States was one of the first countries to impose travel restrictions on China after the declaration of emergency by the World Health Organization, and President Trump signed a decree ordering travelers who had traveled to China fourteen days before will not be allowed to enter the country. Another issue of significance is the accusation of China for lack of transparency on the part of some US officials, including Larry Kudlow. Given the non-openness of the media space in China and the lack of independent media and press in the country, one cannot expect Beijing to publish accurate information on the number of people infected with the virus and other important issues, and it seems that the control over the flow of information in China, by the Chinese government and the Communist Party, is aimed at preventing further intimidation of the international community and sending alarming signals to the international economy and trade.

Overall, considering the temporality of the crisis, the adoption of aggressive and unilateral measures by the dominant power at the system level, not only puts other powers under structural

pressure in various aspects, but also will spread chaos and instability. The emergence of such an atmosphere will threaten and weaken the international cooperation in the face of a soft security threat. Now, specifically on the issue of Coronavirus, the type of interaction between the dominant and the other big powers at the international level, namely the United States and China, has not been able to bring the two closer together taking into account the soft security threat in the last four years. The emergence of a security threat in the form of a contagious and deadly disease not only creates a fatal threat to the citizens, but also stagnates the international trade and economy. However, due to the existence of a background of competitive and divergent relations between the great world powers, this crisis has not only caused international cooperation to become weaker, but the created atmosphere has been used to serve the divergent forces in order to put their competitors under extra propaganda and psychological pressures.

**Narrative and Reality in the post-reality era:** Public opinion, media and social networks can be effective in dealing with a security threat, including the occurrence and spread of the COVID-19 and its management methods. In recent decades, with the development and intensification of globalization in economy and communications, we have observed the development of social networks in cyberspace and its public access thanks to the creation of lots of communication software. The expansion of these communication networks and their impact on how the trends of political and security crises in the world are such that their weight cannot be ignored. The onset of the coronavirus crisis should be analyzed base on temporality within such a framework. In fact, in such cases which incur soft security threats to human life and health, if public opinion could not be properly managed, monopoly in information or imposing bans on their use and censorship will only lead to the spread of misinformation among citizens and the creation of conspiracy theories about the origin of the global crisis. Also, a background of competition and suspicion between the great powers, between the United States and China,

and the divergent trends in today's world, given the prejudice among western media and elites (trying to calumniate) and especially in the crisis that China is facing, would create a good platform for spreading false information and conspiracy theories. On the other hand, China could also play a role in this trend due to lack of free and independent media in the country, as well as a ban on the use of Western social media inside the country. In fact, both on spatial and temporal scales, all of these factors will work together to create the right platform for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories that have a profound effect on divergent trends, hatred, and xenophobia.

A reflection of this situation can be observed in the World Health Organization's warning that Internet trolls and conspiracy theories are weakening their response to the coronavirus. "Disseminating misleading information makes it even harder for our heroic agents," said the president of the World Health Organization. "I want to talk briefly about the importance of facts, not fears," he added. "People need to have access to accurate information in order to protect themselves and others. Misleading information about the new type of coronavirus confuses people and frightens them. In the World Health Organization, we are not fighting the virus; we are fighting Internet trolls and conspiracy theories that weaken our response." In a detailed report on January 29, 2020, the British newspaper "The Independent" addressed the issue of conspiracy theories and false information about the Coronavirus outbreak. Here are two examples:

1. Although it seems that the exact origin of the virus has been in China's Wuhan seafood market, but it is still unknown. It is also thought that the first people infected with the new coronavirus caught it from animals because it was diagnosed that the virus is transmitted from animals to humans. A report from the Wuhan Institute of Virus Studies shows that 96% of the genetic arrangement of the new Coronavirus virus is similar to that of bats, which has been a major source of the SARS virus, too. According to the report, videos showing Chinese eating bats have

been released over the past few weeks, and some people are blaming Chinese food habits for the spread of the disease. In a widely circulated video, a young Chinese woman named Wang Mengion is shown eating a bat. However, Ms. Wang said that the film was shot in Palau in 2017 and is not related to the recent outbreak. "I had no idea during the filming that such a virus may have existed," she said. Bat soup is not a common food in China, although recent research has shown that bat can be a possible origin of the virus.

2. Another baseless theory that has surfaced on social media is that the virus is linked to a covert biological weapons program in Wuhan or has been smuggled from a laboratory in Canada. There is no evidence to support any of these claims. The talked-about Canadian Laboratory is the National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg, Canada, which examined a new cluster of coronavirus infections in 2013. However, as mentioned earlier, there are several types of coronavirus, and the lab was investigating MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome). Another unfounded claim that propagated in the cyberspace says the virus is part of China's covert biological warfare program and is likely to be disseminated by the Wuhan Institute for Virology. China has denied the allegations in a statement and said that there is no relationship between this laboratory and the claimed biological weapons program. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, a US-based institution, said the virus was caused by seafood and the animal market in Wuhan. The Center and, of course, the World Health Organization, are still investigating the source of the virus, but none have linked it to biological weapons.

According to the BBC, Russia's "Channel One" broadcasted the conspiracy theories about the coronavirus during the peak hours of the evening. The presenter at Vermia (Time) program links the virus to US President Donald Trump and claims that US intelligence agencies or pharmaceutical companies are behind the outbreak. Another important issue is the articles published in the western media and newspapers in opposition to China, which

shows that some Western elites are still trying to carry out propaganda attacks in the face of a soft security threat that has manifested itself in the form of a contagious and deadly disease that threatens the lives of many citizens, both in China and elsewhere, so that they do not lag behind in competition with this country. Here are just a few examples: Walter Russell Mead, a former member of the US Council on Foreign Relations, a member of the Hudson think tank, a US foreign policy expert and columnist for the Wall Street Journal, misusing the effects of the Coronavirus on the global economy, tried in a note on February 3, 2020, entitled “China is a real sick Asian man” to frighten the world and public opinion of China's economic power and the world's dependence on it. He believes that China's financial markets are likely to be more dangerous in the long run than the country's animal and wildlife markets. The author writes about the destructive effects of the world's economic dependence on China, and believes that while China is an influential power, it is also fragile. From the author's point of view, the spread of a more deadly virus could change and transform China's political and economic landscape at any time. “It seems that the most important long-term consequence of the outbreak of the virus is to “De-Chinese” their supply chains,” he said. “Currently, many fear that the coronavirus will become a global epidemic. The effects of this issue on China's economic collapse will be widespread: commodity prices will fall around the world, supply chains will be disrupted, and only a few financial institutions can escape the consequences. Improvement of the situation in China and elsewhere can be slow, and its social and political implications can be significant.”

**China's reaction:** According to the “Global Times”, Chinese spokesman for the Foreign Minister, Gang Shuang, said: “The racist title of the article by Walter Russell Mead is contrary to the reality and is a violation of professionalism”. Accordingly, media, the Chinese asked Wall Street Journal to apologize and to inquire about those responsible for the article; but the letter newspaper

does not claim responsibility. "This article has caused outrage in Chinese society since its publication," the article continued. "Many citizens are asking how a world-renowned journal can publish such an intolerable racist title."

Also on February 7, 2020, the China Daily made a response to the American expert in its commentary section a note entitled "Who is the real patient; China or a biased author?" "Not only is this article a manifestation of the author's deep anti-Chinese sentiments, but it also shows his empathy and lack of compassion for humanity. It demonstrates the author's inability to see a great picture of what is happening in Wuhan, capital of the Hube Province, as well as other countries, in addition to the denial of Chinese aids as a responsible member of the international community. Prevention and control of epidemics is China's top priority. Walter Russell Mead should put aside his fearful Chinese mentality and try to pay attention to what the president of the World Health Organization has said: "This is a time of reality, not of fear; this is a time for science, not for rumors; this is a time for affinity, not shame". Also, another Chinese journal, named "China Plus", in an article entitled "Xenophobia, more dangerous than the coronavirus" on February 11, 2020, considered conspiracy theories in xenophobia. The author of this article states that the conspiracy theory is spreading faster than the Coronavirus itself. Instead of showing the human health issues as it is, the authors and publishers are eager to convey their fears of xenophobia. "Herald Sun" published in Australia, called it a "Chinese virus" and "Die Zeit", published in Germany, called it a "political virus". Issuing messages on Facebook, Abdul Halim Abdul Karim, a teacher from Singapore, called the virus a rage of God against the Chinese because of the oppression of Muslim Uyghurs. When China is combating this unknown enemy and is taking serious measures to stop the transmission of the virus from Hube to other provinces and countries, these types of articles are damaging the efforts made. Under these circumstances, China is also witnessing internal rumors about the virus stating that it is a virus designed

outside and against China, just as some people abroad are suspicious of China in this regard. Fortunately, the issue of so-called freedom of expression does not prevail here. The spread of such rumors is not allowed in the mainstream media and is not allowed to be published by public figures or celebrities; while in some countries, there is public debate in the defense of freedom of expression, regardless of what is being said. The author finally writes: “Since the World Health Organization calls for global solidarity and putting an end to the epidemic of false rumors or misinformation, it is time to reconsider the social responsibility of the media, because what is at stake is the fight against a danger against the human health and life. This new virus does not know borders, race or politics, like Ebola, SARS and H1N1”.

The above-mentioned issues and examples, such as the spread of false information or false news, conspiracy theories, calumny by creating content on social networks or the media, and even by some elites are real signs of the phenomenon of xenophobia and traces of hatred in the form of racist attacks and ridicule of a particular race in our world today. This shows that the development of global communications and the increase in interdependence, both in trends related to economics and international trade and in processes of the cyberspace and media and the use of social networks, despite its benefits in today's world, can cause discrimination and even hatred of human races, even in the face of the virus and the epidemic that threatens the life and health of humanity. However, the major cause of such interactions, or attacks and counter-attacks, of the media on such an important subject that is related to a soft security threat should be seen in the bigger picture and frame. This picture is a platform for the parties to the crisis to calumniate against each other (a country that is itself involved in the crisis and other countries that are trying to use this crisis to intensify the psychological and propaganda war against China).

**Regional Convergence in Southeast Asia:** The competition between China and the United States, and of course the structural

pressures imposed by this country, will not make China a neutral force and a country that only observes the spread of the instability and turmoil at a macro level in the resolution of the crisis. In fact, the crisis of COVID-19 appears to be a serious threat to China's neighbors, including countries of Southeast Asia; and China and other actors in the region will not allow all-round structural pressure from the United States to overshadow China in confrontation with COVID-19. In fact, it seems that we are witnessing the efforts of some international parties to strengthen the convergent trends to fight against the coronavirus. These parties include China and its trading and economic partners in Southeast Asia, the member states of the ASEAN Assembly. Given the economic and trade interdependence, as well as China's investments in the region, it is imperative that these countries work with China, regardless of the tensions between the major powers at the macro level, to make coordination to counter the threat of the soft security threat, i.e. COVID-19. ASEAN and China receive more than 65 million tourists a year, many of whom are Chinese tourists. Some of these countries have taken precautionary measures against the outbreak of the COVID-19, which can be considered as a response to the warnings of the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020. However, it should be noted that the implementation of protective measures and the recommendations of the World Health Organization, and consequently, the travel restrictions in the world do not necessarily mean aversion to cooperation at regional and even international levels in fighting against COVID-19.

In this regard, an emergency summit of ASEAN foreign ministers, along with the China's foreign minister, was held in Vientiane, Laos, on February 20, 2020. Wang Yi, a member of the State Council and Foreign Minister of China, and Theodore Lichen, the Foreign Minister of the Philippines, the country coordinating ASEAN's relations with China, jointly held the meeting. "One billion and four hundred million Chinese people, led by Chinese President Xi Jinping, are fighting against this

contagious disease with unparalleled determination and solidarity,” said Wang Yi, China's foreign minister. “By implementing the most complete and serious measures necessary, we have created an effective system to prevent and control the coronavirus, and we have demonstrated the "speed" and the "strength" of China in rescuing patients and sufferers; thus, we made time that for all of the world in this path, which illustrates the responsibility of a great country. With the strong leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the great impetus of the nation, the superiority of workings and the high power of a great country, our country is confident that it will win the fight against the coronavirus as soon as possible. The outbreak of the coronavirus posed challenges for China's economic and social development, but this effect is temporary and limited. China's strong, energetic and growing economic trend will not change”. China's foreign minister has made four proposals to fight the new coronavirus:

1. Strengthening the coordination in prevention and control of the disease;
2. Creating an effective long-term working mechanism;
3. Dealing with gossip and prevention of intimidation;
4. Turning hazards to opportunities for the new growth and development.

The foreign ministers of the respective countries agreed to share their regional information and the use of the best timely methods for the exchange of available epidemiological information in order to strengthen their technical guidelines and solutions related to prevention and control, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring. They also agreed to strengthen their capacity to prevent and control infectious and contagious diseases and their re-emergence and to strengthen the exchange of data and information, technology and personnel training. The foreign ministers of the ASEAN countries believe that the meeting was very important and timely. They believe that the global and comprehensive system of controlling disease in China has been unique and respectable. ASEAN members are going to exchange

the experiences with China to enhance the health security of the region. On the other hand, China is trying to promote the messages of friendship to ASEAN members and the countries of the region so that it can neutralize Western attacks and propaganda against itself. The development of China's integration with the region could be an effective and efficient way to expand international cooperation and attract the attention of other countries to help fight and control the virus.

### **V. Iran and the New Coronavirus “COVID-19”**

Iran is also involved in this virus and its epidemic. According to the latest official statistics, 57 people have died of the virus in Iran so far. The president of the World Health Organization said, “The increase in cases of and fatalities from the coronavirus has caused a great deal of concern in Iran, as the cause and origin of the corona outbreak in Iran could not be traced. This outbreak, which is outside the origin of the epidemic, China, is very worrying; because it is not clear where its main source comes from. It is really difficult to stop the spread of the disease in countries outside China and it can spread rapidly.” The fact is that, Iran and the outbreak of new coronavirus in the country cannot be analyzed outside the framework of spatiality and temporality. In fact, as with China and other countries, Iran is also faced with its own challenges and problems. China is Iran's biggest business partner; thus, within both spatiality and temporality frameworks, Iran will be affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 and its effects on the international trade and economics. On the spatiality of the crisis, it should be noted that the shutdown of businesses and their economic activities in China, followed by a decline in China's demand for oil, will have serious consequences on the oil market, and this will definitely affect Iran. The bulk of Iran's exports to China include energy, i.e. oil and its products. Given that China has reduced its demand for oil, Iran's oil exports to China and its revenues will be undoubtedly damaged. Of course, the damage is definitely based on the assumption that China, in the most

optimistic scenario possible, will continue to receive 250,000 barrels of oil per day from Iran and make its payments, but this is not the end of the story. The problem will become clear by addressing the temporality of the crisis. Putting this crisis in the context of temporality will complicate the issues for Iran, because, regardless of the effects that this crisis will have on China and the global economy, this crisis will be a little more complicated in Iran than in other countries. The variable that can be important to Iran in terms of the complexity of the situation in the context of the temporality of the crisis is the US and the maximum pressure strategy that is imposed on Iran through its unilateral sanctions instruments. Even prior to the outbreak of the new coronavirus, economic and trade relations between Iran and China had undergone a change and have also been affected by this variable. The decline of the volume of the Iranian oil imported by China and the reduction of bilateral trade between the two countries is due to the unilateral sanction imposed by Washington against Tehran, and now, with the spread of the COVID-19, it is not expected that any significant changes could be observed in the current trade situations.

In this regard, the German Deutsche Welle news agency reported on the reduction of Iran's foreign trade on November 23, 2019. "China's customs statistics show that total oil and non-oil imports of China from Iran during the three quarters of the year 2019 have reduced 37% to reach \$ 10.940 billion. Also, China's exports to Iran have reduced 38% to reach \$ 7.23 dollars". On January 24, 2020, China's customs also reported on the significant reduction of the mutual trades between China and Iran in 2019, "Iran's exports to China during the last year (2019) reduced 36% to reach \$ 13.434 billion and China's exports to Iran reduced 31% to reach \$ 9.590 billion." Statistics show that before the COVID-19 crisis, Iran-China trade relations were subject to negative transformations due to the US strategy of maximum pressure on Iran; and China, fearful of US Treasury sanctions against the country, has been forced to align with Washington's sanctions

against Iran. If, in the most optimistic scenario, the coronavirus does not worsen the relations between Iran and China, definitely, no positive change will be going to occur. Here, the effect of the US pressure and the strategy of maximum pressure on Iran and the trade situations between Tehran and Beijing, and its coincidence with the COVID-19 crisis will cause dealing with this virus to be overshadowed by tensions in Iran-US relations. And Washington's sanctions seem to be an obstacle to Iran's response to the virus. In this regard, in a report in the Newsweek on February 24, 2020, entitled "American sanctions, obstacles in the path of controlling coronavirus in Iran", Tom O'Connor wrote "Iran is trying to combat the spread of the coronavirus; however, these efforts have become complicated by the severe economic sanctions posed by the United States."

## **Conclusion**

According to the above, the coronavirus should be considered as a phenomenon that will cause damage to other countries in the international interdependence context. At the same time, the structure of the international system has placed a responsibility on China, as well as on international organizations and other countries, to combat this transnational threat. In addition to controlling the issue at the national level, China seeks to pursue its foreign policy by taking a decisive policy that has been used from the start of Xi Jinping administration with the aim of getting achievements and moving away from a peaceful and soothed politics. It should be said that since 2002, the occurrence of SARS, until 2019, reappearance of COVID-19, the variable of spatiality of the crisis, that is, the weight of the global economy in trade equations and the global economy has become clearer. In 2002, unlike now, we could not observe any discrimination or even competition among the great powers. Although China was an emerging power, it did not have much economic weight and was not at the center of global attention. At the time, the international community's focus was on the fight against terrorism, and the

spread of epidemics had led the international community to reach a consensus on soft security threats, both on terrorism and the disease. The type of reaction of the international community and international institutions to epidemics at that time and in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is important.

The outcome of the confrontation between pro-divergence and pro-convergence forces at the global level (within a temporality framework) can be clearly seen in the trade and economic relations between Iran and China due to the influence of the United States and its maximum pressure strategy against Tehran using unilateral sanctions. It is too early to estimate the effects of COVID-19 on the process, but it is clear that the outbreak of the coronavirus in the country will cause damages to various commercial sectors. The outbreak of a deadly and contagious virus within Iranian borders, regardless of whether it could threaten human life in the first place and economic and commercial activities in the second, will be followed by the reactions of Iran's neighbors.



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