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Book Review: The Geopolitics of Covid-19

Louay Abdelfettah

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Géopolitique du Covid-19: Ce que nous révèle le crise du coronavirus [The Geopolitics of Covid-19: What the Coronavirus Crisis Tells Us] is a somewhat adventurous book. Written by Pascal Boniface, the director of the Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS) in Paris, and released in mid-2020, it considers the coronavirus pandemic as a factor of global geopolitical import with the potential to induce significant changes in the system of power relations, political influence, and trends in interests and influence around the world.

The book seeks to address the need for data-supported diagnoses that can assist in assessing possible geostrategic developments by integrating economic, health, and societal variables. Boniface adopts a graduated methodology throughout the book's ten chapters, proceeding from an analysis of the most comprehensive dimension of the geopolitical repercussions of the coronavirus crisis by examining assumptions about the status of the Western model, the apparent triumph of China and admonitions about the 'communist threat', the United States in retreat, indecisive Europe, and other assertions of 'the end of globalization', as well as the crisis of multilateralism and the alarming restriction of freedoms due to the health emergency. The book concludes that given existing geopolitical parameters, the fallout from the Covid-19 crisis may not lead to profound reconsiderations of the heart of the international order, but it does offer Europe the opportunity to view itself as a coherent sphere independent of American hegemony.

The book starts with a description of the astonishment that accompanied the spread of the virus. Although there were powerful signs and warnings about a possible pandemic, these did not spur governments to take action and prepare.

Boniface believes that talk of strategic or historical revolution is overblown, as contingent events are confused with 'natural' structural shifts that result in a genuine transformation of the international order. The Covid-19 crisis falls somewhere between these two poles, but its impact was limited to pre-existing issues such as the China-US rivalry, the crisis of pluralism, unresolved

European issues, and debates about the limits of globalization. However, the pandemic did change much in the terminology and literature around these topics, giving added depth to and reinforcing many relevant facts and perceptions. According to Boniface, 'There is indeed a Covid-19 moment at the geopolitical level'. It is a watershed moment of uncertain implications.

The author ponders lessons to be learned from the fact that Western countries had no advantage over other states in coping with the pandemic, citing an arsenal of shocking incidents, events, and facts about the spread of the coronavirus in Western countries. These are rich, modern states that do not hesitate to promote their civilizational model, yet they found themselves unable to deal with a health shock. Undoubtedly, this warped the self-image they constantly sought to show to others. It was the sudden collapse of a model of 'greatness' that everyone believed was an exemplar of durability and strength, and it engendered an awareness of how narrow the gap is between North and South and between the West and the rest, although the West has yet to sufficiently absorb this fact. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the sense of superiority ingrained in Western thought and the hubris that led these states to throw caution and prudence to the wind, making them vulnerable and brittle in the face of the pandemic.

The book notes that there are many powers across the world that critique the Western model and spurn the West's oft-touted self-image. The problem is that the West discounts this rejection. It is incapable of formulating a coherent, competitive strategy, preferring to 'lash out' in every direction,¹ unaware that it is gradually losing the means that enabled it to impose its own interests on others.

As for globalization, which the West saw as the product of its own superiority, it produced a transnational epidemic, losing some of its substance as borders turned into a new kind of Iron Curtain and producing, for the first time in history, a globalized fear shared by all of humanity. But globalization has never meant the end of borders. What happened was a forced transition from the real to the virtual, coupled with a reconstitution of the nation-state within its territory as a refuge for its citizens. However, the West discovered that because of globalization other nations like China could shift the balance of power against it.

The West looked on anxiously as China not only was *not* overwhelmed by Covid-19, but emerged victorious and even stronger, released from the virus early on while other states continue to suffer badly. According to Boniface, for the West, China's rise represents an amalgamation of the 'yellow peril' and the communist threat, backed by a strong economic performance and a comradely diplomatic offensive. Whatever the West's criticism of China for its handling of the pandemic, it gave China the opportunity to develop its soft power. Through its global assistance and cooperation for the benefit of humankind, China appears poised to win an all-out war against Covid-19 based on a pragmatic approach that combines the promotion of health protection with positive action on its Belt and Road Initiative.

Noting the West's fear for its democracy and values from an ascendant communist superpower, the author asserts that China does not have the same kind of political and ideological plans and backgrounds as the Soviet Union. Rather, it pursues its economic interests, and its confrontation with the West is a traditional confrontation between major powers. In short, China is more Chinese

than communist. The West, however, is disturbed to think that it might be overtaken by an Asian dictatorship that offers an authoritarian model of economic power based on a capitalist mode of production. According to Boniface, the best option for the West is to view Chinese ambitions rationally, without insisting on promoting the Western democracy/Chinese dictatorship dichotomy, which will not be convincing or attractive to non-Westerners.

As for the United States, the author asserts that it has become ‘a volatile superpower’. President Trump did not manage the coronavirus crisis with an eye to science or even health, but rather to electoral politics. His mismanagement of the pandemic was enough to make him ‘pull the trigger’ on China and the World Health Organization. The book seeks to demonstrate the vast distance between in the way that the US and China managed the crisis internationally. It is clear to Boniface that the pandemic will fuel conflict and rivalry between the two countries instead of offering a point of cooperation. In the US, the relationship with China, once a central strategic and diplomatic issue of public consensus, has become merely a topic for manufactured electoral sparring.

The book notes that China accepts the existing international order and—unlike the US—is integrating rationally and effectively into its institutions.² This allows China to advance, exert influence, and join the international order, in a way that plays to its interests in power relations. In contrast, the US is anxious; it wants to contain China’s rise and cannot accept that another power—Asian and communist—might outstrip it, the exceptional country. Short of armed conflict, the most likely scenario is on-going rivalry, competition, and various forms of mutual harassment. The Covid-19 pandemic could only feed the animosity between the two powers. The struggle for global leadership between Chinese ambition and American anxiety will be the main structural feature of international relations.

Regarding the European Union, the book asserts that its response to the pandemic lacked adequate coordination and solidarity, its members acting unilaterally and sometimes selfishly. But Europe found its footing and, according to Boniface, was able to generate inter-European solidarity and act in a genuinely multilateral way towards other countries of the world in the face of American disengagement and China’s ‘sometimes suffocating’ presence.

In this context, there is room for Europe, through a non-interventionist pluralism that respects the identity and particularity of others, to present itself as an all-around player rather than simply an all-around donor. But it has yet to realize that it does not share the same concerns and goals as the US, which is preoccupied with its own particular problem of Chinese precedence. Europe will not want to antagonize China, and, according to Boniface, it no longer needs America’s protection and should instead take a more objective view of its interests. But would America easily go along with this potential European brushoff? Would it even permit it as it seeks to rein in China?

Finally, the book takes up one important and controversial impact of the coronavirus pandemic: the erosion of many rights and freedoms due to states of emergency. Exceptional laws have been enacted; some penalties have been made harsher; assemblies, movements, and demonstrations have been suspended; and personal data and the private lives of individuals have been infringed in various ways. Yet, Boniface sees all these as temporary manifestations of the crisis and believes,

too, that they will spur civil society, the media, and public opinion to demand an accounting from governments regarding the validity of the methods and means used to manage the crisis. If pandemic surveillance requires the close monitoring of individuals, it similarly calls for stricter oversight of governments and corporations.

Contra Giorgio Agamben's view of 'the permanent state of exception',³ Boniface recommends broadening the important debate about the paradoxes of freedom and security beyond the narrow sphere of crises, provided it is conducted in an open, participatory, and pluralistic way, whether at the national or international levels. He asserts that if governments tend to curb people's freedoms, through their resistance to these restrictions and other demands, people acquire new rights.

But how can effective international cooperation be established on any issue in light of the profound crisis of multilateralism exposed by the coronavirus pandemic? And especially with the US's progressive disengagement from the world, particularly under the Trump administration?

Certainly, many criticisms can be made of international institutions—some of the most important and obvious multilateral frameworks—but it is equally certain that their absence would not have led to better engagement with the pandemic. Indeed, such institutions have for decades played major roles in fighting epidemics and diseases around the world, and there is no doubt that the unilateral American approach will severely damage the universal resistance to the pandemic and the international order more generally. Given the lack of substance of the demand for a new system of global governance, the author advocates a more effective health warning system. In a globalized space, in which all challenges facing humanity must be addressed through consultation and coordination in multilateral frameworks, international institutions are indispensable.

About the Author

Louay Abdelfettah is a lecturer of international relations at Mohamed I University – Morocco, and a researcher in topics of security, human rights, and geopolitical studies.

¹ Mahbubani, Kishore (2018) *L'Occident s'est-il perdu? Une provocation* (Paris: Fayard), p. 18.

² Véron, Emmanuel, and Emmanuel Lincot (2020) 'Organisations internationales: le spectre d'une hégémonie chinoise se concrétise', *The Conversation*, 21 April, <https://bit.ly/3nLzjOQ>.

³ Agamban, Giorgio (2003) *État d'exception* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).