

## Coronavirus is accelerating the China-West divide

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Even though humanity is facing a crisis that could be mitigated through global collaboration, the world is seemingly becoming more divided.

This sentiment was a key takeaway from a virtual meeting of global experts on China-West relations on Friday, Mar. 20. The private video conference, planned by members of the China-West Dialogue (CWD), was organized before the coronavirus pandemic and was intended to happen in-person at Boston University. Access was provided under an agreement that comments made during the conference were not for attribution. The topic of conversation for the more than 20 attendees of the first-ever CWD meeting was the search for a 21st-century international order. COVID-19 ended up acting as a case study for the broader issue of faltering multilateral co-operation.

“The crisis that we are facing makes it clear that events are going to drive institutional change, instead of institutional change driving events,” explained a founding member of CWD in his opening remarks.

CWD was established in April 2019 by 11 leading policy experts and academics\* as a project out of the Vision20 (V20) to discuss the future of global governance between China and the West. The V20 was founded after the 2016 G20 summit in China by Alan Alexandroff, director of the global summitry project, Colin Bradford of the Bookings Institution’s global economy and development program, and Yves Tiberghien, a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia. V20 is a call for a new blueprint in the global system, and the most fragile geopolitical relationship that these three scholars have identified is between China and the U.S.

The world might not have been prepared, but coronavirus has intensified the rivalry between China and the West. At the beginning of the CWD meeting, a Harvard University professor and noted China expert mentioned that the more the leaders of these countries lay blame on each other, the more difficult it will be to revive international co-operation. U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly called COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus,” and China’s president, Xi Jinping, along with other Chinese officials have started a national campaign which says the U.S. military brought the coronavirus to China. This conspiracy theory spread widely in official circles.

This rhetoric of propaganda and indirect accusations has led many people to compare the current global order to the Cold War. However, this is too simplistic. China and the U.S. are divided in many ways, like the Soviet Union and the U.S. were. The fundamental difference is the world is much more interconnected than in the 50 years after the Second World War, and U.S. and China’s economies are more interdependent than those of the U.S. and Soviet Union, noted a Chilean international relations scholar and diplomat.

“This is not a zero-sum competition with China,” mentioned a leading social policy expert, during the meeting segment on the response to the current global health and economic crisis.

In 2020, we have the luxury of modern technology and communication to aid multilateral co-operation, but coronavirus is propelling the world towards populism and decoupling. CWD experts say this is part of the “extreme damage” done by the U.S.-China dispute over coronavirus.

A U.S. foreign policy professional who participated in the meeting noted that the world is acting as if pandemics impact authoritarian states and democracies differently. Still, the truth is that viruses don’t care about political beliefs; they will attack indiscriminately. There is no distinct pattern in terms of ideologies or governing systems for the countries that have managed to control the spread of COVID-19.

Countries should not just think about the foreign policy implications of coronavirus, but also realize how their actions impact domestic policies. Discussions that include sentiments such as “our country is better” propel populism. One political science professor from North America stated that, in China, this nationalism can be seen by the necessity to “rally around the regime” to feel safe.

International relations scholars have pointed out that young people and the middle class in China are supportive of global order, but the more they feel attacked by the West, the less they will want to co-operate. Not only is this true for this demographic in China, but elsewhere, too. The government and authorities will only continue to alienate young people around the world with this polarization.

One of the facilitators of the CWD meeting pushed the idea that national governability is the source for global governance – that inequality must be checked - by saying that “we need to build a global order not only from the outside but also from the inside.” This necessity is not only for the U.S. and China but also in Europe, where the rise of the far-right is of grave concern to the well-being of status-quo states.

CWD meeting participants agreed that there are some areas within the global order we need to accept we won’t see eye to eye on, and areas where we can reach a middle ground. However, the world needs to be tolerant to work together to combat problems that span beyond national borders.

“If we want to deal with these global issues, you can’t just shut 50 per cent of the world off because you don’t like their policies,” said a long-time politician when referring to the importance of countries working together.

\* “Core Member” of the CWD Project initiated on April 10, 2019:

Alan Alexandroff (Canada), Jack Austin (Canada), Colin Bradford (United States), Chen Dongxiao (China), Jorge Heine (Chile), Johannes Linn (Germany and the United States), Dennis Snower (Germany), Yves Tiberghien (Canada and France), Nicolas Véron (European Union), Richard Wike (United States), and Ye Yu (China)