

# Chapter 15

## The Corona Pandemic in Central Asia



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### 15.1 Background<sup>1</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has proved to be a stress test in nearly all policy areas in Central Asian states since 2020. While healthcare, education and economics were some of the early targets, the novel coronavirus also upended nations' international agendas. Leaders' summits, now in an online format, focused on the pandemic. More broadly, Covid-19 has turned into a major variable in debates on globalisation, institutions or global inequality that can also be illustrated by looking at cases in Central Asian countries. The pandemic has exposed the pre-existing conditions of international relations in the region, hampering regional cooperation and significantly impacting Central Asia's relations with key extra-regional powers.

Although there is no right time for a pandemic, Covid-19 spread at a time when the world seemed best prepared to tackle it. Being a global problem by definition, a pandemic requires a global response. The proliferation of international institutions and cooperation regimes since the end of the Cold War, in this respect, should have prepared the world to effectively cope with problems such as Covid-19. However, the year 2020 demonstrated the above was not the case. The novel coronavirus quickly spotted and exposed significant "pre-existing conditions" in the current international system. The biggest of ills included competitive relations between major powers of the world and growing isolationism.

Covid-19 struck when the "global village" mode of international cooperation was under pressure. In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, the role model of international cooperation. A few months after Brexit, the US elected a

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new president who championed an American exit from its international engagements. The events revealed the resurgence of nationalism and the crisis of international institutions that many took for granted. Thus, the populist-nationalist isolationism of the world's chief enabler of globalisation marked a consequential "pre-existing condition" of the international system, preceding the news from Wuhan.

Once a pandemic, Covid-19 quickly tilted the balance. If globalisation was about international trade and travel, both got hit early and badly. Stay at home rules swiftly came to also imply staying in the home country. The US, already sceptical about its international engagements, pulled out of the World Health Organization, questioning its credibility and accusing it of being Beijing's puppet. Covid-19 also exposed "deeper fractures, both within Europe and between Europe and the United States," as Dominique Moisi argued.<sup>2</sup> More recently, "vaccine nationalism" has grown prominent as nations rushed to book jabs for their population.

## 15.2 Regional cooperation in Central Asia

International (non-)cooperation has long been one of Central Asia's most severe "health conditions." Despite much talk of regional integration in the 1990s, the five post-Soviet states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have never managed to institutionalise regional cooperation. Spoilers included both Central Asian states sceptical of regionalism and extra-regional powers too eager to be part of anything Central Asian. National leaders' power posturing also contributed to recurring disputes over borders, water resources, or energy supplies.

In 2016, when the West got Brexit and Trump, Central Asia received a boost for greater regional cooperation. The change came following the power transition in Uzbekistan, a geographically central state of Central Asia. The new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, declared Central Asian cooperation was the top priority for Tashkent, a dramatic departure from his predecessor's policy. Border checkpoints, closed for many years, were reopened in Ferghana valley. In 2018, the region's leaders resumed annual "consultative meetings."

The pandemic in 2020 and 2021 halted the just emerging positive trend. The third consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders, scheduled in Bishkek, was postponed due to Covid-19.<sup>3</sup> Strict travel restrictions were imposed within the region. At an early phase, countries also resorted to unilateral trade restrictions in a bid to redress the food panic among the population.

However, at a broader level, the damage from the pandemic to regional cooperation among the Central Asia governments was relatively small. First, the starting point was low. Occasional restrictions on travel or trade are anything but novel in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Moisi, Dominique. 'The West's Pandemic of Fear | by Dominique Moisi'. Project Syndicate, 30 March 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/covid19-could-halt-western-decline-by-dominique-moisi-2020-03>.

<sup>3</sup> Later, it was postponed again, this time due to political turbulence in Kyrgyzstan.

Central Asian states do not have functioning regional cooperation platforms. In other words, there was little substance in regional cooperation that the pandemic could have tested. Second, and on a more optimistic side, Central Asian states maintained a positive spirit in their communication. The Uzbek president led by reaching out on the phone to each counterpart in the pandemic's early stage. Furthermore, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan joined a larger group of "supporters" of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, sending medications, food and construction materials.

### 15.3 Less Competition—Less Free-Riding

Competition between nations is another significant "feature" of international relations, inevitable for some and unfortunate for others. In the past, pandemics could significantly affect power competition by depopulating empires or weakening armies.<sup>4</sup> For all the statistics, Covid-19 does not appear to pose an existential threat to troops, and international power rivalry is less about manpower anyway. What was, then, the Covid-19 impact for international competition, and particularly in Central Asia, a beloved spot of great-gamers?

In 2015, well before the Covid-19 pandemic, Graham Allison wrote that the biggest geopolitical question of the day was the impact of "China's ascendance [...] on the U.S.-led international order."<sup>5</sup> The pandemic might have turned the question more urgent for the US, not less. Instead of forcing collaboration, the pandemic "added fuel to the simmering U.S.-China rivalry."<sup>6</sup> The pre-Covid trade war between the two had little impact on trade, while the pandemic reminded everyone that half of the world's masks were produced in China.<sup>7</sup>

Central Asia is not one of the battlegrounds of the above power transition. Following the pullout of most troops from Afghanistan, the US left the region to two other powers, China and Russia, as authoritative American experts argued back in 2016.<sup>8</sup> In other words, there was little of a great game in Central Asia before

<sup>4</sup> Drezner, Daniel W. 'The Song Remains the Same: International Relations After COVID-19'. *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (December 2020): E18–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000351>.

<sup>5</sup> Allison, Graham. 'Destined for War: Can China and the United States Escape Thucydides's Trap?' *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, Fiona et al. 'Balancing Act: Major Powers and the Global Response to US-China Great Power Competition'. The Brookings Institution, July 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/balancing-act-major-powers-and-the-global-response-to-us-china-great-power-competition/>.

<sup>7</sup> 'How China Won Trump's Trade War and Got Americans to Foot the Bill'. *Bloomberg.Com*, 11 January 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-11/how-china-won-trump-s-good-and-easy-to-win-trade-war>; Bradsher, Keith, and Liz Alderman. 'The World Needs Masks. China Makes Them, but Has Been Hoarding Them.' *The New York Times*, 13 March 2020, sec. Business. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/business/masks-china-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Rumer, Eugene, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski. 'US. Policy toward Central Asia 3.0'. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2016.

the Covid-19. What was, then, the Covid-19 impact on the state of Central Asia's relations with its big extra-regional partners?

Covid-19 demonstrated that less geopolitical competition meant less free-riding for Central Asian states, particularly the smaller and poorer ones. Finding easy and quick external solutions to domestic problems proved to be problematic during the pandemic. The most notable "cold shower" was China's silence on Kyrgyzstan's repeated, if false-started, pleas for debt relief in view of Covid's economic damage throughout 2020.<sup>9</sup> Since 2010, Beijing became Kyrgyzstan's biggest lender, with its loans praised as quick and flexible. However, the loud silence on debt relief appeals meant Central Asia now saw China's other side, not as benign and generous as known in the past.

On the one hand, the above change was a direct implication of the current crisis. The pandemic has severely affected Central Asia's external partners, too. Thus, in the recent past, following some domestic upheavals, Kyrgyzstan's leaders could summon large "donor conferences" for emergency fund-raising.<sup>10</sup> Now, the pandemic has hit all, and the world's richest and most ambitious actors have their own wounds to heal first. On the other hand, the global health crisis highlighted the already evident decrease in the "competition index" in Central Asia that left little reason for the extra-regional patrons to keep playing softly.

## 15.4 Widening Gap Within the Region

The third "health condition" in international relations that Covid-19 exposed was the gulf between richer and poorer parts of the world. The coronavirus hit first and worst the older and weaker people. Similarly, the pandemic highlighted how vulnerable were the developing countries of the world. The Economist's calculations on Covid-19 vaccination progress suggested that Central Asian states, except Kazakhstan, were at the bottom of the four-tier hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> This group would vaccinate the population no earlier than 2023, while the first group (the US and most of Europe) would complete the task by the end of 2021.

Covid-19 has also amply demonstrated the widening gap within Central Asia. Several factors illustrate the case. First, the pandemic exposed the unhealthy

<sup>9</sup> Kyrgyzstan's president, Soornbay Jeenbekov appealed for debt deferral in April and September 2020. See Asanov, Bakyt. 'Kyrgyzstan poprosil u Kitaya otsrochki po dolgam. Chto otvetit Pekin? (Kyrgyzstan asked China for a debt deferral. What will Beijing answer?)'. Azattyk, 15 April 2020. <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-kitay-kredit-otsrochka/30557585.html>, and Torogeldi uulu, Bakyt. 'Kyrgyzstan prosit Kitay otsrochit' vyplatu dolgov (Kyrgyzstan asks China to delay payment of debts)'. Azattyk, 14 September 2020. <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30838154.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Pannier, Bruce. 'Donors Pledge \$1.1 Billion For Kyrgyzstan'. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 27 July 2010. [https://www.rferl.org/a/Kyrgyzstan\\_Seeks\\_1\\_Billion\\_In\\_Aid/2110729.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Kyrgyzstan_Seeks_1_Billion_In_Aid/2110729.html).

<sup>11</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. 'More than 85 Poor Countries Will Not Have Widespread Access to Coronavirus Vaccines before 2023', 27 January 2021. <https://www.eiu.com/n/85-poor-countries-will-not-have-access-to-coronavirus-vaccines/>.

economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These two are among the top countries of the world in terms of the share of remittances in the country's GDP. When Covid-19 closed businesses worldwide, labour migrants suffered badly, leading to a significant drop in Central Asia-bound remittances. Also, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan stood out for their massive debts to China and were listed among a few countries facing the risk of debt distress.<sup>12</sup> Pandemic-related business closures shrank already miserable government revenues, pushing the leaders to seek debt relief.

Second, Covid-19 has marked a deepening gap between the richer and poorer states in the region. In 2020, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took proactive measures to assist cash-strapped neighbours, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. A helping hand was offered on more than one occasion, including medications, protective gear, and grain. Uzbekistan also funded the construction of several mobile medical facilities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to support fighting Covid-19. The divide between richer and poorer parts of Central Asia is not a novelty. However, for most of the past decades, the region's countries managed to have transactional relations while aid mostly came from outside the region. Covid-19 contributed to a more visible hierarchy in the region.

## 15.5 Concluding Remarks

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed several vulnerabilities in Central Asia's international relations. The first was a lack of any regional cooperation framework. Ad hoc meetings of state leaders aside, Central Asia lacked effective instruments to coordinate the response to crises, such as Covid-19, whether in medical, economic or political aspects. Second, the pandemic demonstrated the limits of free-riding that some Central Asian states enjoyed for most of the past decades. Covid-19, combined with dwindling great power competition in the region, reminded that benign and generous "big friends" could not be taken for granted. Finally, the pandemic vividly reminded about the precariousness of smaller and weaker Central Asian economies. Simultaneous drops in remittances, external aid and domestic revenues, compounded by colossal debt repayments might look an unusual combination. However, the pandemic demonstrated that it was not an impossible one.

On a positive side, Covid-19 had not exacerbated relations between Central Asian states. Although leaders' face-to-face meetings were put off, high-level communication maintained the spirit of mutual support. Obviously, the starting point of regional cooperation was very low, and it would take an effort to generate a negative trend.

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<sup>12</sup> Fernholz, Tim. 'Eight Countries in Danger of Falling into China's "Debt Trap"'. Quartz. 8 March 2018. <https://qz.com/1223768/china-debt-trap-these-eight-countries-are-in-danger-of-debt-overloads-from-chinas-belt-and-road-plans/>.

Nevertheless, the pandemic reminded us that Central Asia's priority must be on building resilience through deeper cooperation, healthier economies and smarter policymaking.

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