

# KFCRIS Report on the Regional and International Impacts of Coronavirus

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# Overview Current Situation

The Trump administration announced that it was halting further funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), claiming that the UN Agency has been incompetent in its management of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. More to the point, the Trump administration accused the WHO of being biased

towards China, for example, aiding China in its initial cover-up. Rather than facilitating grounds for cooperation and international solidarity, the pandemic outbreak has not halted the downward trend in Sino-American relations, locked as they are, since July 2018, in a protracted trade war. In February, as coronavirus began to spread around the globe, the US government designated several Chinese official media outlets such as Xinhua and CGTN as 'foreign missions' that had to register with the State Department. In retaliation, the following month, the Chinese government expelled American journalists associated with the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal, some of whom

were in lockdown in Wuhan covering the outbreak. In March, President Trump formally signed the TAIPEI Act, a piece of legislation that calls for enhancing Taiwan's global alliances and representation in various international bodies such as the WHO—a move strongly opposed by Beijing.

Further compounding the problem has been the eruption of a 'war of words' between the two sides that shows little sign of abating. The Trump administration and its supporters have insisted on describing the describing the pandemic as the 'Chinese virus' in order to counteract what they perceive as China's efforts in international forums,

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## Latest Coronavirus Statistics as of: 19 April 2020

### SAUDI ARABIA

On 12 April, King Salman extended the nationwide curfew until further notice due to the spread of coronavirus after the kingdom reported more than 300 new infections on each of the previous four days. Additionally, Saudi Arabia placed its capital Riyadh and other large cities under a 24-hour curfew, locking down much of the population to stem the spread of the virus. Outside the main urban centers, the curfew which began on March 23, runs from 3 p.m. to 6 a.m.

Confirmed cases: **9362**

Deaths: **97**

Recovered: **1398**

### Individual Countries

Up-to-date statistics on confirmed cases, deaths and recovered in specific countries can be found here:

<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>  
[www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/](http://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/)

If you are interested in contributing to future reports, please email **Dr. Mark C. Thompson** with a short outline of your proposed topic:  
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such as the WHO, to obfuscate the origins of the pandemic. Additionally, the administration has ascribed direct blame to the Communist Party asserting that it not only mishandled the crisis but also underreported the actual numbers of cases and deaths. Chinese officials have largely returned the favour. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' combative spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who has a record of propagating conspiracy theories, aired the view that coronavirus was manufactured by the American military. Other Chinese media outlets,

drawing their strength from nationalist currents in the country, have promoted disinformation of a similar vein, suggesting that the United States, as opposed to China, is the real source of the disease.

More recently, American officials have cast suspicions around China's 'mask diplomacy', i.e., Beijing's propaganda campaign highlighting its extension of medical assistance to various nations overwhelmed by the pandemic. American officials have also capitalized on incidences against

Africans in Guangzhou perpetrated by local authorities there—which effectively sparked a crisis in Sino-African relations—to score points in the propaganda struggle with China. Regardless of the pandemic's impact, bilateral relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China are transforming structurally into a bitter and competitive rivalry. Undoubtedly, this rivalry will be a significant feature of the post coronavirus geopolitical landscape well into the future.

# Commentary & Analysis

The KFCRIS weekly report on the regional and international impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) comes at a critical time. In response to the spreading pandemic, governments continue to enforce quarantines, curfews and 'lockdowns' that impact national economies and the lifestyles of millions of people. Hence, this weekly report aims to interview a diverse range of individuals including policy makers, academics, and thinkers to seek their opinions on the impact of this pandemic as it relates to their area of interest. In this KFCRIS weekly report on the regional and international impacts of coronavirus, Martin Griffiths, United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, argues that the world has a responsibility to draw on the coronavirus lessons and realize our collective safety will depend on how our most vulnerable nations cope with the pandemic. Wang Jisi, Professor in the School of International Studies and President of the Institute of the International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, in conversation with Mohammed Al-Sudairi, KFCRIS Non-Resident Senior Researcher and Head Of The Asian Studies Unit, discusses the pandemic's impact on China-US relations. and Sebastian Maier, Middle East Director at the London-based Strategic Advisory and Political Risk firm GMTL, looks at how Germany has dealt with the virus.

## Collective safety will depend on how our most vulnerable nations cope with the coronavirus crisis

### Martin Griffiths

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely tested the ideals of international cooperation. The turmoil is reminding us that everyone in the world is connected. A virus like Covid-19 does not respect borders or lines of conflict. It has in one way or another affected every person on this planet. The world is as strong as its most vulnerable.

Countries blighted by conflict are arguably the world's most vulnerable now. Take Yemen, for example. As the conflict enters its sixth year, its healthcare system is in tatters. Nearly half of all healthcare facilities have stopped working; almost 20 million Yemenis lack access to basic health services; and healthcare workers in large swathes of the country are not



**Martin Griffiths**

UN Special Envoy for Yemen

being paid. As I write this, there has been one confirmed case of Covid-19 in Yemen. Lessons from around the world show us how intertwined our fates are. The international community should step in and help Yemen prepare to combat the disease. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has already pledged 25 million USD. I hope that many other nations and entities will follow.

The UN and humanitarian community are doing everything possible to prepare for the storm ahead. I know that Yemeni health authorities are also trying to do their best to curb the spread of the virus. But the truth is, it is unrealistic to expect any meaningful containment of the disease while the war rages on.

The United Nations Secretary-General has called on the warring parties in Yemen to end hostilities in order to combat the virus. The positive response to this call from Yemenis across the country has been overwhelming. The parties have also supported publicly his call. Now is the time to turn words into action. On 9 April, the Arab Coalition announced a unilateral two-week ceasefire to support my initiative to end comprehensively this war. I am extremely grateful for that, and we are now actively working to have the parties to the conflict agree to: a nationwide and permanent ceasefire; a set of economic and humanitarian measures which will alleviate the suffering of Yemeni people and will build confidence between the parties; and the urgent resumption of the political process.

This moment is not only a test of the leadership of all involved in the conflict; it is a test of their rationality and humanity. Part of the measures I have proposed to the parties call for the urgent release of conflict-related prisoners; the easing of restrictions on Sana'a airport and Hudaydah port in order to get much needed medical and commercial supplies in the country; and salary payments and opening access roads for cooperation between the parties and for an effective response to Covid-19.

The threat is too serious to be politicized. The time to act is now. The parties to the conflict in Yemen have a responsibility to their people to stop the fighting and focus on this calamity at once. The world has a responsibility as well to draw on the Covid-19 lessons and realize our collective safety will depend on how our most vulnerable nations cope with the crisis.



# Conversation with Professor Wang Jisi

**Interlocutor: Mohammed Al-Sudairi**

**Q: How will the pandemic influence China's relationship with the United States? Do you think it will deepen tensions or, alternatively, help alleviate them?**

**A:** I agree with HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal's assessment of the "growing maneuvering by America and China to push against each other." The China-US relationship has been worsening since the outbreak of the coronavirus despite some technical cooperation between the two sides. There is a widespread rumor in China that a few US soldiers intentionally spread the virus last October when they attended a sporting event in Wuhan; subsequently, the pandemic began to spread across the city. A China Foreign Ministry spokesman reinforced these suspicions by demanding that the US government explain the rumor. Afterwards, President Donald Trump referred to the pathogen as the 'Chinese virus'. Although Trump has not repeated the phrase recently, the 'blame war' has persisted. Some US individuals and institutions are even trying to bring lawsuits to force China to compensate for the losses the pandemic is causing. These attempts are unlikely to be successful, but they will certainly anger the Chinese.

In substantive terms, due to current circumstances, it is looking increasingly difficult for China and the US to implement the bilateral Phase I trade agreement signed last January, which forestalls reduction of trade friction. There is little hope that the perennial problems between the two superpowers can be resolved, including issues related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, human rights, and the South China Sea. A more recent issue that has caused a great deal of concern is America's efforts to decouple its economic and technological engagement with China. In fact, some US officials and politicians are asking US businesses to move out of China. Furthermore, Washington continues to sanction Huawei. Finally, the once promising educational and cultural exchanges are coming under mounting pressure; partly related to the coronavirus pandemic and partly caused by the downward spiral of bilateral relations.

**Q: Some argue that the pandemic constitutes a strategic opportunity for China, accelerating its rise and showcasing the success and resilience of its system of governance in dealing with the crisis in comparison to Western states. What is your assessment of this viewpoint?**

**A:** This is a widely shared view in China, especially among 'netizens' who do not have alternative sources of information other than China's own official media. There is no doubt that China has recovered faster from the pandemic than most other countries in the world, not only because of the resolute measures we have witnessed in China, but also because the coronavirus pandemic broke out earlier than in other countries. Undoubtedly, China's tight social controls,



**Professor Wang Jisi**

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government monopolization of economic resources, and ability to mobilize the population have been advantageous in fighting the virus, especially in comparison to many Western countries. However, to what degree is this comparison related to political values and democracy? For example, Japan, South Korea, and some other societies have also coped with the pandemic better than many Western countries even though their political systems are different to China's.

We Chinese have reasons to take pride in what we have achieved, but we should not look down upon other countries, especially as the coronavirus crisis is far from over. Many challenges are ahead. For one thing, as the economies of China's trading partners come under increasing stress, Chinese manufacturers are receiving fewer orders from abroad and therefore, unable to bring production back to full capacity.

Finally, forecasts vary about China's own economic growth this year and beyond. The Chinese government has not officially modified its GDP growth target of approximately 6% in 2020. Few independent economists believe this figure to be realistic. Yet, it is too early to say whether China will be able to narrow the gap with the United States in material terms—economic, military, and technological—following the coronavirus crisis. Whether China can grasp the strategic opportunity to lead the global order depends to a large extent on the success of its domestic reform agenda.



**Q: In your opinion, how will the pandemic impact the Belt and Road Initiative? Will this impact be for the short or long term?**

**A:** The coronavirus pandemic threatens to create economic crises along China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Several BRI countries have already been impacted severely by the pandemic and will likely be facing high external debt. In fact, China would have faced constraints on its future lending and debt renegotiations even if the pandemic had not occurred. With the disruption caused by the pandemic, severe contraction in the travel and transport sectors might precipitate currency crises in some BRI countries, in particular African countries such as Angola, Zambia, and Mozambique.

Several of China's Belt and Road partners expect China to come to their aid, both in fighting the public health impact of the pandemic and alleviating the inevitable economic slowdown. However, China's economic capacity is limited, and it has faced its own shortage of monetary tools. In addition, China is not the only creditor to BRI countries. Other lenders will want to ensure that the burden of debt relief is shared fairly among them. In this situation, BRI countries are more likely to default on their Chinese loans. Indeed, debt distress along the Belt and Road could constitute a long-term serious threat to China's own financial sustainability as well as to operations of Chinese companies overseas.

**Q: What are some of the geopolitical dangers or opportunities you think might arise due to this pandemic?**

**A:** Currently, the greatest geopolitical danger China is facing is tension over the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is distancing itself faster from China and pro-separatist forces are demanding more international recognition, in particular from the WHO. As Washington grows more hostile to Beijing, US ties with Taiwan are at their strongest since the establishment of US-China diplomatic relations in 1979. Hence, Beijing is under mounting pressure to take tougher measures to contain Taipei's separatist tendencies.

One opportunity China could benefit from is closer China-Japan-South Korea trilateral economic cooperation at a time when all three countries are recovering from the coronavirus crisis. Finally, China should observe West Asia and the Middle East more closely to see what role it can play in these regions in order to tackle the pandemic and maintain peace and stability.

# More than meets the eye: Assessing the coronavirus crisis response in Germany

## Sebastian Maier

As most parts of the world grapple to mitigate the stark ramifications of coronavirus, Europe finds itself at the heart of an unprecedented health crisis, with countries such as the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy being affected dramatically. Stemming the impact of coronavirus has similarly proven to be a challenge of momentous proportions for Germany, even though the mortality rate—in total numbers—remains at this stage comparatively limited.

Upon closer inspection, the current crisis response being leveraged in Germany reveals insights into the intricate relationship between the nation-state, its populace and its crisis management. These insights relate, firstly, to the unique characteristics of the country's political organization and public healthcare governance. As such, the looming debate about the current, and possibly lasting, necessity of strong governments taking the reins, while disrupting people's everyday lives, will be instructive to watch. Therefore, the question is whether Germany's infamous proclivity for federalism and 'bottom-up' subsidiarity as the favored form of social organization might be curbed at the mercy of expanded top-down distribution of authority.

### **The signs were there—in Germany they went unnoticed**

In January 2013, the German federal parliament in Berlin released a risk analysis on the potentially devastating impact of an uncontrolled spread of a fictive pathogen with similar features to the SARS coronavirus (CoV) that spread globally in 2002/2003. The report was the result of an inter-agency working group comprising various governmental and scientific research bodies.

Fast forward to 2020, and with the wisdom of hindsight, it can be argued that the January 2013 digest was not only underreported at the time but subsequently, did not receive the attention it deserved. This is surprising, given the successive emergence of diseases, such as the 2009 swine flu global outbreak, and the regionally more confined Western African Ebola virus epidemic of 2013-2016.



**Sebastian Maier**

Middle East Director at the London-based  
Strategic Advisory and Political Risk firm GMTL

### **A silver lining in the making? Science at the forefront - health governance follows**

According to a 13 April 2020 news release from the World Health Organization (WHO), coronavirus (Covid-19) is now designated as ten times more deadly than the abovementioned 2009 swine flu. Coronavirus spreads more quickly and may ultimately only be contained through a robust vaccination scheme—something that may be available in the not-too-distant future.

Fortunately, it is precisely in the vital fields of medical science and research where Germany performs well. It will likely be among the forerunners to report a breakthrough in the pursuit of achieving viable tools for immunization. More generally, the sophistication and capacity of the country's healthcare system provides grounds for tempered optimism: a country of 83 million people, Germany has as of mid-April 2020 reported more than 130,000 cases of infection. Looked upon in isolation, it is a staggering number, yet needs to be considered in context, as the country tests substantially more



extensively, with an average weekly capacity of 500,000 tests if needed, in comparison to lower testing statistics of other affected European countries. In consequence, Germany's current Covid-19 death toll of 3,200 is amongst the world's lowest.

The German federal government's latest guidance and directives appear to be as closely derived as possible from insights provided by a scientific community that is now in the spotlight and under scrutiny. Tellingly, when the *Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina* (German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina) published its latest recommendations on coronavirus in mid-April, the Academy's webpage crashed due to the high number of server requests attempting to download the report.

Instead of blind deference to authority, it is encouraging to observe the keen interest of German citizens seeking transparent knowledge rooted in scientific and pragmatic guidance, as reflected by their interest in Leopoldina's publications. This holds truer in times where obscure, and sometimes egregious 'fake news' on the origin and impact of the coronavirus are shared globally with impunity.

Leopoldina recommends a swift 'return to normalcy', with an important caveat suggesting that such an approach can only be undertaken step-by-step and in keeping with the diverse realities on the ground in the country's many regions and provinces. Germany consists of sixteen semi-sovereign states, each of which has experienced different responses to the ongoing pandemic.

### **The road ahead: can freedom outlive crisis management?**

So far, the unifying factor in Germany has been the capacity and capability of its dependable healthcare system, evidenced by Covid-19 patients from various neighboring countries, such as France, Italy and the Netherlands being treated temporarily in German hospitals.

The ultimate litmus test lies, however, in probing Berlin's potential intentions to usurp powers that are normally wielded subsidiarily at the community and regional state levels. By the same token, the ongoing crisis does not absolve Berlin from providing clarity on other more pressing questions. The nascent debate about the need for a country-wide movement tracing smartphone application or immunity passports brings back distant memories from pretextual state-orchestrated mass surveillance as experienced in the former East Germany.

As it stands, Germany appears poised to be able to overcome the coronavirus crisis when considering how it has mitigated the worse effects of the virus. One can only hope that this achievement will not pave the way for the curtailment of consequential civil liberties: rights that were hard-won and as such are anchored in Germany's social psyche and collective memory.