



# Perspectives of Japan on the World and East Asia in the Time of Corona

**Kawashima Shin, Professor, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo**

## The Problem of Infectious Disease at a Turning Point in the World Order

COVID-19, which spread from Wuhan in China, has once again reminded us that human society has long been confronted with infectious disease. Even in modern times, infectious disease remains a challenge to be overcome. Nations and the international community have dealt with the challenge, but by the latter half of the twentieth century, such “memories” may have gradually faded in many developed countries. However, since the start of globalization in the 1990s, emerging nations, which are already dealing with in-country sanitation vulnerabilities, have had outbreaks of unknown disease that have quickly spread outside the country.



Prof. Kawashima Shin

COVID-19 has raised significant issues for human society. Firstly, international cooperation functioned in case of the Ebola hemorrhagic fever (EHF) and other diseases, but this time the developed countries were also stricken and, rather than collaborating, they bared their teeth. How do we go about rebuilding this? Secondly, there is also concern that authoritarian regimes, which can evoke the coercive power of the state, will be widely seen as more useful than liberal democracies when countering infectious disease. In this regard, the example of Taiwan and its experience with SARS offers hope. Thirdly, as the US-China conflict comes to the fore, the propaganda machine in China claims that the US exit from hegemony began because the United States has been damaged by COVID-19, and that China will shape the international order from now on. International criticism of China is, of course, deep-rooted and China has its own domestic issues. However, we cannot ignore the possibility of a transformation of the world order. Fourthly, the issues around economic decoupling are also serious. We cannot ignore the logic of politics and security even if the thinking is out of step with economic rationality.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an opportunity to re-examine the state of politics and society in Japan. In addition, amid international scrutiny of China, particularly in developed countries, some distinctive trends are emerging in Japan's perception of China.

## The Change of Order and the Spread of Infectious Disease

International frameworks to fight infectious disease were formed at the League of Nations and various other forums in the wake of the Spanish flu pandemic in the twentieth century. By the early

twenty-first century there had basically been no change to this arrangement where developed countries, focused on the United States, play a leading role in fighting EHF and other diseases. However, when this framework for international cooperation was formed, experts in developed countries took action as infections emerged in developing countries.

In the mid-nineteenth century, infectious diseases spread when Western countries acquired colonies in the tropics just as temperatures were rising across the world, and dealing with these diseases became a major issue. The expansion of worldwide steamship networks and population movement formed the background for the spread of infections. Diseases that had been endemic to tropical regions may have spread around the world in the process of Western countries establishing colonies and becoming the protagonists of the so-called modern age.

In the twenty-first century, SARS, MERS and COVID-19 infections may have spread with the rise of emerging nations during the process of globalization. As emerging nations with certain in-country sanitation issues deepen their ties with the world, it is possible that various diseases, previously endemic, will spread around the world in the future. These infectious diseases may enter a new phase amid a changing world order and shifts in the flow of people and goods.

In some respects, such changes in values and the established order have made an impression amid the COVID-19 pandemic when the developed countries that make up the OECD have been unable to properly deal with the pandemic, while some of the emerging nations have dealt with the pandemic relatively effectively. However, it is not the case that the pandemic has spread ad infinitum in all democratic countries just because the United States and the West have been unable to properly deal with the pandemic. Not all emerging nations have been able to effectively deal with the pandemic either. It is also difficult to imagine that the Chinese model, for example, would spread around the world. In China, the COVID-19 countermeasures are an extension of the strengthening of the policy of management and control that is the basis for society, including the *she qu* (communities), and also associated with the digital mass-surveillance society. But, how many authoritarian states with authoritarian regimes have perfected a Social Credit System for managing the basis for society and formed a digital mass-surveillance society that includes 5G like China has done? Many emerging nations or developing countries would not be able to adopt COVID-19 measures using the same methods as China. Many developing countries are unable to adopt the Chinese method, but neither are they likely to adopt the democratic methods of developed countries.

## **Back to the Age of the Nation?**

As the infections spread in Wuhan and then dispersed to the rest of the world, the disastrous disease spread to both developed and developing countries. It was a situation that could not be dealt with in the form of developed countries supporting a place of infection in a developing country. Many developed countries were also forced to deal with the spread of infection in their own countries ahead of global governance or providing assistance to developing countries.

Pursuant to provisions in the constitution, the state is permitted to “infringe” on the right to engage in business activities and the right of free movement of the constituent members of the

nation when dealing with sanitation issues. Based on the law, the situation must be dealt with through government organizations. Although the cooperation of the private sector, such as hospitals, is necessary, government organizations such as the central government and local governments must step up and confront the situation. Of course, the private sector, including hospitals, participate in various forms of infectious disease control measures, but even so, the efforts are not led by the private sector.

Another major challenge for the state is to deal with economic stagnation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of external relations, the restrictions on freedom of movement are a direct hit on economic activities, but they also have an adverse effect on the movement of goods. Individual countries have also restricted the opening hours of restaurants and travel within their own countries, which has had a major impact on the economy. Such restrictions are “lawfully” imposed by the state. In that sense, states restricted economic activities through their respective legal procedures while providing various forms of compensation. The more democratic the country, the more painful the choice. If people are confronted with economic stagnation in their daily lives, the government’s approval ratings will slump.

On the other hand, it can hardly be said that regional cooperative organizations, which transcend national boundaries, have fully dealt with the pandemic. The EU may have attempted to deal with the pandemic as a regional community, but in some aspects, each member state also tried to deal with the pandemic on their own terms. Neither does the ASEAN provide satisfactory evidence that the various regional cooperation frameworks around the world were key players in regional governance and led the response to the pandemic.

However, even if the state played a leading role, it is difficult to immediately agree when asked if these “hands of the government” were effective or welcomed. Taiwan may be different, but there are many places where the nation has lost credibility. Conversely, some administrations of authoritarian regimes are proud of their success, China being one example. However, even in China, the government's initial response to COVID-19 has been met with considerable doubt in the broader society. On the other hand, messages boasting about the country’s achievements have backfired in the sense that there is now a tendency to expect more of the government. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will celebrate its centenary in 2021. Political sensitivities are increasing due, in part, to challenges such as extending the term of President Xi Jinping and appointing a Chairman of the CCP Central Committee. The restrictions on the freedom of speech have also been tightened with regard to COVID-19.

## **The US-China Confrontation**

Rather than generating some sort of new transformation, the changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have magnified or accelerated existing changes, or rediscovered existing problems. In other words, the pandemic may have had the role of an accelerator or catalyst. The US-China confrontation is one of the issues that has accelerated or changed due to this effect.

US distrust of China had been growing, partly because Wuhan was the first site of the COVID-19 epidemic, but US wariness and aversion to China was further strengthened when the pandemic

arrived in the United States. China also boosted its maritime expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic, causing border friction with surrounding countries. Above all, the United States cannot be indifferent to issues involving the East China Sea, the South China Sea and Taiwan. China has also strengthened mutual support/monitoring of the basis of society as a COVID-19 countermeasure. In one sense, China has been able to suppress the pandemic, but on the other hand, the national security logic has been reinforced and social controls, including the ones on speech, have been strengthened. In such a situation, the freedom divide between the provinces and the Special Administrative Regions, including Hong Kong, have widened. Perceiving that a color revolution was moving stealthily in Hong Kong, the Chinese government enacted the Hong Kong national security law and added major revisions to the One Country Two Systems arrangement based on the logic of national security. This caused concern in the United States and other developed Western countries. The United States protested and countered China by enacting a legal system related to Hong Kong. This attitude of the United States has been extended to issues such as the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the Tibet Autonomous Region. In addition to this, the United States has shown willingness to strengthen its involvement with Taiwan through the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the Taiwan Travel Act. When China increased the pressure on Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States dispatched a US cabinet member to Taiwan to strengthen the relationship with Taiwan under the framework for the One China policy. This is also one of the reasons for further deterioration in US-China relations.

## **Decoupling – The New Cold War?**

The intensifying conflict between the United States and China is not necessarily a new cold war. Certainly, there are value conflicts involving democracy and freedom, so there is a tendency to think that this conflict is similar to the ideological confrontation during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, compared to the US-Soviet conflict, which placed considerable restrictions on economic and even personal dealings, the US-China conflict seems to be in a different phase. This is symbolized by the issue of decoupling.

The decoupling issue has grown large in the United States and China during the COVID-19 pandemic. But, unlike the Cold War, the confrontation is about a few issues such as advanced dual use technologies, while other domains are not in question. In other words, the United States is prepared to decouple advanced dual use technologies, while the Chinese are trying to protect the technologies that give China an edge with the 2020 Export Control Law, and to build domestic supply chains for advanced technology. But the conflict is limited to one domain as the US government allows trading with Chinese companies where 4G is concerned.

I believe that the US-China conflict is a prominent problem in specific domains. A typical area is advanced dual use technologies, but, as mentioned above, there are also human rights issues related to Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as well as military security conflicts and other long-term conflicts. However, in the second half of the 2010s, China made conspicuous advances in the Indo-Pacific space, which became the geopolitical focus of the conflict. This is how the US-China conflict stands out in specific hotspots.

However, these hotspots have several characteristics. Firstly, the Biden administration may not necessarily pay attention to the issue of tariffs with China, which the Trump administration adhered to, so the hotspot for this point of conflict will be transformed. The Biden administration's policy toward China remains unclear, but the administration has raised concerns about economic activities, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan, so these issues are expected to remain hotspots. Secondly, both the United States and China, and other stakeholder countries have different ways of looking at the hotspots between the United States and China. For example, issues related to the Xinjiang Autonomous Region are human rights issues from the perspective of the United States, but from the perspective of China, it is an issue of infringement of its sovereignty by the United States.

Although the hotspots may change, the conflict as a whole will continue. If the hotspots grow and the gaps between them disappear, we may have a new cold war in the end, but for the time being, the conflicts are limited to these hotspots with the United States and China cooperating in other domains. The United States has already called on China to cooperate with space exploration, and China has called on the United States to cooperate on climate change.

However, in the process of advancing future vaccine diplomacy and economic recovery measures, it is possible that more domains will be subject to decoupling. For example, there may be hoarding of vaccines, or China may try to strengthen domestic procurement with regard to advanced industries under its dual circulation policy. Countries around the world will have to deal with these various hotspots. For example, a country may be an ally of the United States, but still try to maintain economic ties with China, which will by no means be a simple zero-sum game. On this point, there are major differences with the former Cold War. The same is true for developing countries who, just because they are developing countries, do not necessarily have to maintain relations with developed countries. On the other hand, both the United States and China will urge all nations to strengthen relations with their own country. The principle of the separation of economy from politics, where the United States is in charge of security and China is in charge of economy, will not apply to dual-use technologies and other advanced industries. Therefore, each country will be forced to make difficult choices.

The spread of COVID-19 has increased and expanded the hotspots for US-China conflict. There are aspects which will return to the way things were in the post-coronavirus age, but not everything will be restored. Rather, there will be new developments.

## **Corona Countermeasures in Japan**

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing existing problems to erupt and expand, while pressuring Japan to make several major choices.

In terms of the nature of the state and the relationship between the state and society, it has become clear that the national framework makes it difficult to respond to emergencies. Japan was among the defeated nations in World War II and the Japanese Constitution, which was enacted by Allies during the occupation immediately after the war, does not have a system for as much as a temporary suspension of the provisions in the Constitution. For that reason alone, it is extremely



difficult to limit people's freedom of movement and the rights of business. The government has been limited in terms of restrictions on movement and businesses, simply repeating "requests" to the nation. In addition, vulnerabilities have emerged such as the issue of the jurisdiction of the central and local governments, and the significance of the network of health care centers responsible for health services.

Next, there is the relationship with China. Relations between Japan and China were in the process of improving at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, President Xi Jinping's visit to Japan, scheduled for April 2020, has been postponed, and the mask diplomacy, an expression of friendship between Japan and China when the infection first spread in China, has gradually declined. However, compared to the developed countries in the West, Japan's view of China has not changed much during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where favorable impressions are concerned, around 90% were negative toward China to start with, so the situation has not deteriorated further. For example, when the private think tank Genron NPO looked at the answers to a question about the importance of relations between Japan and China, they found some decrease, but no major decline. According to a survey by *The Nikkei*, expectations on the Chinese market are not as low as before. Of course, there has been strong opposition in Japan to the increased activity of Chinese government vessels in the East China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as widespread concern about the issue of Taiwan and the situation in Hong Kong. Even so, there has been no movement demanding that the government take a hard line with China. Even though 90% of the population has negative emotions toward China, and are fully aware of the risk posed by China, Japanese society and business circles also recognize that the Chinese market is necessary for the economic recovery, and seem to think that any unnecessary deterioration in relations should be avoided. But, the Chinese have made an issue out of the low level of awareness of China in Japanese society, and criticized Japanese media for an anti-Chinese bias. This is not necessarily a point that hits the mark.

Japan is also confronted with various problems such as decoupling and military security conflicts that have emerged in the wake of the US-China conflict. Concerning advanced industries related to dual use technologies, decoupling is not only an effort by the US, but also by the Chinese who have enacted their own Export Control Law. Using GPS systems and undersea cables, China is trying to build an information and communication infrastructure network that differs from the United States and the developed countries in the West. This kind of decoupling has also progressed and expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Japanese companies are increasingly confronted with this decoupling. In April 2020, the Japanese government set up a team in charge of economic affairs as part of the National Security Strategy (NSS) to try to deal with the situation. However, looking at the survey by *The Nikkei*, it seems that most Japanese corporations are not directly affected by such decoupling. This could point to an understanding of the hotspots, but could also be viewed as a weak sense of ownership.

From the aspect of military security, China's hardline stance on foreign countries is institutionally obvious as suggested not only by the activities of the China Coast Guard and the People's Liberation Army, but also the Coast Guard Law, which China enacted in January 2021. It is imperative for Japan to exercise vigilance to deal with the situation. Seeking the involvement of

the Biden administration in the Senkaku Islands, Japan obtained a promise to apply Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty to the Senkaku Islands. However, whether the Biden administration will continue to adopt the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), or how the United States will realistically respond to China's actions in Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea is still partly unclear. There are also realistic issues such as to what extent Japan will be involved with US actions toward China. However, for the moment, the Japanese government has not been able to fully deal with these realities, but has only requested US involvement in the Senkaku Islands and the FOIP. It is safe to say that as in the past Japan is simply continuing with ordinary measures.

*Translated from an original article in Japanese written for Discuss Japan. [March 2021]*

---

**KAWASHIMA Shin, Ph.D.**

**Professor, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo**

Born in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1968. He graduated from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and earned his Ph.D. in history from the University of Tokyo. He has served as an advisor for the National Security Secretariat of the Cabinet Office and is the author of “Confrontation and Accord: Japan And China Pursue Different Courses,” Chapter 2, *Japan-China Joint History Research Report* published by the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee in March 2011. His publications include *Chugoku kindai gaiko no keisei (Formation of Modern Chinese Diplomacy*, a winner of the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities), *Nijuisseiki-no Chuka (China in the 21st Century)* and *Chugoku-no furontia (China's Frontiers)*.

---