



PACIFIC FORUM COVERAGE ON COVID-19

BY ROB YORK

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The Covid-19 pandemic has changed how people live and work around the world, and regional security experts in the Indo-Pacific are no exception. 2020 looked to be a year of important firsts – like Xi Jinping’s [first state visit](#) to Japan in April – and crucial diplomatic maneuvering – like [the Las Vegas summit](#) the US set for March to smooth over [remaining tensions](#) with ASEAN leaders.

Both are now cancelled, and for the time being negotiations [take place](#) in different, and generally distant, settings.

But regional security and diplomacy are as relevant as ever. Despite deep differences of opinion with both Koreas, Washington has sought to reach out to both during the pandemic, either [to seek](#) or [offer assistance](#). China has stepped up its efforts to [lay claim](#) to territory in the South China Sea, even as it seeks to portray itself as a benevolent force on the global stage, eager to [help Europe](#) address its outbreaks. Taiwan, though, has announced its willingness to compete with Beijing, and even to [surpass it](#), on this front by leveraging its [successful response](#) to the outbreak.

The jury very much remains out as to whether China or the US will emerge stronger from the pandemic. Will Beijing’s initial cover-up of the outbreak in Hubei Province harm its international standing, and will the global public trust its claims of zero new infections? Or will its [global PR campaign](#) be to its

advantage while the US struggles with the virus at the federal and state level?

Authors of Pacific Forum’s PacNet series have wrestled with these topics as the pandemic has spread. Stephen Nagy asked in [PacNet #16](#) whether Beijing, having overcome the first-order problem of the initial outbreak, could overcome the second- and third-order problems of a depressed industrial production and declining demand in its overseas markets.

That, and a sense that its former partners must now insulate themselves from China’s market: “Supply chains have also been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak in China and the crisis has exposed the dangers of overexposure to the Chinese market, resulting in calls to diversity supply chains,” Nagy writes. “This is a wake-up call to states and businesses alike who have not built a diverse trade portfolio to insulate themselves from a shock in the China-centered global production network.”

Jagganath Panda, in [PacNet #19](#) discusses the challenges the outbreak presents to the international model Xi has promoted as China’s paramount leader. Once praised for its international assistance, and able to control the flow of information into and out of the country, Beijing’s initial response to the virus left its trading partners vulnerable, especially considering its [suppression of whistleblowers](#) early in the outbreak. “In a way, the Covid-19 has shown the international community how the trade, people-to-people contact, and connectivity China’s Belt and Road Initiative boasted of can export not only goods, but the dangers of a communist and authoritarian model based on suppression of news, information, and speech,” he writes.

China, of course, is not the only country struggling with changes to its economic and strategic calculations. In [PacNet #13](#), Todd Wiesel argues that North Korea, more isolated than ever from the global economy, may step up the cyber crime activities it has become notorious for: “An economically strangled North Korea has much to gain from global disruptions, and we must brace ourselves and develop our cyber defenses accordingly.”

And in Hong Kong, rocked by Covid-19 the year after anti-government protests devastated its economy, Jason Hung argues in [PacNet #15](#) that the SAR government must consider cash payments to keep its economy—normally reliant on trade and tourism—afloat. This includes, he argues, businesses that explicitly supported the protesters: “These businesses have been hit the hardest in this critical period,” he says. “The delivery of one-off economic stimuli, as an olive branch, is particularly conducive to the sustainability of small and medium sized retail businesses and minimization of anti-governmental sentiments among local entrepreneurs.”

The US and its regional partners must recalibrate as well. In [PacNet #18](#) Lucio Blanco Pitlo III says the cancellation of the Las Vegas summit presents the US and ASEAN with an opportunity to come up with an agenda for a future meeting serving both sides’ interests better. In [PacNet #17](#) David Scott notes how the virus has presented an opportunity to bring India into greater regional cooperation with other regional players, forming a counterweight to China: “Further India-US cooperation was on show with their convening, from March 20 onward, of weekly Quad-plus discussions, in which the four Quad members were joined by New Zealand, Vietnam, and South Korea (but not China) to coordinate responses to the Covid-19 virus.”

As Pacific Forum [adjusts](#) to the new reality of social distancing and [stay in place](#) orders, our coverage of this global phenomenon will continue through the PacNet series, as well as our *Issues & Insights* papers, and we welcome informed contributions to both. The pandemic will figure prominently in May’s issue of [Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific](#) as well, along with the Daily Digest roundup of the most relevant news and analysis from the region, also found at the [Comparative Connections](#) webpage.

Our mission—“To find a better way to enhance mutual understanding and trust, promote sustainable cooperative solutions to common challenges, mitigate conflicts, and contribute to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific”—will continue across all of our work.

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