Contagious diseases are complex open-ended phenomena with various features that readily combine and react with other contemporaneous processes—they are not reducible to biology and epidemiology alone. In particular, politics and social reactions—in the form of panic and blame-casting, for example—are prominent features with clear historical patterns and should not be treated as aspects extraneous to the disease itself.\footnote{See, e.g., Snowden (2020).} When a serious infectious disease spreads, a “threat” is very often externalized into a culturally meaningful “foreign” entity. Especially in already weakened and unstable communities, pandemics tend to be territorialized, nationalized, ethnicized, and racialized. This has also been the case with Covid-19 as it has caused tensions between the West and China. The Russian disinformation machinery has gone into overdrive—if that is possible—by combining the pandemic with other topics, and sowing confusion and distrust in the West. As such, Covid-19 can be regarded as one more regressive driver in a world that already contains many seeds of downward-sloping spirals: “This is not the right time for a pandemic. Not that there is a right time for a pandemic, but some times are definitely the wrong one. And no time is worse than when a nation is already in crisis, when trust in its leaders and itself is already low. A time when international relations are strained and internal strife widespread. Basically, if the social and moral fiber of a society are already being tested, the widespread
fear of death at the hands of an invisible killer makes everything exponentially worse. Fortunately (or maybe unfortunately; it is very hard to tell at this point), history offers us a number of examples of when a plague arrived at the wrong time” (Kelaidis 2020). Covid-19 could be a catalyst and trigger for further regressive transformation as it causes political distancing, global decoupling, and growing distrust.

It should be noted that the tools used for polarizing and regressive purposes before the pandemic can be even more potent during and after the Covid-19 crisis. Although as stated before, the meddling tools have become less effective, yet now when the attention is mostly on the pandemic, it is likely that autocracies will be successful in innovating and reinvigorating them to profit tactically from the growing vulnerabilities resulting from the pandemic. The meddling toolbox has included six parallel operations that can be tailored to specific circumstances: (1) Disinformation to amplify suspicions and divisions; (2) Stealing sensitive data; (3) Leaking stolen data via supposedly trusted entities and fronts; (4) Whitewashing leaked data through the professional media; (5) Crowdsourcing to create lasting cognitive flows; and (6) Finding patterns of collusion to synchronize efforts with domestic “partners.” The toolbox is multipurpose and ideal for any critical time when public attention is focused on a particular effort or undertaking. Although an election clearly is such a critical situation, there are other contexts in which the aims of meddling can be achieved. Emergencies are also such as tense, anxious, and time-critical contexts. In this way, the sudden emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic situation can offer a window of opportunity for meddlers to achieve their goals.

Thus, Covid-19 provides an opportune context for regressive operations. In addition, democracies are facing elections in the middle of a prolonged pandemic situation. The 2020 US presidential election was already going to be held in a historically polarized political situation. The pandemic can further heat up the already feverish situation and add to the sense of extreme stakes involved. The Covid-19 crisis makes it more likely that the US move closer and closer to falling into the Thucydidean brink: The internal affinities between political competitors will decrease even more and be less than the enmity felt towards various external actors and their ideas and goals. Covid-19 shakes different democracies and challenges the established patterns of trust and sources of respected knowledge. The emergency situation can inflame misinformation and disinformation, creating alternative sources of knowledge bypassing the usual authority production. The disease burden can be uneven, thereby causing strains between different population groups. In some ways, the pandemic itself
meddles in and disrupts societies, and, therefore, it can add to the harmful strategic operations set to sow division through disinformation, spread conspiratorial attitudes, and harden oppositional identities.

Political turbulence in democracies is likely to be catalyzed by the pandemic emergency as societies become increasingly insecure and economies decline. The political regression toward the Thucydidean brink can speed up. The Thucydidean model can shed some light on the interaction between political regression and the pandemic situation. As already pointed out in the first two chapters, Thucydides focused on the broadening of the political space against two types of challenges. On the one hand, political space can be significantly narrowed through the emergencies of human-wrought violence such as interstate wars, internal wars, and other abrupt forms of political violence. On the other hand, the narrowing can be caused by natural calamities such as disasters and epidemic diseases. The shrinking political space leads to unpredictability and uncertainty whereby the community is less prepared for other coinciding challenges. In this way, pestilences such as large-scale violence, resource scarcity, and disease can come together and trigger each other in a nonlinear way, as they have if one examines the history of diseases.

The Arrival of Covid-19

In December 2019, reports started to emanate from Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in China, that an unknown disease was spreading. According to publicly available information, it seems that the early epicenter was a particular seafood market in Wuhan. While this may indicate animal-to-human transmission at the outset, the disease soon started to spread from person to person. After a crucial time gap, the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) country office in China took action based on reports from Wuhan, and notified the WHO on December 31, 2019. By January 3, 2020, 44 cases had been reported. A causal disease agent was reported to WHO on 7 January by the National Health Commission of China. On January 30, 2020, the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee was convened by the WHO director-general decided to declare a “public health emergency of international concern.”

2 See, e.g., World Health Organization (2020a).

3 See, e.g., World Health Organization (2020b).
As of early August 2020, about twenty million of people around the world had tested positive for a new variant of the Corona family of viruses responsible for the disease known today as Coronavirus disease 2019, or Covid-19. Unfortunately, by that time, the epidemic had also resulted in close to a million deaths. Although earlier on, China accounted for the vast majority of cases, there is an inevitable trend which highlights that the epidemic is currently spreading much more rapidly outside of China—whether in South Korea in Asia, the UK, Italy, Spain, and France in Europe, Iran in the Middle East, or in the US and Brazil in the Americas. This new global challenge is comparable only to the devastating H1N1 influenza pandemic in 1918, called the Spanish Flu. However, Covid-19 seems controllable, as WHO has pointed out, through large-scale restrictive measures such as lockdowns. These measures, unfortunately, freeze up the economy and cause simultaneous shocks in supply production, consumption, and security. Prior to the introduction of effective vaccine or treatment, public health measures like lockdowns, social distancing, good hygiene and facial coverings remain the best options available to manage the disease.

Seventeen years after the outbreak of another precursor epidemic, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), the rapid spread of Covid-19 shows that it is adapted to key characteristics of the early twenty-first-century global political reality—a global order based on efficient mobility systems and infrastructures, as well as with intensifying great power competition. In particular, Covid-19 challenges China, whose rise to economic and political prominence has relied on steady global flows of resources and goods. China is challenged both domestically, as the economic growth that legitimizes its one-party rule has slowed down, and internationally, as many see failures in China as contributing causally to the spread of the disease. Tensions with the US have increased as accusations are being traded. China has also tried to fight the propaganda war by providing aid to the outbreak zones in the West and questioning the origin of the disease in its territory. Chinese newsletters say that the claim about the origin of the disease in China is doubtful, it should be further researched, and that the disease could have originated in many different places. The US president has stated that he suspects that the disease originated from a Chinese research facility in Wuhan. Disinformation and

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4 See, e.g., Yuan (2020).
5 See, e.g., Huang (2020).
6 See, e.g., CGTN (2020).
misinformation are rampant as the status and trustworthiness of the main actors are questioned and doubted.

Covid-19 is very likely to contribute to the reshaping of the global order by triggering further distancing between the major actors and strengthening calls for economic decoupling instead of interdependence. International public health governance, led by the WHO, may also face growing delegitimization as the outbreak of Covid-19 has increasingly brought to light lack of harmony between local, national, and global efforts. Attention is likely to turn to the US as well because the Trump administration’s policy responses (or lack thereof) will be further tested in the middle of an already heated election year. This also applies to the US leadership role internationally: unlike during past outbreaks, Washington, DC, is largely perceived to have been missing in action in the fight against Covid-19. Hence, the virus appears to pose a multidimensional stress test that is going to raise red flags at both domestic and global levels for the US.

The outbreak of and response to Covid-19 have also brought to mind a set of recollections and lessons learnt from previous serious infectious diseases. The arguably most important precursor to Covid-19, SARS, also originated in and affected China. In addition to tragic human casualties, it raised concerns that China was not only acting as a dishonest stakeholder, but was also incompatible as a country in the circulation-based interdependent world order. The Covid-19 blame game has been similar to that surrounding SARS. Unfortunately, ongoing developments outside of China have not always been promising either. This has even been the case in the US where, despite world-class know-how and a proven track record in combatting infectious diseases at home and abroad, the initial Trump administration’s response and communication have met with a storm of criticism. Covid-19 has already (re-)created rationalizations for (poorly) responding to a health crisis, both domestically and internationally. The responses include withholding information about the onset of the outbreak and acting in ways that hinder response efforts but quell public demands to do something.

**Regression Makes Epidemics Worse**

Thucydides saw epidemics as telltale symptoms of serious regression and also as a metaphor illustrating how a grand regression looks like and behaves. For Thucydides, any serious regression of political order involves confusion, convulsions, extroversion, factionalism, and, inevitably, contagions in the form of physical maladies. Thucydides prognosticates that
pestilences—political and physical ones—come together and tend to coincide. The reason for this is commonsensical. Diseases that have been prevented and controlled by a well-functioning and healthy community become harder to check as general impulsiveness and disorientation deepen. Loss of control increases the likelihood of pestilences. The modern mind regards political disorder and violence as different categories because they have distinct and different causations. However, a cursory check of the history of disease shows that conditions of political chaos do increase the likelihood of diseases and vice versa, as people are on the move and in contact with each other, conditions worsen, and negative sentiments reinforce each other.

Thus, the concept of regression as a process cannot be adequately understood without taking into account its intimate relationship with lethal epidemic diseases. The Plague of Athens devastated the city-state of Athens during the year, 430 BCE, the second year of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides’s account of how regression is contagious and gathers steam when it spreads parallels closely his narrative of what took place during the Plague of Athens: “It first began...in the parts of Ethiopia above Egypt, and thence descended into Egypt and Libya and into most of the king’s country” (Thucydides 1954: 2.48). Then the disease suddenly fell upon Athens, Thucydides tells us, and the deaths in Athens became much more frequent: “For the plague broke out as soon as the Peloponnesians invaded Attica [...] committed its worst ravages at Athens, and next to Athens, at the most populous of the other towns” (Thucydides 1954: 2.54). While Thucydides’s account is a naturalistic description, it also intentionally highlights the link to the way he saw the dynamics of a political regression. The plague’s intensity grew, came closer, and progressed in a human body in a manner that reminds one of the regression’s ability to become more serious as people who were struck later got to know more about its devastating nature. Thucydides seems to be suggesting that plague is a fundamental part of a regressive grand movement as are the occurrences of deep political regressions in and between city-states.

For Thucydides, the regressive direction of the plague is similar to how political regression starts and deepens. The plague first affects the head and then spreads malignantly to the bowels. “...people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath. These symptoms were followed by sneezing and hoarseness, after which
the pain soon reached the chest, and produced a hard cough. When it fixed in the stomach, it upset it; and discharges of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, accompanied by very great distress…. But if they passed this stage, and the disease descended further into the bowels, inducing a violent ulceration there accompanied by severe diarrhoea, this brought on a weakness which was generally fatal” (Thucydides 1954: 2.48). This regressive process of gradual physical decomposition starts from the top, i.e., in the incontinent behavior of leaders. It is accompanied by the rapid weakening of social bonds and obedience of rules at the societal level. “Plagued” people fail to recognize previously important and even sacred communal norms: “The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets…. The sacred places…were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane” (Thucydides 1954: 2.53). The power of norms and beliefs to bind the community together was replaced by open deviance from communal norms: “Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them. As for the first, they judged it to be just the same whether they worshipped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing; and for the last, no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offences, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung ever over their heads, and before this fell, it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little” (Thucydides 1954: 2.53). Judging from such remarks, the plague affected the communal body as much as it caused suffering to individual lives and bodies. Plague was also a political disease. It could lead to regression, civic collapse. The grand regression engulfing the city-states, Thucydides seems to be stating, is similar to an epidemic disease. Simultaneously, he makes the prognosis that such diseases are an inevitable sub-narrative of widespread serious political regression, one vector catalyzing the regression even further.

The practice and popularity of common values decreased as individual desires became the foremost concern. This led to changes and reversals in the meanings of central concepts in the same way that regressions lead to the loss of established meaning: “Men now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property…. Perseverance in what men called honor was popular with none, it was so
uncertain whether they would be spared to attain the object; but it was settled that present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was both honorable and useful” (Thucydides 1954: 2.53). This is very similar to the Thucydidean description of political regression as a process adversely affecting norms, memory, and language: paralleling his description of the plague, one of the most striking characteristics of an extreme form of regression is the way in which words lose their meaning: “Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; caution, plotting, a justifiable means of self-defence. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent, a man to be suspected” (Thucydides 1954: 3.82). Thucydides continues his list in a way that highlights how meanings and values turned upside down—the meanings had changed from those instituted through previous interactions to ones further catalyzing deepening hatred and violence.

Fittingly, the widespread regression was imagined by Thucydides as a “chaos, terrible flux, a destructive kind of motion” (Monoson and Loriaux 1998: 291). For Thucydides, the regressive vortex induces pulses and co-currents such as diseases. New subcurrents occurred in the vicinity of the war’s rhythmic expression of energy. The increasingly violent circular motions meant that intervals in extreme pain production become progressively shorter: Violence kept coming back, cutting across, and within bodies in more intense spirals, circling round and back, again and again, grinding bodies, both somatic and political, to pieces. It is within this frame that the Plague of Athens became meaningful and unforgettable as Thucydides’s account was later adopted by many commentators as a narrative model for a description of a lethal epidemic disease (Longrigg 1992: 27). Violent regression and plague became interlinked in a way that still evokes age-old political imagery.

It is highly significant that the macro-level movement spread not just horizontally between political bodies. It also turned into increasingly deep vertical vortexes or, as Thucydides descriptively frames it, into “intestinal disorders.” On one hand, according to Thucydides, these abnormalities referred to local-level factionalism and atomization (Monoson and Loriaux 1998: 287). On the other hand, this violent regression spread simultaneously into the individual level in both the moral/psychological
and physiological senses. Whereas in deep regression, the convulsions atomized Corcyran society into political factions and finally into violent but extremely vulnerable individuals, the Plague of Athens entails a parallel story of bodily disintegration. This plague narrative highlights the influence of overall regressive movements on human bodies as the loci of soma and psyche. The suggested direction of the dynamic is clear. The grand regressive movement gathers intensity and spreads downward toward smaller communities which are set into disintegrative motion, and toward individuals where somatic suffering—such as mass murder or disease or mental incontinence in the form of rash actions, selfishness, and failure to obey sacred norms—takes place.

Thucydides’ search for political ideas was greatly conditioned by Hippocratean medicine. It should be noted that this was a two-way street: the language of politics also permeated the medical thought of the time. To highlight this connection, some have suggested that Thucydides was moving even beyond the medical thought of his time by suggesting the dynamics of contagion. Thucydides, for example, describes that stasis “ran its course from city to city” with steadily increasing intensity. However, there is an important distinction that is especially relevant for the Thucydidean brink model. As Craik (2001) points out, the “contagion” reading is an anachronistic interpretation of the History of the Peloponnesian War. Rather than referring to contagion, Thucydides was using related but different ideas of flux/flow: political regression is seen as a flow that can spread just like a contagious disease. One significant difference between the more modern contagion dynamic and Thucydidean flux was the ability of regression—for example, plague and regression—to become more intensive when it spread. It is as if the condition mutates into a more serious form. Partly, Thucydides links this intensity effect to the fear aroused in people during the later stages as they become more aware of the devastating effects of the flux (Thucydides 1954: 3.82.4). There is an added horror in the acknowledgment of impending doom.

Thucydides sees violent events—defined as increasing societal confusion, meaningless abrupt actions, and psychological isolation—as the intensifying constituent of regression’s horizontal and vertical spread. This type of violence is very evident in the description of stasis. Thucydides perceives stasis to be a regressive process that was common in times of a large war and that could strike any community. As the vortex of war intensified and deepened, the smaller poleis were the first to unravel. However, it should be noted that these poleis did not just violently
dissolve: They turned into what can be called anti-communities in stages. This violent kinesis was not only destructive in the engulfed community, it was also violently reactive, “contagious” in a sense. Thucydides, by turning his attention to the Plague of Athens, further accentuates the flow/flux characteristics of regression. The dynamics of political regression is akin to a lethal malady that spreads from person to person.

**COVID-19 INEVITABLY PROMOTES FURTHER DIVISION**

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis can be used to illuminate and summarize Thucydides’s regression model. The model can also be used to shed light on the current regressive tendencies. The hypothesis so far is that Covid-19 will trigger and catalyze the already existing regression trajectories. However, this leads to a question concerning the more specific scenarios: How can a pandemic like Covid-19 cause further political regressions? Since its outbreak in late 2019, the coronavirus disease has become a serious threat to public health around the world. Public awareness about Covid-19 has initially, and for good reason, centered on the biological, epidemiological, and medical aspects of the newly minted disease—for example, what kind of virus is behind it, how it spreads, and how to develop a cure or vaccine for it. But, as with all emerging apparently high-risk diseases, Covid-19 has also manifested itself in the social, economic, and political realms. Stock markets have fallen, commodity prices have declined, trade has decreased, suspicions and rumors are rampant, and movements are being restricted.

It seems that the sight of Covid-19 victims as well as medical workers in protective gear has led to a sudden global jolt of aversion and fear. The immediate global reflex has been to distance and sever contact with sites of the unfamiliar and deadly disease outbreak. Highly rehearsed—even ritualistic—political behavior and efforts have ensued as a result (see Aaltola 1999: 1, 2012: 3). Politicians cannot appear to be doing nothing as the overall momentum of pandemic emergencies is geared toward disengagement as anxieties intensify among populations. The reflex is one of containment rather than any sense of humanitarian compassion. Covid-19 compels seemingly non-compassionate haste toward withdrawal and containment of the disease in a certain place, hot spot, or “zone.” If there is other-interestedness, it is toward the people living close by or toward the “general public,” conceived in increasingly national terms. In the pandemic context, any seeming acts of help and aid are deemed to be
propaganda and to be taking advantage of the desperation caused by the disease. Politics and politicization seem to prevail as countries struggle to insulate themselves.

From the Thucydidean perspective, pandemics have the tendency to accentuate existing patterns of antagonism. A serious epidemic disease can highlight the antagonism inherent in two types of relationships: The sustainability of the relationship that humanity has with the natural world, and the political relationships inside and between states. On the one hand, pandemics highlight the hostility and incompatibility between natural and human-made environments. Global attention is focused on the diseases of wild animals, from the HIV/AIDS of monkeys and the avian influenza of birds to the SARS of bats and the Covid-19 of bats or snakes. The common, socially interpreted theme seems to be that a border, which should not have been violated, has been transgressed with the result that nature has turned hostile toward human habits.

On the other hand, the intra-humanity antagonism stems from the differential geographical exposure to the disease and from the perceived sense of who is doing what to safeguard the health of populations. In pandemic situations, the multidimensional fractions that run across humanity become acute when the outbreaks receive their communal interpretations. The records on both Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, or Mad Cow Disease) and SARS provide evidence of this. Before the spring of 1996, BSE was believed to be a managed disease. It was thought to be confined to animals and largely to the UK geographically. The crisis of 1996 turned the outbreak into a “British disease,” embodying, in addition to many other modalities, the independent-minded Europe policy pursued by the UK government. When SARS broke out in 2003, its meaning was partly synchronized with the existing patterns of long-standing suspicion and animosity. SARS was interpreted by the US authorities and by many observers as a cry for political reform in China so that it could become safely and securely integrated into the global order.

Epidemic encounters tend to involve situations in which political legitimacy is contested and events contain a strong judgmental note. These legitimacy crises can easily be used to criticize the authorities or to construct alternative visions of a “healthier” sense of national cohesion. Such dramatic moments of judgment and legitimacy tend to come with a plot: They involve a fight by the presumed protagonist—often in the
guise of the whole nation or even the international/global community—against the negative elements of a perceived antagonism. The protagonists include such stock figures as watchful authorities, proactive doctors, efficient national and international health agencies, and politicians who “did their job.” The disease and disease-causing agents, on the other hand, easily become associated with some ethnically, nationally, or ideologically defined minority, non-vigilant authorities, and self-serving or corrupt politicians. These antagonistic characters in the plot find their historical equivalents in the older collective memories about polluters, untouchables, plague spreaders, and well poisoners.

Covid-19 is no exception. Avoiding and diverting blame was a clear characteristic of Covid-19 from the very beginning. The virus has involved drama as well as legitimacy and status contestations. There are fears of a communal verdict—a judgment being passed about the moral status of the actors involved, whether at the national level in China, the US, or Europe or more widely at the global level. The central focus is on the ability of national governments and health authorities to keep their citizens safe: Were they vigilant, was the level of preparedness high enough, and were the measures taken adequate? As the disease has morphed from a local challenge into a global problem, the measures have clearly not been optimal. The “verdicts” turned the spotlight on the actors and their ability to have made the correct choices. The sense of blameworthiness is going to add to the overall political pressures and, if the accumulative pressures are high enough, potentially trigger political change at various levels.

The main actors of Covid-19, whose (in)decision, reactions, and actions have been actively evaluated, are China, the WHO, EU institutions, and other states, especially the governments of the US and the EU countries. For these actors, doing nothing has not and is not going to be a viable option even in the US where the President Trump has received criticism for his tendency towards inaction. The resulting multi-level legitimacy game related to the disease has pointed to the eventual resolution of the situation in China. One early sign of this interaction was China’s criticism of states that had implemented travel restrictions. Many states, including the US, took a decision to restrict the entry of Chinese nationals and people who had been in mainland China into

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7 Though all evidence points to a location in China as the origin of the coronavirus, the authorities there have been publicly casting doubt on this claim. See, e.g., Huang (2020).
their respective territories. The travel restrictions and subsequent criticism by Beijing were particularly painful for states that had a high level of economic and trade relations with China. For China, what was at stake was its own position and trustworthiness. As of March 2019, many new cases in China have been imported from other countries, which China has pointed out explicitly. As the second wave of Covid-19 is increasing in US, and European officials are struggling to contain their own self-propelling epidemics and re-applying large-scale quarantine measures, following China’s seemingly successful example. However, the blame game is increasingly taking on national/domestic characteristics as opposed to analysts thinking about the disease as a Chinese issue.

For China and its authorities, the inevitable challenge of the global disorder is raising doubts about its possible incompatibility with the global system. On the one hand, it has to demonstrate through its actions its compatibility with and trustworthiness within an international community, and that its economic integration is (in certain key aspects) safe and secure. On the other hand, the Chinese political system has to demonstrate its health and legitimacy first and foremost to its own citizens, who might be, perhaps increasingly so, becoming anxious about the viability of the country’s domestic order. Yet, from the point of view of international relations, the external challenge is tricky yet vital. China’s position in the global value and security of supply chains is fundamental to its economic and political model, and global economy more broadly. Yet, its trustworthiness is often debated, not least because of the perception that many of the challenging influenzas of the past few decades have originated in China. China’s reputation as a source of global vulnerability and exposure can highlight arguments that are counterproductive to Beijing’s attempts to portray the country as a benign major power. However, for the Chinese authorities, the domestic challenge understandably remains a priority.

It is difficult to appreciate the political aspects of Covid-19 without engaging with historical cases where serious epidemics have played a part. Although much of the interplay between lethal epidemics and the realm of interstate relations is contingent upon specific circumstances, some general, recurring, and conventional themes can be highlighted.

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8 See, e.g., Smith (2019).
Imbalance

The uneven and lopsided distribution of the burden of a disease among states can cause shifts in the prevailing balance of power. In a general sense, disease distribution maps can be used to provide a sense of “who’s who” on the map of power when it comes to the supposed efficiency of governance. Besides the level of impressions, in more specific cases, asymmetry affects the outcomes of specific turns of events, such as military campaigns. Historical cases are numerous: for example, asymmetry affected the tragic outcome of the contact between the Spaniards and the Native Americans after 1492 (Diamond 1997). A more recent example is that of the very uneven burden related to HIV/AIDS. The developing countries, especially in southern Africa, continue to face a relative disadvantage in comparison to the developed north. Thus, sharp asymmetries in the distribution of the disease burden can result in shifts in the distribution of power. Moreover, the uneven distribution turns easily into disempowering stereotypes and corresponding biases. The pattern of spread attracts culturally meaningful explanations. It can cause emotional storms as rash and irrational actions are taken sometimes to fight the disease or maintain relative immunity from it. The “innate” tendency of states to derive legitimacy from a certain sense of physical and moral superiority with respect to other states can lead to the common belief that other states or groups of states are, and have been, more prone to the horrors of epidemics. In this way, epidemics can foster nationalist and exclusionist identities and support elites accordingly.

In terms of the geographical spread of the burden, Covid-19’s dynamic has clearly been uneven. It originated in a Chinese city and, up until the February 2020, was mainly confined to a few provinces in China. The efforts to contain it have led to a widespread imposition of quarantine and self-isolation measures that have hit the Chinese economy and global supply chains. Trade has been hampered and the economy is suffering in and around China, and further afield. The disease burden is shifting away from China in ways that are politically and economically meaningful. The outbreaks in different regions and states—for example, in Europe and North America—not only consume the strategic attention of Western states, but increasingly raise the possibility of an emerging economic recession among them.
Public health is not only important in the eyes of one’s own citizens, but also provides an invaluable instrument for conferring status onto states as legitimate and respected actors. A rampant lethal epidemic disease can easily be read as a strong signifier of lower status and governance failure, as a sign of decline. In the declinist framing of epidemic diseases, the epidemic becomes only one symptom of a more acute and dangerous “political dis-ease.” Attempts to hide a disease can be motivated by this logic. When the bubonic plague hit the Indian city of Surat in 1994, concern about international repercussions initially led to attempts to conceal the problem and, once that proved impossible, to downplay the seriousness of the outbreak. A further example of attempts to conceal an epidemic disease is provided by Thailand’s efforts to cover up an outbreak of cholera in 1997 by calling it a case of “severe diarrhoea.” This tendency to hide diseases in an attempt to avoid international embarrassment, which could potentially harm the state’s political and economic interests, can be witnessed all over the world. As the UK’s failed attempts to hide BSE in 1996 demonstrated, states are rarely totally open about the outbreak of a potentially serious epidemic disease. They have too much to lose in terms of respect, legitimacy, and status.

In the Covid-19 case, the likely presumption is that China’s initial management of the disease has been at least partly affected by the need to safeguard perceptions. Similarly, in the US, there were attempts to downplay the significance of Covid-19 during the initial phase, which has led to much criticism of inaction. The concern is that status-related worries and fear can lead states to hide or downplay the actual number of cases and deaths or inability or unwillingness to respond adequately. Cover-ups for status purposes can hamper containment efforts quite drastically.

Lethal epidemic diseases can serve as effective propaganda tools for eroding perceptions about one’s enemy. Diseases have always called for a socially and politically understandable explanation, whether warranted or not. During the centuries of plague in Europe, the pestilence was interpreted as a divine punishment for sin and moral corruption. Not surprisingly, for a short time when the plague epidemic struck, city-states
and other localities became citadels of “righteous” and “healthy” politics: The alleged disease spreaders became enemies of the people, and people’s enemies, whether domestic or foreign, were easily presented as related to the spread of the epidemic. The stock narrative of an epidemic duly contains a well-established dynamic that easily leads to the attribution of contagious disease to foreign sources and political adversaries. This tendency has been particularly pronounced during periods of heightened interstate conflict and world order tensions. For example, in the early 1980s, the Soviet authorities falsely insisted in their propaganda that HIV was the outcome of a US military experiment that had gone terribly wrong. The aim was to point out that the US was a vicious, perverse, and underhanded superpower that should not be trusted.

Unsurprisingly, Covid-19 has seen a proliferation of disinformation. Various conspiracy theories have surfaced claiming that Covid-19 is an artificially created disease. Two main variants of the false theories are that the virus was created by either the Chinese or the Americans for some yet to be fully comprehended geopolitical objective. Russian trolls have been accused of creating and spreading these stories. In the Covid-19 case, China’s draconian efforts to control the disease are connected to the national struggle for cohesion and strength. At the same time, Beijing readily views the travel restrictions imposed on China by other countries very critically or as a sign of outright anti-Chinese behavior. It considers that the disease broke out in China, rather than that it originated in China. This seemingly slight semantic difference was meant to combat the perception that the coronavirus was “made in China.” In the West, Covid-19 has been interpreted as a “mess” created by China. However, as the disease inevitably spread, the political meaning attached to it has become more domestic and local in the West as well. For example, in the US, its spread has been increasingly connected with the Trump administration’s perceived mismanagement, or with the perceived mismanagement of states that are led by the Democratic Party, such as California or New York, or subsequently those led by the Republican Governors, such as Texas or Florida.

Co-option, Pretense, and Diversion

A state can use the outbreak of a lethal infectious disease as an excuse for politically motivated actions such as restrictive maneuvering or economic sanctions. An epidemic can enable states to divert people’s anxiety and frustrations away from its own actions or lack of action, and also to justify its actions against perceived threatening elements. Throughout the
history of states’ interaction with epidemics, it has been very difficult to distinguish between their genuine efforts to minimize the health implications of epidemics and their opportunistic attempts to minimize or gain political benefits from an outbreak. For example, historically, during an epidemic, it has not been unknown for hospitals set up to accommodate patients to be filled with dissidents; politically unwanted elements can find themselves in quarantine or isolation of one form or another for reasons of “public hygiene.” On the other hand, manipulation and trickery have not been confined to the abuse of internal enemy images, they have been extended to the level of international interactions, too. International relations have witnessed some attempts to use epidemics as a pretext for military or strategic gain. States have used regulations whose original purpose was to stop the spread of epidemics by containment to “reap political benefit.” Furthermore, disease-related practices provide ways of legitimizing otherwise politically impossible decisions which would primarily be motivated by economic and political self-interest, ruthless ambition, and power politics.9

Covid-19 has also involved compromises and political considerations. In the case of China, the imposition of even stricter controls on Covid-19-related communications emerged in a context where the country had been internally challenged by many negative trends: a slowing economy, trade tensions, and a recent swine fever emergency. Indeed, at least initially there were some concerns about growing dissent. But it also seems that disease management and control can, perhaps, facilitate a degree of political control as well. This can catalyze the development of social control systems that could otherwise have taken years to implement. Outside of China, the politics of Covid-19 has surfaced in the US for one, as the disease has struck in a highly polarized preelection climate. Due to the fear of economic turbulence before the election, the Trump administration has tried to downplay the significance of the disease; the president himself has claimed that Covid-19 has been hyped up by domestic political opponents to such a degree that it is merely a hoax-like scare. Or, to the extent that is real, that it will simply go away miraculously. His opponents, on the other hand, can co-opt the ramifications of Covid-19 for the 2020 election campaign if there is a widespread sentiment that the administration has failed in epidemic preparedness and response.

9 For example, the US government considered the term “blockade” to be too offensive during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. So it officially imposed a quarantine instead, which carried a stronger sense of international legitimacy.
The key lessons to be learnt from the Covid-19 outbreak, at least at this stage, point to ways in which it can act as a trigger for and precursor to various new developments. The following seven conclusions highlight the joint evolving global impact of the widening regression and coronavirus outbreak in more detail.

**Covid-19 can trigger a major economic shock:** Though the SARS impact was significant, the recovery afterward was fast in 2003. The disruption caused by Covid-19 appears to be both significant and more long term. The disruption to key global production areas is likely to be combined with a demand slump as the main markets in Europe and the US freeze up due to business closures, isolation policies, and general confusion.

**Global decoupling is gaining traction:** At the global level, the economic and supply chain disruption caused by Covid-19 provides one more reminder of the risks posed by the efficient yet overwhelmingly interdependent global system. Its resilience is being stress-tested by the coronavirus and the result(s) might accentuate the ongoing decoupling process. Multinational companies are reconsidering the long-term implications of investing too much in far away production sites. They have already started to shift their production away from China to other countries in an attempt to save money as well as to become less reliant on China due to US–China trade tensions and, more recently, growing risks brought about by the coronavirus outbreak. Covid-19 has suddenly decreased production in China as large-scale quarantine and travel restrictions have been put in place. As such, Covid-19 can be read as a sign of the times, pointing to further decoupling once the unprecedented pandemic crisis is eventually resolved.

**The internally regressing US is missing in action:** During the Ebola outbreak in Africa that started in 2015, the role of the US in mobilizing resources was key in containing the emerging pandemic. Now, the US has not shown any significant global leadership in containing Covid-19. Rather, as the number of cases in the US continue to mount steadily higher, there are increasing concerns that epidemic management is simply lacking in the country, and that the disease is contributing to existing serious domestic antagonism and inequalities. The situation can be read as another indicator of a more lasting trend, whereby the US is retreating from the global arena, and its leading influence and prestige are waning.

**China’s status and legitimacy are increasingly in doubt, especially in the West:** Modern societies are supposed to be compatible with a world order characterized by mobility
and cross border flows. Such societies are seen as forming the safe, secure, and sanitary apex of the global hierarchy. The Covid-19 outbreak puts China in a disadvantageous position: although a part of the system of global flows, it has been associated with multiple pandemic outbreaks in recent times. Furthermore, its place as a legitimate core member of the global club of nations with an adequate, functioning governance and political system is being cast into doubt. Simultaneously, events in Hong Kong have also cast their shadow on the legitimacy of China’s position in the international community, at least in various Western democracies.

China’s turn inward and the solidification of its autocratic system is likely to continue, catalyzed by Covid-19: An epidemic can further reinforce coercive authoritarian tendencies, including the increasingly pervasive forms of surveillance that China continues to develop and utilize. Historically, diseases have led to the pursuit of enhanced purity and civil religious adherence to norms and virtues that are associated with getting out of harm’s way. China’s reaction to the Covid-19 outbreak was to blame the local authorities in Wuhan and Hubei province for trying to hide it for too long. This attribution of causality and blame game point to stricter centralization also in the future, depending on how the situation ultimately proceeds. Furthermore, speculation about the ramifications of the disease for China has tended to overlook the fact that, irrespective of actual culpability, Covid-19 was rapidly morphing into a global disease, a factual state of affairs at this moment.

Russia is challenged domestically, yet more likely to externalize the instability: The Russian Covid-19 crisis is serious and this domestic anxiety came at a moment when President Putin was trying to pass major constitutional changes potentially delaying the problematic handover of power in the future. Rather than being able to deal with the domestic situation directly, the autocratic tendencies might harden at home and diversionary projects could gain further momentum. The efforts spent in meddling in the US domestic affairs are likely to continue and Russia is likely to co-opt the Covid-19 related confusion in the US to meddle as much as it can in the US 2020 presidential elections. The deepening Russian involvement and the likely increased Chinese meddling activity will affect the 2020 US elections: Power transition in a democratic way can be harder to achieve than previously as factions have increasingly mutually exclusive identities and values. In the coming years, perhaps even in the context of the election of the next president, it is not impossible that the US regresses further and further towards the Thucydidean brink or even beyond it. But before that happens, the US will
have become an increasingly incoherent democracy and a possible source of regressive contagion for other Western democracies. The regression can widen and deepen, increasingly engulfing many autocracies as well as democracies.

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