



Welcome to the New Abnormal

By Michael Miklaucic and Amit Gupta

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most globally disruptive event since the terrorist attack against the United States in 2001. Originating in China in late 2019 the disease rapidly spread throughout the international transportation network to every region and every country. Neither its velocity nor its magnitude were initially

understood. In 2020 the entire world seemed to come to a standstill. International and even domestic travel came to an abrupt halt. Normally teeming cities were silenced. Streets, markets, and even schools were empty.

The gravity of the pandemic was perceived differently in different countries, and at different

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times, and the subsequent disruption uneven. Each country responded in a unique way, though general response patterns are discernable. Importantly the pandemic revealed significant vulnerabilities caused by the juxtaposition of private sector globalization in the context of national governance. That is what this special issue of PRISM is about; the different perceptions and reactions to COVID-19 as people and governments experienced the disease, and their diverse understanding of its implications for national and international security.

It is now widely accepted that the COVID-19 virus emerged in Wuhan, China, where the first clusters appeared in December 2019, though some Chinese authorities have promulgated other theories using a global information campaign to cast blame

elsewhere. According to a report of the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the National Intelligence Council based on information as of August 2021 the source of the virus was most likely either human-animal exposure, or a laboratory-associated incident. Sadly, the government of the Peoples Republic of China has not cooperated or been open with the international community regarding the origin of the disease, resulting in regrettable confusion and opacity. The U.S. intelligence community (IC) believes we will never have certainty regarding the origins of the disease without that open cooperation; the IC does assess however that “China did not develop SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) as a biological weapon.”

Chinese authorities first alerted the World

Health Organization of unexplained pneumonia cases on December 31, 2019. By January 20, 2020, COVID-19 had spread from China to Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. By February 15 at least 28 countries, including the United States, most of Western Europe, India, and Australia had reported cases. By March 25, nearly every country in the world had reported cases. As the velocity of the virus' spread was under-estimated, so was the gravity and longevity of the pandemic. Already by mid-February 2020 the COVID-19 death toll had surpassed the total toll from the 2003 SARS epidemic. Yet, as late as March-April 2020 many continued planning their summer vacations assuming the contagion would be arrested within a few months. That was not the case; international tourism arrivals declined 74 percent from 2019 to 2020. Domestic air travel declined 50 percent worldwide. Retail essentially closed down for months.

The recession caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic far exceeds that of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and is in fact the deepest since World War II, with a contraction of 3.5 percent in the global economy. The hospitality and travel industries were among the worst hit, but retail, manufacturing, as well as a wide range of services were decimated as well. Unemployment spiked in many countries, and the nature of employment underwent drastic changes as many chose to work from home, or even not to work at all. The economic impact however has been uneven with some countries descending deeply into economic distress while others recovered more rapidly and robustly.

National responses varied from country to country as did the progress of the disease itself. Most governments imposed restrictions on travel and assembly; drastic restrictions in some cases. In Asia, Singapore and Taiwan were quite strict in their counter-pandemic measures, a strategy that resulted in a manageable experience and relatively low infection and casualty rates. Some argue that

is due to a greater sense of community-well-being in these populations, possibly coupled with experience from previous epidemics. In Europe Sweden adopted an iconoclastically laissez-faire position, imposing only minimal restrictions in hopes of reaching early herd immunity; a strategy that was widely questioned as the disease took a far greater toll in Sweden than in its Scandinavian neighbors Denmark and Norway, both of which were more restrictive. The United States was slow to appreciate the severity of the pandemic, with Presidential leadership giving ambiguous signals, both declaring a national emergency while claiming that the disease was no more dangerous than the common flu. The United States did take the global lead in developing effective vaccines with an ambitious, public-private partnership entitled Operation Warp Speed facilitating and accelerating the manufacture and distribution of vaccines, which became available in early 2021—a record-breaking pace for pharmaceutical development. Nations competed fiercely, first for access to adequate doses of the vaccines, then later for generosity points gained by donating their excess to countries in need.

As of this writing—nearly two years since the onset of the COVID-19—there have been 247,664,151 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in 221 countries and territories, with over 5 million fatalities. The United States has suffered the most fatalities—746K—followed by Brazil (608K), India (458K), and Mexico (288K). And the pandemic is not by any means contained with 4,611 deaths worldwide on October 23, 2021. This issue of PRISM was written over a period from November 2020 through August 2021: its insights and observations reflect the views of the diverse authors from eleven countries, based on information available at the time. Each knew as they wrote that by the time their articles were published, the course of the pandemic would have already moved on. Until COVID-19 is a distant memory that would have been the case

regardless of which month the articles were written or published. Nevertheless, they wrote, and PRISM is publishing these narrative images of the global pandemic beginning in Wuhan, China, in 2019, from their unique perspectives, to contribute to a better understanding of how our nations behave, sometimes together but often separately in response to a global calamity. We hope to learn how people throughout the world see their national and the international security environment in light of the COVID-19 experience. And we hope to learn how we must adapt, and how we must better prepare our individual countries and our global system in anticipation of future global disruption. **PRISM**

