Think
new *things*
Make
new *connections*

Living with COVID-19: what are the implications for the world if a vaccine remains elusive?

15-16 October 2020

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Terms of Reference

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has emerged as the greatest shock to the global economy and our way of life since the Second World War. In an unprecedented global effort, multiple programmes are pursuing the development of vaccines with some promising signs of success. We all hope that these efforts will be successful and that the global sharing of a vaccine will be a powerful counter lever to trends towards fragmentation of the global economy and growing geopolitical tensions. Even with a vaccine, we would face some formidable logistical and technical challenges in inoculating the world. The economic and societal damage caused by global shutdown recession will take time to address and have long-lasting consequences that are probably not yet understood.

This Ditchley discussion, however, will focus on a yet more challenging possibility: that it may ultimately prove impossible to engineer a vaccine that provides lasting protection and that COVID-19 will end up as ubiquitous and varied as that other coronavirus, the common cold, but without losing its lethality for segments of the population. Our assumption is that this would be the most difficult scenario, requiring the most adaptation from humanity, and therefore deserves consideration now. If things work out better, we will still garner insights that we can apply to less negative scenarios.

What effects, then, would COVID-19 as a permanent feature have on the modern, integrated world to which we have become accustomed? What would have to change and what would the consequences and trade-offs be? Would there be upsides and what would they be? How can governments, institutions and individuals prepare and what are the capabilities they would need? What would be the moral and philosophical dilemmas and how could leaders and stakeholders think them through? What would the impact be on relations between generations on the one hand and between countries on the other? Could the balance between global cities and provinces change? How much effort should we put into adaptation, as opposed to striving for medical victory over the pandemic?

Moving into more detail we will look at three buckets of issues, broadly drawn:

Public Health and Public Morality
What would be the implications for public health if we are unable to develop effective vaccines or treatments for COVID-19? How would the lives of the elderly and care for people approaching the end of their lives need to change? What would be the right balance between protecting those more susceptible to the disease and affording freedom and normal life to those less at risk, notably the young? What would be the right balance between, on the one hand, freedom of choice for those at risk on what risks they take and, on the other, the responsibility of the state and employers to provide protection, and their interests in limiting liability? What would be the impact on the relations between generations, if either the interests of older sections of the population or younger sections of the population were prioritised or seen to be prioritised? How could we find a balance and what is the right moral framework for such decisions?

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How would health systems need to change? Would the private sector market be able to provide health insurance covering COVID-19, or would this be left to the state and/or to individuals? In tracking and tracing outbreaks of the disease, how would our attitudes to personal privacy and data privacy have to change? Aside from a vaccine and effective treatments, what other technological breakthroughs or methodological capabilities would help? Who should lead and make the decisions – health professionals and scientists, with greater knowledge, or elected politicians with greater accountability?

The Global Economy, Global Education and Globalisation
What would be the impact on the global economy and globalisation if current conditions were to persist indefinitely? How should we cope with the debts already amassed in tackling COVID-19 if global growth is permanently reduced? How could we mitigate the impact on the global flow of goods, services and talent? Should our focus be on enabling a resumption of what we had before – frequent business travel, global supply chains, systems optimised for efficiency – or the creation of something new, for example yet more reliance on technological remote connection through AR and VR; global ideation and IP – but resilient and perhaps more local manufacture and supply? What would be the implications for the insurance industry and how would this affect business?

What would the impact be on education and the university system if it is no longer so easy for students to study abroad? What would be the broader global and cultural consequences of reduced travel and direct knowledge of life abroad? Would nativism, inwardness and xenophobia increase? What would be the implications for coming generations?

On both the economy and education, in mourning for lost freedoms are we imagining things worse than in fact they might be? Could we adapt our systems quite quickly through reciprocal health care agreements between governments, health passports and smoother and more comfortable arrangements for quarantine? What new industries and new jobs could emerge from the crisis? Would we see a greater pace of automation and the displacement of jobs? How could the nature of work and the place of work evolve under the pressures of a persistent pandemic? What economic and environmental problems could in fact be improved? How might living with the pandemic help us prepare for existential challenges such as climate change?

Geopolitics and the Technological Revolution
How would a persistent pandemic interact with the other great trends of our time: growing competition and tension between the US and China, alongside the growing pace of change from technology? On the one hand, would greater systems of control and surveillance give China and other authoritarian states an edge in living with the pandemic? On the other, how would the global economic slowdown and a likely inevitable degree of "de-globalisation", combined with persistent pandemic, impact on China?

Could dealing with a persistent pandemic help build bridges over geopolitical tensions, or would the divides be deepened? Could the global rule of law expand its reach or would there be new space, both literal and figurative, for bad actors to operate outside of the law? With the space between civilian technology and military technology reducing, how would dealing with a persistent pandemic change the technology arms race between superpowers? Would technology dealing with the pandemic become part of that race? What would be the implications for global connectivity, the Internet and cyber power?

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Programme

The conference will take the form of a phased global conversation, allowing for different time zones. A small group will gather in person at Ditchley Park (conditions permitting), whilst a larger selection of people from around the world will join the conversation remotely. Three working groups, combining in-person and remote participation from the Western Hemisphere will address the three sets of issues above. Separate conversations (because of time zones) on the second morning (UK time) of the conference will bring Eastern Hemisphere perspectives into the discussion. The conclusions and insights from the conference will be shared with all.

A more detailed agenda is laid out in the accompanying full programme.

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