

Strategic Diplomacy

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Strategic Policy for COVID-19: Connectivity with Resilience

In the long history of humankind, more people have been killed by infectious diseases and pandemics – the Plague, the Black Death, small pox, Spanish influenza amongst others – than by deadly conflict. Societies have spent considerable effort to strategize, in Clausewitz' words, the employment of battle to achieve the end of war. But strategic planning to win the war against deadly viruses must deal with the complex problem of an enemy wreaking havoc upon multiple dimensions of our hyperconnected socio-ecological systems simultaneously.

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March, we were dealing with a crisis foretold, for which most national governments were underprepared. For decades, infectious disease specialists have warned that epidemics will become more frequent and an existential security threat because of the interconnected problems of globalization, population growth, inequalities and climate change.

Modern pandemics are systemic diseases with enormous disruptive potential not only for global health but also for economies and societies. They result from the unprecedented connectivity of globalization: mass transit systems within mega-cities, affordable and prevalent air travel, huge cruise ships, the ability to work and live outside of the country of one's birth, even to commute for work across oceans and continents, the frequency of international conferences and meetings, the global supply chains.

Whilst globalization has pushed the connectivity and speed of interaction of socio-ecological systems to unprecedented levels, the capacity of governments, including their policy space and the reaction time to deliver essential services, has shrunk.

Governments have ubiquitously responded to COVID-19 by limiting connectivity in multiple ways – lockdowns, travel restrictions, and border closures. Yet, a wholesale shutdown on connectivity is not the answer: societies want to enjoy the benefits of globalisation, and scientific collaboration and joint global leadership are vital for getting through this crisis. The key question is how to optimise the opportunities of system connectivity while minimizing its risks.

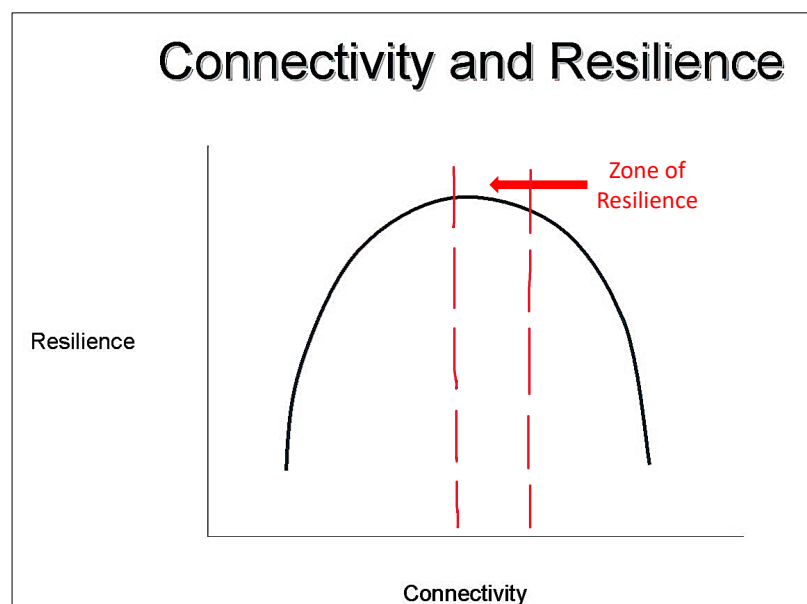
Connectivity and resilience

COVID-19 is a system tipping-point: it will reset globalization as we know it. Like the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, this pandemic demonstrates that the costs of connectivity can outweigh its benefits. The fundamental challenge today is that there is a trade-off between connectivity and resilience understood as a society's ability to bounce back from systemic shock.

As [complexity theorists](#) recognise, connectivity boosts systemic resilience – but only up to a point, after which the relationship can become inverse. This is especially true when numerous interconnections multiply very quickly across a social system and can generate unintentional and unpredictable effects. China's economic growth has clearly been good for the world economy. However, COVID-19's much greater systemic impact compared to SARS also results from the exponential increase of numerous types of international linkages between China and the rest of the world since 2003, and the vastly increased – and uncomfortable – exposure the rest of the world now has to its second largest economy.

Strategic policy for COVID-19

As the graph shows, a healthy balance between connectivity and resilience is needed.



Source: Adapted from Homer-Dixon 2011

Strategic policy is required to position, prepare, and nudge national systems into what we call the 'Zone of Resilience'. What would a strategic policy for COVID-19 look like?

First, it requires [a sea-change in policy-making mindset](#). We need to shift from the traditional focus on the national interest (*raison d'État*) to a new emphasis on how to keep our hyperconnected socio-ecological systems thriving (*raison de système*). A helpful starting point is recognizing that the planet today is a complex adaptive system. This means that the individual components are highly-interconnected; there is often non-linear cause and effect

(e.g. a small single event can trigger cascading effects down multiple chains); and entirely new phenomena can emerge from the interactions of individual components ('emergence').

Second, with this complex-systems strategic mindset, governments can identify more effective ways to mobilise and amplify state capacity to fight diseases of connectivity like COVID-19. For example, richer countries or international health organizations should raise an international pandemic monitoring system to track incidence and data in each world region. Such an early warning system could be the first line of defence even before the disease reaches a country's shores.

Once a pandemic breaks out, it needs to be fought not only at the current epicentres, but also at the weakest links in the international system. Those with more resources must intervene to assist early in these areas because a collapse at these points can trigger cascades and tip the system into a new unpredictable situation. In the COVID-19 context, weakest links include potential international disaster zones such as refugee camps, slums, fragile states with weak state capacity, or countries with very poor health systems. [According to UN figures](#), 2.2 billion people worldwide lack access to water, and 4.2 billion lack basic sanitation.

As almost every government recognizes by now, a pandemic like COVID-19 must be fought equally hard on the economic front. But this battle too must be won at a system-level for any national recovery to be sustainable. In March 2020, G20 leaders promised to do 'whatever it takes' to support the global financial system during the COVID-19 crisis. But they did not commit to refrain from trade protectionism and competitive currency devaluations – essential steps to boost the resilience of the multilateral trading system in times of systemic shock.

Third, strategic policy for COVID-19 would focus urgently on building up resilience within states and societies in key ways. For example, the principle of diversification – of food, medical, other strategic supplies – is essential to building some redundancies into the system so that there are multiple points of potential failure rather than a single potentially vulnerable supply chain. Relatedly, better shock-proofing of critical infrastructure is required. As we have seen from a relatively successful case like Singapore, a broader-based pandemic capacity must include the entire health system from general practitioners, to general hospitals and specialist communicable disease facilities. But there are also weak links in other critical infrastructure: for instance, Australia fortunately produces a great deal of its own food – but food security in times of global supply chain disruptions entails having more credible national stockpiles of fuel necessary to transport this food and produce across a continent. Finally, public education and mobilization capacity is imperative for managing any public health threat. There is no silver bullet here; governments must navigate their own countries' particular political systems and social attributes to find the most appropriate means of ensuring a high degree of public confidence and compliance.

Essentially, what this pandemic lays bare is the crucial variable of state capacity, of which one vital element is the ability to make and implement strategic policy.

The Globalization Reset

In the coming months of continuing disruption and trauma, we must take the opportunity of this terrible crisis to reset globalization by renegotiating the acceptable trade-off between connectivity and resilience. We are at the precipice of a systemic shock that may cause system failure. Business as usual is not an option, as it may well spell our oblivion. Changing strategic mindsets at the national levels is key to mastering this fundamental challenge of our time. The economic recession that is already upon us compels a general shrinkage of national and global economies. But we should not assume that the eventual recovery of economic activity must be based on pre-COVID-19 levels. Australia's summer of climate disaster had already brought home the unsustainability and dangers of our current carbon footprint. To build resilience in the face of connectivity, now is the time to rethink our way of life and to pivot towards what is responsible and what is sustainable.

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The [Strategic Diplomacy project](#) is concerned with translating the findings of our primary research into policy-relevant outputs. The *Policy Memo* series provides concise and timely analysis on strategic policy issues for our national and international policy audiences.

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