H. R. McMaster on Coronavirus and the Fight for the Free World

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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Please note: This transcript is based off of a recorded discussion and mistranslations may appear in text.
Matthew Hunter:

Good morning. Good afternoon everybody. On today’s call, we have Hudson Institute’s inaugural Japan Chair holder, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. Many of you will know General McMaster from his time as a national security advisor to the president. He’s a 34-year veteran of the United States Army, a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. He completed his Ph.D. in military history at the University of North Carolina and is one of the most celebrated military commanders of the modern era and a wonderful, wonderful guy to boot.

He will be joined by our Asia-Pacific Security Chair, Patrick Cronin. Patrick's research focuses on the challenges and opportunities confronting the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, including China's total competition campaign, the future of the Korean peninsula and strengthening US alliances and partnerships. Dr. Cronin is a graduate of the University of Florida and earned his doctorate at the University of Oxford. And without further ado, we'll go ahead and turn it over to Patrick.

Patrick Cronin:

Well, thank you Matt and thank you everyone. It’s a great pleasure to immediately turn it over to a great American and our Japan chair and good friend H.R. McMaster for his initial comments. And then I’ll follow that up with some of my questions and conversation before we turn it back to you, Matt, to take questions from all of the listeners. Thank you. Over to you H.R.

H.R. McMaster:

Hey, thanks Matt. Thanks Patrick. It’s really a pleasure to be here with all of you and especially because Hudson I think is doing some of the best work on the geostrategic implications of the coronavirus. And Patrick, I'm thinking of the work that you've done on that topic, and Walter Russell Mead's great essay in The Wall Street Journal this past weekend. But I think that Hudson's scholarship is more important than ever in this time of crisis and they're trying to anticipate what we're going to have to do to compete effectively on the backend of this crisis. I know that all of us, all the listeners here feel as I do in terms of great admiration and gratitude for all of the healthcare workers and first responders who are on the front lines of this competition, this war against this horrible virus.

I want to begin this call with the competition with China upfront and then talk about really five other areas that I think are important to understanding, at least initially, the potential implications of the coronavirus, the COVID-19 experience as well as one overarching implication for technology and health security. So what I thought I might do, on the topic of China, is to pose four questions and give tentative answers that might help us reorganize our thinking and our research and the work that we do as we continue to track the progress of this crisis and our interaction with it.

The first is, what effect will the coronavirus experience and the post-virus environment have on US-China geostrategic competition? And I think all indicators are to this point that competition will intensify.

Of course, the rhetoric has been escalating on both sides. And internally, China is likely to respond to this crisis with policies that make economic reform within China toward a
liberalization of the economy, a return of the Deng Xiaoping approach to the growth of this economy as more and more unlikely. The virus has damaged China’s already slowing economy and the party will have to shift more resources to deal with the public health system and the aftermath. And it will I think, abandon economic and financial liberalization and double-down on the toxic debt and the misallocation of its capital to state-owned enterprises. Beijing will feel, I think, compelled to continue to exploit what they see as our vulnerabilities through state-backed industrial espionage and IP theft under the Made in China 2025 effort.

And then also the continued subsidization of their state-owned enterprises. It's almost certain that China will view this, what they've called a window of opportunity, to realize their Made in China 2025 goals. They'll see this window is closing more rapidly than even the Chinese Communist Party leadership anticipated. And so this will lead to a quickening of their pace in their effort to develop, steal, force the transfer of critical technologies that would make them less dependent on supply chains outside of China for advanced technologies and advanced manufacturing capabilities.

What we’re seeing also is the competition intensifying in connection with Chinese influence operations. I think what's been interesting about how China has tried to bend the COVID-19 tragedy crisis in its favor is it's adaptation—adoption, really—of Russia's playbook, of Putin's playbook, of disinformation and sowing conspiracy theories as a way to cast out about the origins of the virus and then also to sow conspiracy theories that are damaging to the US and other's reputations.

And I think the second question for us to track, is to ask what effect the coronavirus experience will have on what has shifted from a trade competition to a tech competition—and what we might now call a decoupling competition or a decoupling war.

Part of China's influence campaign has been to offer coronavirus response assistance to countries that it wants to pull into its orbit. I think at last count there were 89 countries that were on the receiving end of some form of Chinese assistance. And this is just one aspect though, of a broad effort by the party to build out its network of Chinese Communist Party-compliant countries as well as US independent regional and international institutions. Outside of China, the virus has exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and of course has reinforced what I think is now an increasingly inescapable conclusion that China is not a trusted business partner. And so of course in response I think we'll see an acceleration of this decoupling. And what we ought to do is regard this as a competition and we ought to work with like-minded countries, our allies and partners globally to convince others to align with our free and open societies and our free market economic system rather than China's close authoritarian system and its state-led economic model.

And I think the decoupling will accelerate particularly in areas of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, obviously. What's important to note about this is how China is really trying to score points in a propaganda war and then drive wedges between our free and open societies within countries in Europe and then between the United States and our partners as well. You see this again with the assistance that they're providing, the propaganda campaign, but I think you are likely to see this also take the form of trying to take advantage of the economic crisis to set even more debt traps for countries that are vulnerable to Chinese lending and indebtedness. I think just an example that we could point to is an intent by China to drive a wedge between Europeans through the so-called “Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern
European Countries Initiative.” This is where China is trying to peel away countries that may be most vulnerable to Chinese influence, such as Serbia. And you saw the statement that the Serbian leadership made this past week, probably Hungary and others. There are other countries that are recipients of large amounts of Chinese aid. I think Greece for example is vulnerable in that connection. And you see how China is focused in particular on Italy, and with the provision of assistance, deliberately highlighting the China's largesse and then disparaging the EU for not being able to do more for Italy.

A third question to track is how will the COVID experience affects the Chinese Communist Party's obsession with control internally and its effort to perfect the surveillance state. China will intensify the campaign that has already begun to sow disinformation about the virus internally, deflect blame, and then use the pandemic opportunistically to perfect its Orwellian digital police state. We're already seeing China perfecting techniques for population control in the course of coping with the violence and it remains to be seen, what effect this blow back might have, and efforts to coerce the Chinese population, for example, into lauding president Xi's response.

Will this be, as Patrick Cronin has suggested it might, Xi Jinping's Chernobyl moment, especially in the wake of revelations regarding the coverup of the scope of the outbreak, the persecution of whistleblowers, and then some of the ludicrous ways of dealing with this crisis with demonstrably false narratives? Speculation is growing that the death rates have far exceeded information the government has released. And this is something to keep an eye on, the degree to which the party responds to an increase in pressure, an intensification of its control, and the tightening of the party’s exclusive grip on the population.

The expulsion of Western journalists fits into this, the same pattern of the tightening grip and obsession with control. The fourth question is, what effect will the virus have on the party’s foreign policy? We see elements of this with the disinformation campaign, the sowing of dissension between like-minded countries, allies, and partners in the West. What you could see is an increase not only in jingoistic rhetoric, but aggressive action in flashpoints such as the South China Sea, and I think especially Taiwan. The party's intensifying, jingoistic, aggressive rhetoric on Taiwan is always a cause for concern.

But in the wake of COVID-19 and the party's concerns about losing grip on control internally, the party may see this as the perfect opportunity to ramp up tensions on Taiwan as a means of deflecting the Chinese people's attention away from the party's mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis and toward an external crisis. So those are four questions I think that we should track with China that could make this a dangerous time, not only in connection with our health and global health, but also geo-strategically. And, the other areas I'd like to cover will begin with Russia.

Falling oil prices are putting tremendous pressure on Russia. What began as a Russian attempt to crush America's shell oil industry appears to be backfiring as a Russian population is reacting negatively to a stagnated economy. And that may carry over into opposition to Putin maneuvering to continue his rule at least until 2036. Russia will not be generating the revenue with depressed oil prices that it needs to continue to fund its aggressive foreign policy.

Russia will be stuck with a huge bill in Syria, a bill for reconstructing a country that it and Iran helped to destroy. And so what Russia has seen as some of its triumphs – its ability to restore national greatness, how it's restored itself as a player in the Middle East, may become a lodestone around the Kremlin's neck. Saudi Arabia is also very much affected by the decrease in oil prices. as well as the COVID-19 crisis, and the slowdown of the global economy which has
affected world demand and resulted in this glut in supply. This could have an effect obviously on Saudi Arabia’s ability and Mohammad bin Salman’s (MBS) ability to make good on his economic reform efforts. This could in turn sow dissension within the Royal family.

Of course, MBS may not be in a very strong position as we’ve seen in the last couple of weeks with rounding up kind of the usual suspects within the royal family, Muhammad bin Nayef, MBN, in particular. And so Saudi Arabia is another area to keep a close eye on from the geo-strategic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. And the fourth area that I think is worth watching, I’ll just lump these together, would be Iran, North Korea and Venezuela, three countries and autocratic regimes that are under tremendous strain and are on the receiving end of US maximum pressure campaigns which may be reinforced, which are being reinforced in the tragic and unfortunate way by the coronavirus. There could be potential leadership crises in all three of these countries, and as these regimes become more desperate, it’s worth asking what could their reactions be?

With Iran, we’ve already seen their aggression across their 40-year proxy war against the United States, the Arab monarchies and the West generally. But I think what is highly likely is Iran will act out in the area of offensive cyber capabilities. And for North Korea, as Patrick has pointed out recently as well, it’s worth keeping in mind the reported Sixth Army Corps mutiny during the 1996 famine, something like that could happen in North Korea. I think it’s worth noting that Kim Jong Un has created kind of a new pseudo wealthy class in Pyongyang, and as they begin to feel the effect of COVID-19 and the constraints on the economy there, will they begin to oppose a continuation of the Kim family regime in North Korea.

Venezuela is going to become under pressure not only because of oil prices but also because of the pressure its sponsors, China and Russia, are under based on the COVID-19 crisis. The fifth area that I think we should consider is the European Union and the countries of Europe. It seems as if EU problems are worsening due to a further erosion of confidence in the EU. As the European economy slows even further, the structural imbalances between Northern and Southern Europe are going to continue to grow wider. And you see growing skepticism about the degree to which the EU and Brussels can assist the member states in coping with this crisis.

China, as already mentioned, is doing its best to draw a contrast between what they're portraying as responsive Chinese support to countries such as Hungary and Italy, and the European Union’s assistance [to these countries]. China is trying to draw this contrast between a responsive China, a friendly China and an ineffective, incompetent Brussels.

COVID-19 is going to overall reinforce the narrative of the limits of globalization. That might be a good thing, especially if we recognize that there’s no prize for membership in international organizations like the World Health Organization, which has been subverted by the Chinese Communist Party and has been part of the problem in the response to the virus and the recognition that international cooperation really happens among strong sovereign, like-minded states.

The sixth area to keep track of is one that's been receiving increasing coverage, which is really the inability of fragile and developing economies to cope with this crisis and the vast humanitarian crisis that could carry over as this virus progresses across the globe. And then finally, just an observation on technology and long-term implications. It’s a statement of the obvious that threats emanating from synthetic biology will multiply and this disease heightens the potential threat from synthetic as well as manmade biological crises. The coronavirus most
likely started in this illegal wet market, not a biology lab, but it did demonstrate the impact that a
dangerous new virus could have and will likely embolden our enemies and unscrupulous
adversaries and those who would propagate these threats.

A range of biothreats in the future could emerge from clandestine laboratories, through the use
of CRISPR DNA printing and other biological advances. It's important for us to begin investing
even more now in the technologies that will help us cope with that emerging threat. And then
one final note on emerging technologies. One of the greatest, I think possibilities associated
with our response to this crisis is in the area of what some people or most people are now are
calling agile manufacturing, as the vulnerability of supply chains has become apparent. These
are the range of technologies that will allow manufacturing to occur closer to home, even in
economies with tight labor markets or higher labor costs.

I'll just end there except to say that I think we ought to be as confident, generate as much
confidence as we can. There is a narrative out there geo-strategically that the United States has
been inept, and China has dealt with these problems effectively. There has been another
narrative out there that China is cooperating and helping others while the United States has not.
I think it's incumbent upon us at Hudson and elsewhere to point out that the United States has
contributed 10 times more to the World Health Organization than China has. 86 million in 2019, I
think 10 million or so from China, or less than 10 million.

Also, Americans have made voluntary contributions, such as I think the Gates Foundation alone
made up 8 percent of all voluntary funding to the World Health Organization. I think it's
important for us to let the world know that the United States has been a tremendous champion
of world health under the PEPFAR program, under US AID. The United States donated like
$900 million to the World Health Organization last year and then President Trump signed his
supplemental appropriations act that included $1.3 billion in additional US foreign assistance for
the pandemic response, just in March. And then most recently Secretary of State Pompeo
announced an additional $274 million in emergency health and humanitarian funding for at risk
countries. Our aid doesn't come with strings attached by China, on data tracking apps that the
Chinese diplomats are using to advance their propaganda campaign. So I think I'll stop there,
but it's a real privilege to be with everyone. And Patrick, I look forward to hearing where you'd
like to take the conversation. Thank you.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Well H.R., that's a terrific set of insights and I know there's a deeper story behind even all the
many points you just made and those points are read and can be read in your new book "Battle
Grounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World," which is coming out later this month, or in April.
And I only mentioned that because it also reinforces the fact that you put together the national
security strategy in the Trump administration and trying to get my mind around what changes
strategically after this coronavirus, or in the midst of this coronavirus for the United States. I'm
thinking back to Isaiah Berlin, the “fox knows many things and the hedgehog knows one big
thing.” Right now we're focused on one big thing, the coronavirus, maybe China, but we're going
to have to be prepared for all of these many things afterwards. This fight for the free world. What
changes from your view and when you put together the national security strategy, when you
finish your own new book that I think riffs off of the strategy, what changes as a result of this
coronavirus for you strategically for the United States?
H.R. McMaster:

Well, thanks Patrick. I think what this virus highlights is that we can't draw back to our borders, to the coastline of the United States. And what I've sensed ever since leaving Washington is a growing movement towards a form of isolationism or at least of retrenchment and a belief that cuts really both political parties and across the political spectrum that America's disengagement from the world is an unmitigated good. And I think what we're seeing is really some kind of strange bedfellows in this connection. When you have George Soros and Charles Koch working together to advance a narrative of American disengagement. I think we're motivated by different sets of beliefs: that what we're seeing with this virus is really the only way for us to protect ourselves, to protect American security and prosperity, and the idea that advancing American influence in the world is through engagement, and engagement that aims to reduce threats to the United States really at their origin.

Once these threats have become unbounded, coping with them comes at a much, much higher cost then engagement ever would have. Of course, as we wrote the 2017 National Security Strategy, pandemics were on our mind. We kind of dodged a bullet, we thought, with SARS, and maybe had too much of a sense of complacency as a result of how quickly SARS disappeared. But what we emphasized under the priority actions in the National Security Strategy was to detect and contain bio threats at their source. We've pledged to work with other countries to detect and mitigate outbreak breaks early to prevent their spread. Well, of course the dishonesty, the coverup of the Chinese communist party, the World Health Organization's complicity in that coverup and slow response, played foil to our ability to do that. And so now what we had to do is fall back on the other party actions that we identified, which are, and we're playing catch up there, which is biomedical innovation, which is to rapidly get out the therapies and hopefully a vaccine in time at least to prevent a second wave of this terrible disease. And then the third-party action, which is improving emergency response.

It would cost far less in dollars, but especially in lives, if we were able to have responded to this horrible disease overseas and helped contain it at its origin through international cooperation with China. But that was not to be. I would say that this lesson, and I don't want to be over simplistic with COVID-19 analogies, but it also applies to sustaining our effort against Jihadist terrorist organizations, for example.

We now have this mantra of ending endless wars, as if wars end when one side decides to disengage. We've created, in Afghanistan for example even, a delusional false narrative about the nature of the Taliban and its relationship to terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda. It might make us feel good, but it ultimately, I think, we'll pay a much higher price for disengagement than we will for sustaining our engagement abroad in an effort to defeat or foil these threats before they reach our shores.

Patrick Cronin:

Well, that's a great answer. I wonder if you could offer advice about how we could better mobilize allies and partners, and better mobilize American unity in response to this ongoing crisis and the strategic challenges we're going to face after this pandemic is dealt with.
H.R. McMaster:

Right. Well, this is another element of the narrative of disengagement. This deep skepticism about the value of allies. And I think what we see in this crisis is how immensely important international corporation is against common threats. Whether it's a disease, or whether it's the importance of alliances in deterring adversaries in the context of great power competition with terror regimes like Russia and China, or in coping with hostile states such as Iran and North Korea. And I think what we have in the West is a crisis of confidence. Confidence in our democratic principles, and institutions, and processes, the effectiveness of our government. And I think if we can respond to this crisis in a way that begins to restore our confidence in who we are, and confidence in the value of our alliances, that we will come out much stronger on the backend of this crisis.

If we play into what I think is in many ways a self-defeating narrative, or narrative almost of self-loathing that you can detect in much of the popular discourse today, I think we will accelerate this downward trend in confidence. And, of course, there are those who are ready to take advantage of that lack of confidence, and those include Russia and China in particular. I think, as I mentioned though, both of those countries are going to have their own problems. I think that we have an opportunity. We do have an opportunity to focus more on us and how to strengthen the effectiveness of our governance, how we strengthen and rebuild our economy coming out of this crisis. So I would emphasize the need for us to look at this horrible tragedy as an opportunity to strengthen ourselves, the competence of our government, but also the confidence that we have in ourselves and like-minded countries and our ability to work together.

Patrick Cronin:

I know the time we have is short, and we want to open up the questions to the listeners. You've already given us many more points than you suggested at the beginning, H.R. I can't count on my fingers now how many points you've made but they've all been good ones. Just one final quick question before we open it up to listeners. In terms of a tactical breakdown of deterrents, because, yes, we need to be looking strategically and have our focus on the big crisis, but while we're doing that, it does seem to me we are in a maximum potential danger of miscalculation by a revisionist power or actor. And what could be done just to try to minimize the breakdown of deterrents on, whether it's North Korean or Iran, in the South China Sea over Taiwan, or wherever.

H.R. McMaster:

I think the point you're making is the importance of forward position of U.S. forces to deter potential enemies. And I think that that is an aspect of our long-standing defense strategy of deterrence by denial, and really convincing potential enemies that they cannot accomplish their objectives by the use of force. I think the miscalculation you're referring to would be the perception that U.S. forces do not have the capability to respond effectively. Or would be complicated by the COVID-19 virus and the effect on our armed forces. I think that is a legitimate concern. Of course this is not an unprecedented threat, the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 had a devastating effect on the U.S. Navy, and on the U.S. Army. Tens of thousands of soldiers died even before they could deploy to Europe in the closing months of World War I.
So I think it's very important obviously for the Department of Defense to continue what it's doing to mitigate the effect of the virus, but one of the conclusions we might make on the backend of this realization is that the diminishment of readiness in our forces that are deployed abroad, the danger associated with that might also reinforce the importance of forward position capable joint American forces as the best way to reassure our alliances and our allies. And then also to deter potential enemies.

Patrick Cronin:
Terrific. General McMaster, thank you very much, I want to hand it back to Matt Hunter to take question.

Matthew Hunter:
Thank you, Patrick. I think it's clear based on the analysis that what the two of you provided represents the absolute very best of what we do at Hudson Institute. So thanks to both of you for that extraordinary analysis.

Caller:
Thank you. I have no crisis of confidence with people like Patrick Cronin and General McMaster framing our approach. So thank you gentlemen very much. I want to follow up on the last question. Beyond deterrents, is the U.S., and should the U.S., be taking action to help change what's going on in Iran, and North Korea, and the South China Sea.

H.R. McMaster:
I think that there have been causes, well I know there have been causes, you've seen to alleviate sanctions on North Korea and Iran. And while I fully support doing everything we can to ensure that medical supplies and food, which are not the subjects of U.S. sanctions, but may be constrained by financial institutions wary about processing financial transactions associated with those. We ought to do everything we can to alleviate those sanctions. To ensure that we don't have unintended consequences of sanctions, we should keep as much pressure on these regimes as we can to force them to make a choice. With Iran, I think the choice that we ought to try to force Iran to make is to either behave like a normal nation state and be treated as such, or to continue to behave like a terrorist organization and be treated like a terrorist organization.

Iran, for too long, has been able to have it both ways, and ultimately it will not be the United States that will determine the future of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and whether or not they're going to continue with this theocratic technocracy, it'll be the Iranian people. But I think our policies ought to reinforce an effort to affect a shift in the nature of the Iranian regime, such that is ceases its permanent hostility to the United States, Israel, and the West. On North Korea, I think the purpose of the sanctions is to attempt to convince Kim Jong Un that he is safer without nuclear weapons than he is with them. Safer from the perspective of not only how the United States and allies would respond to a direct threat from North Korea with the most destructive weapons on Earth, but also that the effect of the sanctions exacerbates internal threats to the Kim family's rule, to the Kim family dictatorship in the North.

But I think that we ought to be strong in resisting calls to alleviate sanctions and abandon the campaigns of action pressure against both Iran and North Korea. Patrick, over to you on this.
Patrick Cronin:

A few brief thoughts. The first one strategically of course is we don't want to exacerbate the separation between our aspirations with regard to security and our capabilities, which are now further stretched by dealing with this. And yet, our adversaries are prepping the battlefield, they are taking advantage of this crisis, and we need not just some defense but also some offense in some cases. Defense in the case of North Korea, for instance, where Kim Jung Un is essentially castigating Secretary Pompeo and the U.S. administration for talking about the maintenance of sanctions during this crisis, while also offering assistance on a humanitarian level.

That's not a contradiction in policy, that's actually a sensible policy where we're offering our humanitarian hand, but we're going to maintain sanctions because they're in place over the nuclear steps that are now being taken by North Korea. But Kim is essentially incurring favor with Beijing right now because the North Korean economy is so utterly dependent on China, especially with sanctions in place, and with the virus as well, and North Korea is deeply worried about the management of this virus. So they're taking a cheap shot. But I do worry that those cheap shots, in terms of political warfare by North Korea or others, could lead to some kinetic action that could lead to at least a dust up or something. But meanwhile, North Korea is building its nuclear capabilities, so it's not stopping prepping their battlefield.

China, while we need to corporate with China where we can, we have to be very weary of the fact that their data are wrong and misleading. That their equipment is riddled with problems and defective, and that they have this immense propaganda machine churning out lines like The Global Times today saying that the “American century is now over.” Not exactly a very cooperative tone coming out of a mouthpiece of the Communist part of China. Even so, we need to be seen by the rest of the world as seeking to cooperate where we can, while recognizing that a country like China is prepping their own information dominance across Huawei and other systems that H.R. McMaster already talked about. And I think that's something we need to be also having our own offense on in terms of information campaign and information dominance.

Caller:

Yes. I wanted to ask General McMaster about his assessment of our capabilities, US capabilities in surveillance and intelligence. And I don't mean militarily but more civically, how is it that for two months things were going on in Wuhan and we didn't know about it? Why is that we don't really know the impact of this virus in places like North Korean and Iran? Or don't seem to know. Maybe we do know and it's just not shared with the public. But I just wanted your assessment of our surveillance and intelligence capabilities in situations like this and therefore in other situations as well?

H.R. McMaster:

Well, it's, I would just say it's never perfect. It varies wherever, depending on your access, obviously. China has done its best job and Chinese Communist Party has done its best job to deny any kind of any kind of access to what's happening in that country, both from a sustained campaign of counterintelligence as well as expelling journalists, for example. The initial reports that came out of Wuhan were in December of last year. And then Taiwan of course advanced a lot of these within the World Health Organization and those reports were deliberately
suppressed by the Chinese Communist Party. I think there just has to be a recognition that there are active efforts to frustrate our ability to understand better what's happening in these closed authoritarian regimes.

I think though our visibility into what's happening will improve based on technology. I think commercial technology is helping. We're already seeing this through satellite imagery with companies like Planet for example that are going to be able to detect image changes over the whole surface of the earth. And then also with the satellite communications capabilities being able to penetrate into some of these closed authoritarian societies. And I think we ought to be actively pursuing that, a way to get around China's firewall or the Islamic Republic of Iran's efforts to block access to outside information as well as to understand better what's going on within that country.

In Iran it's particularly difficult just because of, it's been since 1979 that we've not really had good routine access to key elements of the Iranian population. But I guess the short answer to the question is it varies. I think we ought to be aware of what our blind spots are and from an intelligence perspective, but increasingly an open source commercial perspective, try to shine light on these of dark corners of the world.

Patrick Cronin:

I would just reinforce what you just said, H.R. I remember back with the North Korean famine in the 1990s, how ill-equipped the CIA was to try to understand what was happening with the black markets and with the famine. Today with the open source intelligence that you're talking about with surveillance and satellite surveillance, you see creative analysis ongoing. For instance, the number of deaths in Wuhan probably numbers about 40,000 based on just the crematoriums and counting the urns that have been brought to them. A very grim statistic, but a way that the open source intelligence may be better than what the government is at least putting out. They may know it, but they may not want to reveal their own sources.

Caller:

Okay. Thank you. General McMaster, thank you for decades of service. Around a narrow question, could you expand on what the Chinese have done with regard to what you described as affecting their independence and the quality of their work?

H.R. McMaster:

You mean in terms of, meaning China 2025 and the effort to break free of dependence from the U.S. technologies?

Caller:

Yes. What have the Chinese done that make the World Health Organization a less effective and independent organization?

H.R. McMaster:

Yeah. So, really it's by virtue of the influence they exert on the organization through people, Chinese agents within the organization as well as the weakness of the leadership, frankly.
There's a decent article on this, or maybe it's a letter to the editor, in *The Economist* this week and there's an essay that I read earlier on why is it that the Chinese Communist Party has influence on the WHO. Patrick, could you offer your thoughts on this and then I'll see if I can pull up this essay that I've just read and I seem to have forgotten. But it really is, it's about how China exerts influence within these organizations.

And I think that what happens is, is that we sort of view these international organizations as reflecting our principals automatically. And we tend to think that just by being a member of them, we'll be able to advance our interests internationally. Whereas the Chinese actually subvert these organizations and try to bend them to their own foreign policy agenda. I mean the most ludicrous example of this is the Human Rights Council. But there are others as well, UNESCO and now of course the World Health Organization. But Patrick, over to you and I'll see if I can find this essay.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Yes. I worked a lot with the WHO and international organizations when I was at USAID for instance in the Bush Administration. And I know that we, as Americans in general, just neglect to know very much about these international institutions. And a country like China coming in with a single-minded purpose of making them support their party line, that can go a long way toward influencing them, making them essentially self-censor their own words as the WHO chief did for a long time, refusing to call a pandemic what was obviously going to be a pandemic and going along with Beijing's line.

But inside China of course, there's a great article in *The Wall Street Journal* this week on how China built a “foolproof” system in theory after SARS so that they would be able to detect a burgeoning pandemic and they would make it free from political tampering. But what they didn't count on was that because Beijing and the Communist Party of China demand a certain party line to be sort of kept to, they didn't want to send bad information to Beijing and as a result the political tampering happened within the Chinese system and then that was then fed into the WHO, which essentially repeated the bad information. So bad data in, bad data out and the WHO was there to essentially put a rubber stamp on it for a while.

**H.R. McMaster:**

And I think this is, and I would just say, I would just add to this, this is a failure of leadership too with Dr. Tedros. I mean, I think there should be international calls for his resignation as a result of the way he mishandled this and deferred to Xi Jinping.

**Caller:**

H.R. spoke about the importance of the forward positioning of technological capabilities including ISR. You mentioned that a little bit, but my question is what about Afghanistan? Does the epidemic affect them in a particular way?

**H.R. McMaster:**

Well, I have to really see what the latest is on Afghanistan, but of course it will be devastating there based on the fragility of the healthcare system and then the duress that Afghanistan is already under based on the violence of the Taliban, which has not let up. I mean, despite these
promises and the deal has not let up at all and has actually intensified the violence against the
government and the Afghan people and Afghan security forces. And then of course there's a
political crisis internally that's affecting the government based on what the competing claims of
having won the election between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah.

What I think is regrettable is how much of our diplomatic effort went into negotiating what I think
is a fundamentally flawed and doomed to fail agreement with the Taliban instead of focusing our
diplomatic effort on trying to broker an internal political combination between Abdullah Abdullah
and the Northern Alliance groups and the various Christian groups that Ghani did particularly
well in during the election. It's a crisis because of just the effect the of the virus would have,
especially in urban areas in Afghanistan and the fragile healthcare system that exists there. But
then we, if you put on top of that, the violence as well as the internal political problems, it could
lead to kind of a catastrophe there.

We ought to remember that even at the height of the Syrian Civil War, a large number of
refugees who were flooding into Europe was based on the Obama Administration's
disengagement from the fight in Afghanistan, not even declaring, not having the Taliban as a
declared enemy anymore. What we seem to be replicating has had Afghans as a close second
in the numbers of refugees that were flooding into Europe. So again, we tend to think that
maybe these problems can just be confined to over there, but they all have second- and third-
order effects if they're not at least ameliorated at the source. Patrick, any comments or thoughts
on that?

Patrick Cronin:

No, I agree. I mean the dire concerns emanating from Afghanistan this past weekend are
growing and I think they're fearing the non-government organizations in the U.S. kind of
withdrawing or retrenching and being left with a very vulnerable healthcare system. Just as we
might add globally, all those countries that have been taking Chinese money through the Belt
and Road Initiative and other investments, are very worried about the hidden toxic debt burden
they now face, especially as their commodities prices plummet. So there, this goes to your
point, H.R. McMaster, about second-order effects, they're going to be felt globally and a lot of
the countries that are in the developing world are going to be hurt even more than the first world
countries.

H.R. McMaster:

And I'll just point out the news this weekend that the Taliban attacked a hospital that was under
construction in Herat. And of course, Herat will be the front line of Afghanistan's battle against
the coronavirus because it's right on the border with Iran.

Matthew Hunter:

All right. And I think with that we are just about out of time, but I want to thank you, H.R. and
Patrick, both of you for that outstanding analysis. That was incredible. And I think everybody on
this call will feel the same way.