

COVID-19 Pandemic in “G zero World”

Ken Koyama, PhD
Chief Economist, Managing Director
The Institute of Energy Economics, Japan

The COVID-19 pandemic is the gravest problem and the most serious global crisis that today’s international community faces. While some major countries have begun to hope that the worst phase is passing with infections peaking, infections are still expanding in the world, with the novel coronavirus estimated to have infected about 4.25 million people and killed about 290,000 people by May 14, according to the World Health Organization. Even in countries where infections have peaked, infections could expand explosively again or a second or third wave of pandemic could come. Infections could spread from Europe and the United States to Africa and Latin America, with global damage expanding.

At a time when the world is plagued with the unprecedentedly grave crisis, the international community is naturally required to fight against the crisis through strong cooperation and solidarity. Central leadership is required for maintaining and enhancing such unity, cooperation or solidarity. Nevertheless, we must question if the current world is prepared for cooperation or solidarity.

As a matter of course, many people in the face of the unprecedentedly serious crisis are courageously helping each other beyond national boundaries in healthcare and life support areas that are the most important for addressing the crisis, as reported frequently. At the same time, however, numerous matters of concern regarding the unity, cooperation and solidarity of the international community have emerged. For example, whether the WHO has worked well in addressing the pandemic has become a controversial issue, while the WHO is expected to play a key role in international public hygiene and health maintenance amid the pandemic, with WHO officials making enormous efforts and initiatives. Some people have called for verifying whether the WHO has made adequate initial responses to COVID-19. The United Nations, even though expected to address any important international issue, has failed to demonstrate its presence in regard to the current pandemic.

How about international frameworks such as the Group of Seven and the Group of 20? Top G7 leaders have held teleconferences to discuss initiatives for preventing coronavirus infections from expanding, the importance of and cooperation in developing remedies and vaccines, global economic problems and countermeasures, and other matters. However, the G7 has taken no remarkable leadership in addressing the pandemic. The same for the G20. The European Union, as a regional community, is moving to implement its strategy of combining reconstruction and restoration from the current crisis with the enhancement of its decarbonization initiative. In the face of the pandemic, however, EU members have implemented their respective infection prevention and economic measures. It seems that the European Commission has not necessarily taken leadership in fighting against the pandemic for its member countries. The union has not necessarily led the world in addressing the pandemic.

Amid the pandemic crisis, the world has apparently entered what Eurasia Group's Ian Bremmer calls "a G zero situation" where the world lacks any agent who leads governance for maintaining global stability and order. The biggest factor behind such situation has undoubtedly been a change in the role of the United States. While the United States has remained the world's strongest superpower, its once dominant political, economic and military positions have been relativized, leading its global governance power and its interest in such governance to gradually decline. In line with the decline, the United States has grown inward-looking, as noted by various experts.

Amid such trend, the United States is now under the Trump administration. As symbolized by its "America First" foreign policy, the administration gives top priority to the imminent challenge of the presidential election rather than global governance. The United States has been plagued with the world's largest number of coronavirus infections or deaths. It may be natural for the hardest-hit country to give top priority to protecting its people and economy. In the past, however, the United States could have tried to lead the world in addressing the pandemic while protecting itself. Today, the United States seems unlikely to do so.

Attracting attention in the G zero world is the important position of China as well as the United States. Backed by its rapid economic growth since 2000, China has fast increased its presence in and influence on international politics, the world economy, military affairs and technology. While China still falls short of rivaling the United States in many areas, its rapidly increasing power has raised its presence as a potential new challenger to U.S.-led global governance. The United States has had no choice but to grow conscious of China's presence, hardening its attitude on China. Typical problems arising from this trend include the U.S.-China trade war and the underlying bilateral race for technological supremacy.

As COVID-19 emerged in Wuhan and developed into the current pandemic, China initially was the country hit hardest by the disease. However, China has controlled COVID-19 under its successfully powerful coronavirus containment policy and launched "mask diplomacy" enhancing healthcare support for other countries that have replaced China as the main battlefield for fighting against the coronavirus. At the same time, however, the U.S.-China blame game and tensions have been gaining momentum over the source of the coronavirus outbreak, the adequacy of China's response to the initial phase of the outbreak and recent cyberattacks to steal COVID-19 vaccine data. As far as the difficult U.S.-China relations continue, it may not be easy to expect real global unity, cooperation and solidarity over the pandemic issue. In the United States, the inward-looking trend that gives top priority to national interests has remained unchanged ahead of the autumn presidential election. In presidential election campaigns, a focus of attention could be whether Republican President Donald Trump or his Democratic rival Joseph Biden would be tougher against China. In this sense, the world may have to face the pandemic while the "G zero world" remains unchanged with U.S.-China relations growing even sourer.

We must be prepared to see such international situation as a precondition for international politics, the world economy, geopolitics and the international energy situation. How to deal with the United States and China based on an accurate understanding of the entire global situation is the most important matter for Japan in considering its national strategy. Japan will be required to develop its overall national strategy based on the difficult international situation and geopolitical environment and plan its relevant energy policy or strategy.