

## **Social Unrest Shaking U.S. and Other Major Powers under Corona Disaster**

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The COVID-19 pandemic is still expanding globally, having infected far more than 6 million people and killed nearly 400,000. The United States remains the hardest hit in the world, while infections are rapidly increasing in Russia, Brazil and India. Meanwhile, Western countries known so far as the epicenter of the pandemic are viewed as having seen infections peak. As these countries have reopened businesses and eased or lifted travel and outing restrictions following the alleged peaking-out, however, concern is growing that such measures would lead infections to expand again or that second and third waves of infections would come.

The COVID-19 pandemic expansion has brought about huge human, economic and social damage. Each national government has spent huge money on preventing the infection expansion, supporting the seriously deteriorated economy, protecting employment and backing economic activities and livelihood. While U.S. and other stock prices have stabilized and posted hikes amid hopes of economic recovery, real economic conditions have remained very severe, with future conditions staying uncertain. Job losses have risen sharply, heightening social unrest. It is pointed out that the corona disaster has inflicted serious damage particularly on low-income and other socially vulnerable people, bringing about great social unrest and divide. Under such circumstances, we must pay attention to various problems and destabilization signs seen in the domestic situations of major countries.

The U.S. situation is a matter of special concern. Social unrest and disturbances are spreading as the death of an African American man seized by white police officers has prompted nationwide protest rallies. On May 25, the African American man died after white police officers handcuffed him and knelt on his neck in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The spread of video footage of the arrest triggered rapid expansion of nationwide protest rallies in a manner to ignite discontent with the deep-rooted racial discrimination, leading to a great social problem. While protest rallies have been mostly peaceful, some rallies have escalated into violent ones involving riots and looting, signaling social destabilization. Some states have imposed curfews and mobilized National Guard troops, but the United States has fallen short of restoring calm. While President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Mark Esper have differed over whether to mobilize federal military troops to deal with violent rallies, a mainstream view might have been that their mobilization is not required now.

As noted above, the Minneapolis incident has ignited discontent with the racial discrimination problem that has been deep rooted in U.S. society. Cited as a factor behind the social unrest prolonged over more than two weeks after the incident is an indescribable sense of insecurity that has been lingering in society due to the U.S. economy's substantial contraction and the dramatically deteriorating employment situation indicated by more than 40 million unemployment benefit applications under the corona disaster. As it is pointed out that many socially vulnerable people

have suffered great damage including economic and job losses, social discontent and unrest might have risen greatly. Another unignorable factor is the U.S. social divide that has been pointed out over several years. While any society is required to be united to overcome a grave problem like the corona disaster, the social divide affects unity. The social divide might have been combined with huge human, economic and social damage inflicted by the corona disaster to further increase stress in U.S. society. How will the social unrest end? No optimism can be warranted. In such situation, the coming heated presidential election campaign battle between Republican President Trump and Democratic candidate Joseph Biden could deepen the social divide. Would the divide be healed through and after the presidential election to stabilize U.S. society in a manner to enhance U.S. commitments to the international community or be deepened to increase social difficulties to cause the United States more inward-looking and reduce U.S. influence on the world? The future of the United States has great challenges and uncertainties.

Not only the United States is plagued with various domestic challenges under the corona disaster. China experienced the world's first coronavirus outbreak and seemed to successfully contain the outbreak so far by taking such measures as powerful lockdowns. Although its economy substantially contracted in the first quarter, China restored industrial production gradually after the outbreak peaked, launching economic reconstruction. Based on the experience, China has promoted the so-called mask diplomacy for international cooperation, providing other countries with supplies for treating and preventing coronavirus infections. However, the corona disaster has exerted various unignorable social impacts on China.

In a development symbolizing such impacts, the Chinese government refrained from announcing an economic growth target for 2020 at the National People's Congress convened on May 22, after the disaster unusually forced the convening to be postponed from March. While economic recovery moves and initiatives are seen, great uncertainties for 2020 have made it impossible for the government to give officially any economic growth target. Even after high economic growth in the 2000s, China had annually set a firm economic growth target. The government gave the target at 6.0-6.5% for 2019 at last year's National People's Congress. The actual growth rate came to 6.1%.

To achieve its commitment to double gross domestic product from 2010 to 2020, China must expand its economy by some 6%. The construction of a more affluent society is very important for China saddled with the world's largest population, various gaps including those between urban and rural regions, between coastal and inland regions and between elite and non-elite classes, and complicated ethnical issues. In this sense, it is unusual for the government to refrain from announcing any economic growth target for 2020, indicating how great the corona disaster's influence is. Even without a growth target given, it would grow even more important for China to promote economic recovery and the construction of an affluent society for domestic political reasons. While whether Hong Kong's high-level autonomy would be protected was attracting global attention, the National People's Congress enacted the Hong Kong national security law, highlighting Beijing's hardline external stance. As China's relations with Taiwan have grown difficult, Beijing has become even more sensitive to the Taiwan issue. In such situation, domestic political stability would grow even more important for the Chinese government.

The corona disaster's impacts on the domestic situation or domestic politics are also conspicuous for Russia's Vladimir Putin regime facing a sluggish economy and falling approval ratings. In Europe or the European Union as a region rather than a country, differences over the

European Reconstruction Fund and other issues have emerged due partly to the disaster's differing impacts on member countries, indicating that centrifugal force rather than centripetal force is working. A serious problem like the corona disaster tends to ignite underlying social gaps, divides and discontent. In the future, we will have to closely watch how the corona disaster would affect domestic situations and international relations in various countries including great powers.

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