

COVID IMPACTS AND GREAT POWERS COOPERATION: THINKING GEOPOLITICS OF CITIES

Francisco de Santibañes, 16/03/21

Thank you Carolina.

Since I am not an expert about innovation in cities, and my colleagues in this panel know much more about that than I, I will limit myself to provide some comments regarding how some of the changes that are taking place in the world may affect the future of cities.

There are indeed a few important trends that have not only continue during the pandemic, but may be gaining strength.

First of all, let me mention some of the challenges.

The first is great power politics and the growth of nationalism.

The strategic competition between US and China may not only hurt economic flows, but also cultural and technological exchanges. In this sense, one of the worst possible scenarios would be to have two big blocks, one under the umbrella of the US and other of China. This scenario would be harmful for big cities, hurting both diversity and technological development.

Discussion about visas to Chinese students and researchers in the US.

Furthermore, there is a new generation of conservative leaders that is more hostile towards urban live than leaders of the past. Their political support comes from the countryside and they tend to oppose the metropolitan elites, showing themselves as the true representatives of the people. Trump, Modi, Putin, Erdogan...

Behind this narrative is the idea that big cities are the home of distant elites that do not necessarily understand or care about the problems of the population. That thus their values and interest has been abandoned. Lets remember that the Yellow vest movement in France started as a protest due to a raise in gas and diesel prices due to new taxes implemented by the government of Macron to combat climate change.

Or take the example of Boris Johnson and the new British budget. An effort in part to decentralize economic power with the creation of a new infrastructure Bank with 12 billions pounds in Leed and the relocation of a significant part the Treasury from London to Darlington. This is a new economic agenda that will hurt major cities.

New restrictions regarding immigration and smaller markets due to nationalism is another threat to major cities. In the last months, 700 thousand migrants have left London. One factor is covid, but also a more hostile environment and Brexit.

These new policies will hurt the economy but also cultural diversity.

Finally, another challenge has to do with the fact that after covid polls show that, in many western countries, there is a desire about migrating to the countryside. Technological change, with remote work, is making it possible.

These challenges are not so great in Latin American due to the, so far, lack of geopolitical competition and to the fact that we are far away from the technological frontier. Maybe downtowns and financial districts. Lack of economic growth is hurting every country and every major city.

But eventually it will be the problem, so it is important to study what is taking place.

But there are also some opportunities.

One of the main ones has to do with that although we face a strategic competition, this does not mean that a war will take place, not even a new cold war. For instance, now civil society is now more important. This is a great opportunity for cities.

An example are the Urban 20 mentioned before by Secretary Straface, but also C40 and climate change. Buenos Aires part of the steering committee. This is a group of cities that is focused on tackling climate change and driving urban action that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and climate risks.

We tend to think about multilateralism in terms of states, but it also applies to cities. The idea that global problems can only be solved through international collaboration. Multilateralism as a force multiplier for every city.

And technological change can be helpful by promoting this kind of collaboration but also to exchange experiences and ideas to improve the life of citizens.

And as we have been discussing in this conference this may be one of the lessons we are learning from the pandemic.