When it comes to preparing for crises, political science is failing us

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Last week Duke, suspended all on-campus classes as students transitioned to remote instruction. This notice came after seven COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in North Carolina. With my Duke career coming to an end, I want to reflect on my experience studying political science at Duke. The grand strategy talks to which we devote so much attention in our political science curriculum only fall apart in the face of a global crisis-which must be solved by collaborative effort from countries around the world, for the wellbeing of ordinary people.

I grew up in a medical family in the Research Triangle Park. Before coming to college, I planned to pursue a career in medicine, largely because of my family's influence. I knew I would enroll in a life science major, but I would never have imagined that one day, I would step into political science.

During my first year at Duke, I met a few Chinese international students who love to talk about Sino-U.S. relations and Chinese politics. As a Chinese-American who grew up in China before immigrating to the U.S. at age 10, I naturally gravitate toward their conversations.

Under their influence, I attended several international relations and national security talks hosted by organizations like Duke Program in American Grand Strategy and Duke East Asia Nexus, a student group that I've been extremely lucky to be a part of.

In my junior year, I took my first Duke IR class called Nuclear Weapons and learned about first strike, second-strike capability, nuclear deterrence, and so on. We would discuss whether the U.S. should strike first, should a nuclear war with either Russia or China become inevitable.

Then, I took International Law, another class in the Duke IR series. Again, our discussion went, "if China nukes the U.S.," and "if the U.S. nukes China."

Indeed, the U.S.-China rivalry is not going to end anytime soon. In all grand strategy talks I have been to, China, a rising power, is interpreted as the U.S.'s greatest enemy-the most commanding threat to American dominance. It is the second largest economy in the world and it has been building islands in the South China Sea.

In these hypothetical classroom thought experiments about international conflict and warfare, we should recognize that if the U.S. had indeed nuked China or if China had indeed nuked the U.S., it's the ordinary people who would suffer the most.

When I visited China in the summer of 2018, I met migrant Chinese workers taking up long-hour, low-paying jobs. I saw kids living in cramped, wet, dirty and near-collapse residence buildings in the Hubei Province. The same

conditions exist in the U.S. While shadowing in a hospital, I've met HIV-positive patients who have to deal not only with the medical implications of their status but also the social stigma ascribed to it.

Perhaps to these people, what matters the most is not the U.S.-China rivalry, but simply to have a job, to make enough money, and to live a good life. Those people would never become a part of the grand strategy we talk about, either for China or for the U.S.

When we look at the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we recognize that it is hardly a China thing or a U.S. thing. More than 200,000 people have been infected globally, and only collective effort by countries from around the world to contain the outbreak would benefit mankind, regardless of nationality. Labeling it as the "Chinese virus" would save neither ordinary Americans' lives nor the U.S. economy. It would only instigate unnecessary ignorance, racism and hatred.

I minored in political science, and it's a subject I've been heavily involved with, but all those political science classes and grand strategy talks hardly take into consideration the lives of ordinary people. There are always those living in corners of this world who can't access an education and live a good life, and they exist in both China and the U.S.

While we have put so much of our attention on policymakers and politicians in Washington and Beijing and so much emphasis on not losing to China either technologically or economically as we draft our domestic and foreign policies, we should also look at how those policies would impact the lives of ordinary people in both countries. Unless you tell me political science is not about bettering peoples' lives.

Perhaps health policy, not political science, would be a better minor.

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