

## COVID-19 and Rebalancing the Global Agenda

*Igor Yurgens, Chairman, Institute for Contemporary Development (Russia)*

*Sergey Kulik, Director for International Studies, Institute of Contemporary Development (Russia)*

As the COVID-19 crisis continues, any predictions or recommendations as to its further course are inevitably tentative and approximate. Its scale and, more important, its duration can only be guessed at. The uncertainties include how deep the crisis will be in the sectors hardest hit by the lockdown, how much unemployment will rise, and whether governments will claim a bigger role in the economy. How these and other issues will play out globally or in any particular nation is not yet clear.

What is clear is that failures in protecting global health security will seriously affect the economy, politics, and the public sphere. Efforts to improve global governance will need to be made against a background of increased pessimism, xenophobia, irrationalism, disinformation, a crisis of confidence at all levels of government, and a crippled economy. Value-added chains and businesses that move goods and services across national boundaries are already severely affected.

Notably, the pandemic has given a powerful impetus to confrontation in relations between the United States and China. Each has been quick to blame the other for creating a threat to all mankind. This confrontation directly threatens economic globalization and hinders efforts to improve institutions of global governance.

All these elements make it even more difficult to reformat institutions, which have not been able to adequately meet the task of organizing a collective response to current challenges. On the other hand, the daunting threats, both present and future, are now more clear than before. Although the leading powers have failed to demonstrate much-needed solidarity, nonstate actors have the opportunity to step up and assume more responsibility.

Institutional renewal should be based on rethinking the priorities of international politics. Existential threats call for correcting the imbalance in policymaking and policy research. In addition to the continuing and still-prevalent emphasis on the threat of nuclear holocaust and the more recent interest in mitigating climate change, the challenges of biosecurity need to be moved to the top of the global agenda. Biosecurity is still marginal in the priorities of analysis and forecasting of emerging threats. Many official national security documents simply ignore them. When these challenges are mentioned, as Russia's national security strategy does, the approach is more declaratory and less specific.

Advancements in biotechnologies can have both beneficial and harmful effects on national and global security. Institutions of global governance therefore face the task of developing new rules to place limits or ban research in certain areas of biotechnology and biomedicine and on market supply of their products, as well as of creating the tools of appropriate, agile, and comprehensive control and verification.

In avoiding overemphasis on military security and armed conflicts and a lack of adequate attention to the new, nontraditional threats, global health security must now be regarded as a critical priority. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this quite clear. Both national governments and international organizations may rightly be faulted for paying too little attention to global health security. Specialized agencies with responsibilities in this area have also demonstrated serious shortcomings, especially the World Health Organization (WHO).

Success in ensuring global health security when an epidemic escalates to a pandemic depends, first, on timely and effective government responses where the epidemic first appears; second, on the effectiveness of international mechanisms; and, third, on other governments' stepping up to their responsibilities in regard to a robust health infrastructure. A proper analysis and evaluation of these three components will take time, but even now it is obvious that gaping holes need to be addressed in all of them.

The WHO in particular needs to address flaws in its mechanisms, including project financing, bureaucratic inertia, and tensions between headquarters and regional offices, among others. Member states and the WHO should consider increasing shares of nationally assessed contributions to adequately reduce the organization's dependence on voluntary donations. The substantial imbalances between the two reflect the scarcity of national governments' interest in global health challenges. COVID-19 could reverse this, despite the worldwide economic and financial crunch.

Decisive action is needed to ensure that the WHO and other specialized agencies, as well as the global health system as a whole, work effectively and in a concerted way with national governments. Here, future obligations of national governments, particularly financial commitments, should be allocated and enforced more strictly than they are now.

So far, such commitments can be changed quickly and under various pretexts. It is therefore important, though currently more difficult, to fix resources, both state and nonstate, that would provide funding for a foreseeable period. To address this task with at least some success, interaction and coordination of efforts by leading actors and international agencies are essential.

Stricter national compliance with the 2005 International Health Regulations (IHR) should also be required. The IHR obligates national authorities to report and exchange information on potential threats to ensure timely responses. In the absence of enforcement mechanisms, however, COVID-19 has revealed serious flaws in this regard.

The Group of Seven–Group of Eight has contributed significantly to progress in global health security, particularly in the period of Russia's participation. In addition to supporting specialized agencies, the group advanced initiatives, interacted with state and private donors, and helped promote a certain degree of international discipline. The group's potential and power have recently changed substantially, however. It could be helpful to establish an informal forum focusing more on health security challenges and reenergizing efforts to shape an integrated approach to global health risk management. Other functioning platforms, such as the Group of Twenty, should also give much more attention to the tasks for overcoming these and related challenges.

National governments need to be adequately ready to meet and mitigate the more serious effects of COVID-19 in developing countries as the situation evolves. Even before the pandemic, infectious diseases accounted for almost half of all deaths in poorer countries. COVID-19 is likely

to make the situation worse. This is another major challenge for global risk management. In addition, food security should also be placed higher on the international agenda. Approximately 70 percent of infections originate in food supply chains.

The WHO and national governments should more closely consider and fix preparedness gaps made apparent in the Global Health Security Index, a comprehensive assessment and benchmarking of health security and related capabilities across 195 countries. The tools and methods of evaluating national government actions should be reexamined and expanded to offer more robust monitoring of both warning signs and compliance of national governments with international obligations.

The pandemic also calls for serious reconsideration in areas that are directly, partially, or unrelated to global health security. For example, disruptions in supply chains suggest the need to get rid of overdependence on major producers and suppliers.

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, it is more and more clear that stoppages and disruptions of supply chains could lead to persistent troubles. It is quite probable that foreign businesses have new incentives to gradually phase out excessive dependence on China, including pharmaceutical supplies. Russia, for instance, gets 60 percent of its raw materials for pharmaceutical production from China (and 20 percent from India), and Russia also depends substantially on pharmaceutical end products.

To call COVID-19 a globalization killer, at least for now, appears to be an exaggeration. The crisis could also give a second wind to globalization. The closing of borders, disruption of transborder flows, surge of nationalism, limitation of civil rights, and greater resort to tools of social mobilization and control are all closely associated with the crisis and serve to further it. In both developed and developing countries, people tend to see the pandemic as a time of trial—but also as something that will pass. When the threat recedes and a postcrisis reality emerges, a public demand for demobilization and a return to peacetime practices will inevitably make itself felt.

Nevertheless, the world needs to prepare itself for a rebalancing of the global agenda and a reformatting of international institutions to make them more agile, effective, and transparent. Unless this is done, the opportunity for a Globalization 2.0 may be missed. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way”—but only if it has institutional mechanisms to make it a reality.