

Global Governance and COVID-19: Why International Cooperation Still Matters

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As populations across the globe grapple with diverse repercussions of the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, one element common to all cities, provinces, and states is the sense of uncertainty as to what lies ahead. Given the profound and broad implications of the pandemic both directly, on public health and the global economy, and, indirectly, on priorities and worldviews, the outbreak warrants an evaluation of the future of global integration and the significance of global governance going forward.

In the face of a general lockdown of many of the world's economies and emergency rules expanding government powers, conventional wisdom often refers to the decline of globalization and rise of an illiberal world order. Although assertions that globalization has suffered a severe blow since the onset of COVID-19 seem to speak for themselves, assessing such an argument from a more nuanced perspective with a view to the contribution of international organizations and institutions in the globalized world order sheds light on the current state of affairs. The implications of such a critical view is that more can and should be done in the future to better equip the current international system to address issues affecting citizens of a globalized world.

Minding the clear limitations of human ability to foresee how exactly events might unfold, forecasts predicting the beginning of the end of globalization risk repeating the same mistake as those who saw it as an unstoppable force when it was in ascendance. In other words, despite current trends, this force has already proven that it is not unidirectional. It is undeniable that much of the world's momentum appears to be moving away from internationalism—as seen in Brexit, U.S. President Donald J. Trump's America First policies, and the U.S. withdrawal from international agreements and UN bodies—but such developments should not exclusively inform perception of what the future holds. It is true that COVID-19 has thus far led to a heightened risk awareness regarding participation in the interconnected world system, but the length of time and the extent to which this paradigm will guide the future conduct of companies and consumers remains unclear.

Indeed, the immediate response of states across the globe to the spread of COVID-19 has been to close borders; however, the fundamental factors that led to an interconnected world will remain relevant. Information technology, social media, electronic payment systems, sophisti-

cated shipping systems, multinational companies, and complex international business structures are part and parcel of life in the twenty-first century and are unlikely to disappear. Furthermore, although the virus has stopped many from walking down Main Street or sending their children to school across town, it has not prevented and has perhaps even encouraged continued engagement in more global fora and with contacts around the globe in virtual online spaces (which risks other sorts of viruses—but not those that put physical health in jeopardy). When considering the theory professing the demise of globalization, it is worth recalling that not long ago, before COVID-19, populist currents around the world had already led experts to prematurely eulogize this international order as a casualty of rising nationalistic leaders and the backlash against migration.

Despite the damage to globalization caused by COVID-19, and keeping in mind that states will likely prioritize their immediate need to manage health and economic crises that local populations face, the question of the necessity and added value of coordinating a global response to COVID-19 naturally surfaces. In that context, the benefits of international cooperation and information sharing are unlikely to recede along with the pandemic. The outbreak's aftershocks will leave shared global problems that are likely to linger: movement restrictions, high levels of unemployment, rising dissatisfaction with governing institutions, and open-ended measures adopted by authoritarian regimes to suppress civil liberties, assume more power, and insert loyalists into sensitive positions under the fog of COVID-19.

Notably, even before the outbreak of this virus, the ability of the UN Security Council to effectively produce resolutions on issues related to peace and security was limited. Nevertheless, a comparison of earlier Security Council responses in similar situations demonstrates that in the past, great-power competition was not quite so debilitating. Two clear examples of the Security Council's success in global health are exemplified in the passing of Resolution 1308 in 2000 on HIV/AIDS—when the United States was at the helm of a unipolar international system—and Resolution 2177 in 2014 on the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Both resolutions underscored that the control of outbreaks of major infectious diseases requires urgent action and an immediate need for a coordinated international response to the pandemic.

In contrast, the spread of COVID-19 appears to have further soured the already competitive power dynamics between the United States and China, most poignantly demonstrated by U.S. insistence on referring to COVID-19 as the Wuhan or Chinese virus and the Chinese government's propagating baseless allegations that the United States was responsible for spreading the virus. This war of words may appear marginal in dealing with the tangible and deadly results of the virus outbreak but it was the U.S. insistence on terminology that rendered UN Security Council efforts to reach a resolution on COVID-19 dead on arrival. Not only was this international response comparatively poorer than to those previous pandemics, but also the great power friction caused by the pandemic may reinforce the very factors that made the Security Council so dysfunctional. Significantly, within the multipolar setting of 2020, the spread of COVID-19 has exacerbated already strained U.S.-China relations as well as relations between the United States and its long-standing allies, as demonstrated by President Trump's announcement—without prior coordination with the European Union—of a European travel ban.

In contrast to the Security Council, the UN's World Health Organization (WHO) is playing a prominent role leading the international response to the pandemic. This includes distributing

millions of tests to identify cases, sharing research-based information to diagnose and manage cases, supplying protective equipment to keep health workers safe, educating the public about the virus through online courses, and disseminating situation reports regarding the global spread of the virus. The WHO's performance, however, has been marred by its pandering to China in its fact-finding report and its unwitting dissemination of Chinese misinformation regarding the risk the disease posed. The latter undoubtedly harmed global preparedness in the early days of the outbreak by failing to convey the seriousness of the virus and the situation.

It is therefore important to consider how to better manage international cooperation in a world that will continue to be deeply interconnected, but whose current international institutions are underperforming, which may render them increasingly irrelevant. The U.S. response to all this —announcing the halting of funds to WHO—is the opposite of much-needed action-oriented and effective international leadership. This is because the world is in the midst of an unfolding crisis; another wave of the epidemic outbreak cannot be ruled out even in countries that appear to have effectively dealt with the first; and, as it stands, no alternative international organizations are better structured or empowered to coordinate a global response to COVID-19. Furthermore, international power vacuums are likely to be filled by disruptive actors. If the United States has claims against China's rising influence over international bodies, it is unlikely to remedy those complaints—in this case a failure to convey accurate information on the gravity of the pandemic—by abandoning those organizations and perhaps even seeking to create parallel institutions excluding the sources of information.

Current and future global challenges demand far better international cooperation and significantly more decisive action to avoid worst-case scenarios. Given the lack of action by important international political bodies in dealing with COVID-19 efforts and resources ought to be channeled to more flexible, technocratic international organizations that have the knowledge, access, and proven ability to provide rapid response to unfolding events. Considering that such organizations are not hermetically sealed off from the political environments in which they exist and operate, reforms should be articulated toward improving transparency and mechanisms to demand accountability on critical decisions. Although great-power competition is likely to be a feature of global dynamics for the foreseeable future, such steps would contribute to minimizing the risks of the dysfunction embodied and reinforced by the current international response to COVID-19.