

# Mistaking Panacea for Pathogens: The Case for Existential Multilateralism

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At least three implications of COVID-19 for global governance deserve a closer look. First, multilateralism is taking a hit for the deficiencies of globalization, and the two phenomena are being confused in the public debate. Second, the pandemic helps update the gradation and classification of global threats, forming a distinct category of existential threats. Third, information and expertise, alongside multilateralism, appear to be proper tools to confront existential threats.

## MULTILATERALISM IS NOT GLOBALIZATION

Many [authors](#) predict that a wave of deglobalization or nationalism will follow the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, according to a recent [YouGov poll](#), 43 percent of respondents from eight European countries and the United States think that globalization should be reduced. Countries have closed their borders in an attempt to stop the spread of the pandemic, international value chains are disrupted, and some are calling for the return home of basic goods production. Simultaneously, a global campaign of defamation against international organizations has gathered steam. The World Health Organization (WHO) is being accused of inaction and a pro-China bias, and the European Union of ignoring the needs of its member states. These coupled with regular criticism of the United Nations make it clear that multilateralism is being questioned.

Criticism of globalization—understood as the increase of trade around the world, especially by large companies to maximize profit—is healthy and necessary. Even when taken broadly as development of closer economic, cultural, and political relations among countries, globalization does need corrections. But it is not synonymous with multilateralism. The two are often confused.

The public narrative has become so saturated with these general terms that there is often no reflection on what they actually mean. Multilateralism is a method of [coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states](#) through ad hoc arrangements or institutions. It relates to globalization as does a method to a process. Multilateralism is the sine qua non of globalization, as it is of the UN convention on genocide or the European Parliament, but not vice versa.

Blaming multilateral approaches for the deficiencies of globalization or the spread of the pandemic is politically dangerous because it diminishes social trust in international cooperation, the only tool capable of addressing a special category of threats: the global existential ones.

## EMERGENCE OF EXISTENTIAL POLITICS

The majority of the global population only fears a handful of international threats. According to a [Eurobarometer poll](#), the greatest EU concerns are immigration (34 percent), climate change (24 percent), the economic situation (18 percent), and terrorism (15 percent). According to a [Pew survey](#), the top three concerns in Asia-Pacific and Latin America are cyberattacks, climate change, and terrorism. In most polls, Africans fear economic hardship the most, but the [2019 Afrobarometer](#) also found that a majority think climate change is making their lives worse. According to an early [Pew survey](#) after the pandemic [in the United States](#), Americans feared infectious diseases the most (79 percent) followed by terrorism (73 percent), nuclear weapons (73 percent), cyberattacks (72 percent), a rising China (62 percent), and climate change (60 percent).

These first-tier global challenges—climate change, terrorism, mass migration, infectious diseases, nuclear weapons, economic hardship, and cyberattacks—are not only substantively but also qualitatively different. That quality rests neither on the number of victims nor on the kind of perpetrator (state, individual, or natural) but instead on the potential to threaten the existence of humanity. Three threats have this potential: climate change, highly infectious diseases, and nuclear weapons. Of course, abstract scenarios are easily imagined in which human existence is endangered because of a massive cyberattack, mass migration, or vicious artificial intelligence that leads to a conflict in which nuclear weapons are used and humanity kills itself. Such potential futures, though, require a chain of events, whereas the three existential menaces are present and direct. Unlike other threats, they are all global and equal. No community is immune from them or their aftermath. All three can reach a tipping point, after which the danger spirals out of control.

This set of [existential threats](#) is not conventionally recognized. The term *existential threat* has proliferated in political debates to mean anything across a spectrum of [minor and major challenges](#): the opiate crisis to the policies of the Donald J. Trump administration. In twentieth-century politics, the expression was barely used despite the omnipresent danger of the nuclear bomb. For the past two decades, it has been [mostly associated with terrorism](#). Terrorism, however, is not a threat to human existence—not even to Middle Easterners, where [95 percent](#) of deaths from terrorist attacks occur. Classing mass migration as an existential threat is even more preposterous given how little insecurity migrants have brought to already stable host countries. Similarly, little suggests that inequality or economic hardship are existential threats, though their complex forms and far-reaching consequences render them categories of their own.

The distinction between existential and other international threats matters for multilateralism and global governance in light of the functional difference in the roles of the state in fighting them. The former can be taken on only by international efforts. Other concerns can be fought in other ways: a unilateral national decision to act internally or on another state; or a national bottom-up societal effort to reduce terrorism, disrupt cyber capabilities, or influence local migration patterns. Climate change, nuclear weapons, and infectious diseases, however, require global multilateral efforts to prevent their destructive potential from manifesting itself.

## REVIVING TRUST IN INFORMATION AND SCIENCE

National responses to the pandemic have often been provisional—decisions of utmost importance to civil liberties are taken [without proper argumentation or scientific judgment](#), because none is available. Not in living memory have governments watched each other as closely as now on decisions such as when and how to lock down and open societies and economies—at least in Europe. Since the pandemic, hunger for information and knowledge seems to have increased exponentially in international relations and the global public sphere because specific epidemiological expertise was needed—such that was available to only a few. Perhaps for the first time on such a scale, information is seen as directly correlated with human well-being. What scientists know about the virus—the way it is transmitted, how it mutates, how strong the antibodies are—is no longer seen as abstractly affecting our individual lives but directly affecting them.

The shortening of this perception chain is an opportunity for the scientific and analytical community to revive trust in experts by learning from the experience of life scientists. Medicine advanced as a result of interdisciplinary and international teams, and innovative fast publishing procedures (short communications and case reports). Given the importance of information to physical, political, and social life, further plans are being enacted to make [scientific publications available for free](#), something social scientists should ponder as well.

The pandemic also exposes the weight of information in politics. First, information has been critical to assessing how effectively governments are responding to COVID-19. Without reliable statistical information from the health sector, it is impossible to analyze the scale of the pandemic, and therefore say anything about the measures authorities have taken. The [Open Data Inventory 2018/19](#), which assesses the coverage and openness of official statistics, including health data, finds them open and covered only in Europe, North America, and a handful of other countries. Second, states have used the pandemic to spread propaganda and misinformation. China and Russia have a lot to answer for here by vilifying the European Union and the United States, as do Iran (which blamed the virus on the United States) and several Gulf states (which blamed Iran).

## EXISTENTIAL MULTILATERALISM

The Indian novelist Arundhati Roy sees the pandemic as a [portal](#) between the old and new world. In international politics, this may translate into a passage from the post-1989 preoccupation with terrorism and economic growth based on consumption and exploitation to new existential politics. Little can be said about the future with certainty except that it will face global existential threats: climate change, infectious diseases, nuclear war. Because of the nature of these menaces, they cannot be mitigated save by multinational, informed, and expert governance.

Such existential multilateralism can be championed by Europeans, whose regional system [rests on multilateralism](#) and who had recently intended to reinvigorate international cooperation by forming the Alliance for Multilateralism. The grouping should work toward making the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council recognize and prioritize the existential threat category. Europeans have also

masterminded the WHO [Solidarity clinical trial](#) initiative to find an effective treatment for COVID-19. If successful, this project alone will do more good for global governance than a hundred UN General Assemblies.