

# Global Distrust & the Future of Multilateralism: Reflection on International Relations and Covid-19

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Most of us would be able to recall World War I and its catastrophic outcome that triggered the emergence of the International Relations (IR) discipline in 1919. However, we often overlook a pandemic outbreak that occurred at around the same time in 1918. The Spanish Flu, spread with astonishing speed around the world, reaching the remote Pacific islands, with 500 million people infected, about a quarter of the world's population at the time. Estimates on fatalities vary, from 20 million to 100 million deaths. If the upper end of that estimate is accurate, the 1918 pandemic killed more people than both World Wars put together. Yet in IR, even decades after its conception, not much focus has been given to international public health. Rather, the field has been largely focused on traditional warfare and conflicts.

However, things have been changing, albeit slowly. While at least 30 new infectious diseases appeared in the past thirty years, including avian flu, HIV/AIDS, and SARS, global health remains a trifling concern in mainstream IR. Top IR journals have little mention of terms like "pandemic", even zero mentions in journals like *International Organizations (IO)*, *American Political Science Review (APSR)*, and *Journal of Conflict Resolution (JCR)*. This could change with COVID-19 affecting the West, and hence can no longer be ignored by mainstream IR as a 'third world' problem.

We don't have to wait too long for that to happen. [Foreign Policy](#) released an article saying how "the pandemic will change the world forever" and would shape the new global order, comparing it to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Lehman Brothers. COVID-19 will not only shatter lives and disrupt markets, but also will lead to "permanent shifts in political and economic power". *Foreign Policy* asked 12 scholars their predictions of the world after COVID-19, and most predicted that the world would turn inward, the state being strengthened, with greater move towards nationalism, and doubts over multi-country supply chains. The international system will be under pressure, America's leadership will continue to fade and the power shift from the West to East would become imminent. No wonder some of us would say that COVID-19 is realism, where states take centre stage and national interest triumph over others. While WHO alerted nations when they suspected there could be a chance of a global pandemic, responses to contain and mitigate it have largely been nationalistic: travel & export bans, and hoarding of resources. These measures would lead to an in-ward looking post-Covid19 world, a retreat from internationalism.

Is an inward-looking world the only outcome that is imminent out of this pandemic? [Yuval Noah Harari](#) argued that people and governments do have choices in their responses and the decisions taken in the next few weeks will shape the world for years to come as temporary measures tend to outlast emergencies. He argued that governments have two contrasting choices, between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The first would be the easy way out, choosing health over privacy. He argues that asking to choose between the two is the root of the problem, as we should be able to opt to enjoy both. Rather than totalitarian surveillance, another choice would be citizen empowerment.

"Centralised monitoring and harsh punishments aren't the only way to make people comply with beneficial guidelines. When people are told the scientific facts, and when people trust public authorities to tell them these facts, citizens can do the right thing even without a Big Brother watching over their

shoulders. A self-motivated and well-informed population is usually far more powerful and effective than a policed, ignorant population.”

Besides the choices of totalitarianism and citizen empowerment, leaders also have to make choices on how to react globally, which then reflects their tendencies of addressing the problem through nationalist isolation or international cooperation. While bans and hoarding of resources seem to be the easy choice, they are not the only way out. Information sharing, co-producing of medical equipment, and pooling medical personnel are some of the ways global leaders may opt to fight the pandemic. As of today, most countries, if not all, opted for nationalist isolation. There are hardly any collective efforts by international communities in responding to the crisis. While admittedly there are some bilateral efforts: countries seeking help from China, or Cuba sending their medical officers to Italy, multilateral response seemed to be slow, if not absent. We have neither seen UNSC hold an emergency meeting addressing the pandemic, nor any emergency meeting of global leaders. The G20 leaders only met on 26th of March, months after Covid-19's first outbreak, 2 weeks after WHO declared it as pandemic.

What shoves multilateralism away? It seems that the world is running a trust deficit and lack of global leadership. States have little trust among them, even between their closest allies. We saw how the United States has abandoned its closest allies when it banned all travel from the EU without previously informing them. The fight of words between China and the United States made things worse. While the world is facing the pandemic, Saudi and Russia are having an oil price war. The United States has abandoned its de facto position as global leader and no other states seem to fill the void.

Would Covid-19 mark the end of multilateralism? It should not. Instead, Covid-19 should be a stark reminder that global pandemic, like climate change, respects neither state sovereignty nor border. It is a reminder that no person or country is an island unto itself. While some countries may respond to the pandemic better than others, national efforts count for nothing without coordinated efforts globally. Not only that, global trust deficit and retreat from multilateralism would continue to threaten us beyond this pandemic, affecting our responses to the impending risk of recession, climate change and many other global issues facing us that require international cooperation.

Covid-19, like terrorism, produces a similar effect: mass fear. Fear can become a tool for leaders to do as they like. Domestically, the lack of trust between government and its people also seems to be apparent. The trust deficit fuels mass fear, which then allows the government to use fear tactics by deploying police and military forces to enforce rules. At the time where the role of government is strengthened and mass fear is crippling around us, it is as important for the citizens to be empowered and heard. As global leaders make these choices, we ordinary citizens must reflect on these choices and questions, continue to voice out what we want and what we believe, question the decisions made by governments, and not be fooled by fear or rhetoric.

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