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# COVID-19 and Global Order: Issues for Global Cooperation

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## Abstract

*With the engines of globalisation coming to halt, the state becoming a primary agency in the distribution of public goods and a container of society, the charges on global cooperation has been of power ridden ineffectiveness with questions of its sustenance in the future. The present article intends to do three things. First, it seeks to locate the problem at hand and contextualise the pandemic and the lack of international cooperation. Second, following from the context, the article situates the problem through the theoretical paradigms of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism, both sharing a synthesis of core principles – centrality of state and anarchy of the international setup. Finally, the article puts forward two issues – information sharing and human security, on which future multilateral cooperation might depend on, however, with considerable questions.*

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There are two very rudimentary, albeit contradictory, observations to start off with. First, the spread of Coronavirus in terms of three dimensions – intensity, time and scale, has been extremely rapid. A common sensical factor here is that the spread of the virus depends upon a carrier, which in this case been the human agent. Channelized into the existing templates of connectivity, the spread has been rampant. The obvious deduction being that the global capital, citizens, value chains are intrinsically connected and

interdependent. If one draws this observation further, the conclusion is that security and ecology are intertwined. In sharp contrast to this is the response to the pandemic. While the effect has been global, the response has been national in terms of scale. An available evidence of this is the shutting down of borders, grounding of international travel, suspension of maritime operations and disruption of the global value chains.

Where do these two observations lead us? Plethora of writings are claiming that the state is back in international relations<sup>i</sup>. Borders are back in the game sovereignty is paramount again and monopoly of the state over public goods is unquestioned. This resurrection of the state directly questions the principles of globalisation which altered the primacy of the state. The high tide of globalisation had several questions on the primacy of the state as the only actor at the global level. Through the transnational capital flows, international and multinational organisations, increasing fluidity in terms of cultural and social capital, the essential components of the state – borders, sovereignty and autonomy, were challenged. Globalisation made borders more fluid, sovereignty more contested and autonomy more shared. It also presented the case that with growing interdependence, the world is now looking at global problems demanding global solutions.

The response to the pandemic, however, has put many of those strands of thought under considerable doubts. Under this crisis and owing to the risks of transmission, the engines of the globalisation are the first to be closed and the borders have been sealed. The nations are on themselves. The state is back in terms of solely devising its policies, being the container of the society and the most significant actor in international relations. That does not mean that the other scales of responses – regional and global are absent. However, there have been significant questions on the future of multilateral institutions given the fact that they have not responded well in the times of crisis and have been largely ineffective. If states are for themselves and multilateral institutions are ineffective, what is the future of international cooperation?

### ***COVID and Cooperation***

Before assessing the claims against international cooperation, a primer of the recent trends in international relations is essential. First among the key trends are the already existing and growing voices of anti-globalisation in the world<sup>ii</sup>. A chief proponent of this has been American President Donald Trump. His ideation and praxis have deviated the American grand strategy with a considerable a turn. Snapping ally commitments, withdrawing from significant multilateral treaties and engagements along with the anti-migrant rhetoric has led a different direction to the American foreign policy from the past years<sup>iii</sup>. One can argue that this mix of insulation and anti-

globalisation rhetoric have been characterised by several other states as well, prominent among them being the Brexit. This trend has been complimented by a rise of ‘strongmen’ leadership, exemplified by Erdogan in Turkey, Orban of Hungary and Bolsonaro of Brazil<sup>iv</sup>. Parallel to this is the gradual transformation of the structure of world power in terms of declining and rising powers. With a arguably declining United States is a simultaneously rising China, added with the rest as well, indicating to a change in the nature of distribution of power and order in the international system<sup>v</sup>.

The point of this context is to argue that the changes that are being debated and hotly contested in terms of global cooperation are not solely the products of COVID-19 alone but is a manifestation of continuing and lingering factors in the global arena that has been pushed off the edge by the catalytic effect of this pandemic.

The ineffectiveness of global cooperation can be understood through five key aspects. First, the states have not been able to coordinate and act on the level beyond the nation-state. World leaders have made symbolic utterances about a global resolution of the problem and advocating for more cooperation at the regional and global level, but that has not been translated into substance in terms of any concrete measures and commitments<sup>vi</sup>. Second, the mudslinging within the states has been another chief factor that has hindered cooperation. China has been on the receiving end of this being the epicenter of the pandemic. The US- China rivalry was at display

with the American President Donald Trump alleging that the spread of the virus is to the credit of China's reluctance and irresponsibility. Naming it as the "Chinese Virus" is also a part of the stigmatisation at a global level<sup>vii</sup>. Fourthly, the international organisations or the multilateral institutions are ridden with power politics that is representative of the international order and its power balance. The UN Security Council has been unable to produce any constructive resolution because of the Chinese attempts at defecting any call on the situation. However, this is a continuation of the exiting character of the international organisation for some decades now. The UN Security Council was earlier turned into an institutional collateral damage in terms of its functioning because of the US-USSR Rivalry during the Cold War years. In this case, there have been considerable apprehensions on how the World Health Organisation (WHO) has sided with China in terms of disguising data<sup>viii</sup>. Finally, a considerable clout of the international organisations is dependent on the financial capital and leadership bestowed by the member states. Post-Cold War international order in this sense has been characterised by US leadership, more so categorised as the leadership of the West. With the American foreign Policy withdrawing from its erstwhile role and the EU as well losing its earlier salience of multilateral cooperation<sup>ix</sup> and turning unstable, the international organisations are losing financial clout and leadership direction<sup>x</sup>.

## **Principles Positions: Neo – Realism and Neo-Liberal Institutionalism**

There are certain core assumptions that we can draw from the problem that has been discussed. States have undoubtedly been positioned as the primary actors at the global scene. The second aspect that underscores this lack of cooperation in global governance is the driving principle of anarchy in the international order. With the global value chains disrupted, the global order represents the Hobbesian model of 'war of all against all'. Actions have been marked by securing national supplies first at any cost and any relationship has been a result of a material and transactional exchange. With the exception of China's deliverables in certain cases, most transactions have been driven by other means than that of cooperation alone. In such a case, what has international relations to offer in situating the prospects of cooperation?

The problem here overlaps with the shared assumptions of two schools of thought who have their own models of cooperation to offer – neo realism and neo-liberal institutionalism. Both the models have an abiding acceptance to a set of basic principles, clubbed under the umbrella of rationalism. Both the traditions believe that the state is the primary actor and anarchy is the principle that governs the international order. However, the reasons and model of cooperation that they provide are starkly dissimilar<sup>xi</sup>.

Neo-Realism explains cooperation through the model of balance of power. In a model of self-help,

analogous to a billiard pool-table, states cooperate by balancing against the bigger power through advancing its own capabilities (internal balancing) or forming alliances (external balancing)<sup>xii</sup>. Neo-Realism stresses on the fact that international politics is largely a game of power and states always look to gather and maximise power for their survival as they are unsure of what the other states might do. Cheating and deception being the mainstays of the game, the states are practically on their own and they behave rationally in terms of augmenting their security from others who are potential threats. In the process of this, states might find suitable, but changing allies, to balance against the potential threats.

On the other hand, neo-liberal institutionalism holds that with the growing capital flows, the duality of economic merit and globalisation has produced an interdependence of states on each other. Therefore, they agree with the realist school of thought that states are primary but they part ways in believing that cooperation can exist between states and institutions can prevail which talks about absolute and long-term gains between states.

With the continuing factors aggravated and accentuated by COVID-19, the present international order stands in contestation between these principled positions. While the evidence suggests a balance tilted in the favour of the realist logic, there have been also assurances in favour of restoring faith on multilateral institutions. American President Trump has openly flouted international

norms and structures, while French President Emmanuel Macron has advocated for a rethink on multilateralism, starting with EU, stressing on common benefits of cooperation and the need for humility<sup>xiii</sup>. The jury remains divided as these are contrary positions which do not reconcile would compete with each other. The next section explores on which issues these debates would linger post-COVID.

### **Issues and Trajectories**

On what issues will cooperation and the ensuing debates of these two positions happen? There are two issues on which the debates would linger in the situation that we stand as of now—information game and human security.

Globalisation has ensured that the speed and intensity of interactions and flows are rapid. Information has become the chief currency of these network societies. Even if territoriality has not been unbundled, the conception of territory has gradually changed. Information seeps through borders and now control over networks is considered even more vital than control over spatially marked territory<sup>xiv</sup>. The rampant spread of the Coronavirus underscores how important information sharing is at a regional and international level. Since any threat of the present era would wrap the ‘shrunk’ world, information remains a key in terms of any response. That relates to information transparency at two levels – within the states (information flow and transparency between the state and the people) and outside the states (including a web of inter-state

cooperation along with non state actors). Neo-Liberal Institutionalism would argue that such information sharing would increase confidence building among the states, reduce transaction costs, build long term commitments and norms and ultimately make states more secure. Realist logic would be undoubtedly be apprehensive of information sharing and would not institutionalise such. The information sharing would only be within a sub-set of the states would like to build an alliance against the larger set of states. In that case, information sharing can be divisive and weaponised.

The two schools of thought have central complications in this. The neo-liberal argument misses that information in terms of the states is a part of the components that make up its security. For the state, it is not automatic to become subservient to institutions and forego the logic of survival. Similarly, for the realists, the suspicion is enough to obliterate larger and more consistent gains. A plausible situation is dependent on which states deposit their will in terms of setting up the information regime. If the more authoritarian countries would take the lead in terms of institutionalising the norms, the information sharing would be restricted and would only insulate the nations. In a recent survey during the pandemic, the study calls for a group of 4 countries – Belarus, Brazil, Nicaragua and Turkmenistan as the “Ostrich Alliance” who are fudging information within their states<sup>xv</sup>. The fact that these states would try to fudge data to cover up for their inadequacies within the

states goes to translate that they would not vouch for a robust information sharing mechanism. For democracies, they are more adept in subtleties of hiding and misinforming their audiences<sup>xvi</sup>. Therefore, even if this issue becomes a latent factor for cooperation, the content of information and the extent of it becomes important as the mechanism can sway between cooperation and surveillance.

The second issue is that of human-centered security. In both the viewpoints, the referent object is the state. The state security is primary. While the viewpoints refer to the conceptions of security differently, the focal point remains the state. There have many important works in terms of arguing for a more deepening and broadening of the agendas of security<sup>xvii</sup>, COVID-19 has augmented this debate further in terms of dimension of human security<sup>xviii</sup>. The threats are therefore not only for the existence of the state, but the state, along with other sources, becomes the cause of the threat to human agency. If one reads further into this dimension, the present pandemic and the threat to human security can also be contextualised in terms of the state’s under preparedness of the health emergency and infrastructure, its unsustainable policies to safeguard the weaker and marginalised sections. Even if one looks through the prism of the productivity of the state, the financial and the military productivity of the state would be directly proportional to the health condition of the citizens. Similarly, human security is oblivious to borders. For neo-realists, human security, especially health is the subject of the state as nation-states remain to be

the sole container of society. Moreover, the unbundling of territory for the sake of prioritising human security would mean also opening the Pandora's Box. The states believe in inviolability of borders and territorial citizenship for the creation of 'us' and 'them' in constructing and consolidating the projects of nation-state building. Similarly, for the neo-liberals, the hard task is to bridge the gap between 'high' and 'low' politics, neutralise the discrepancies across the globe in terms of capability and increase confidence of absolute gains.

## Conclusion

What has this pandemic done in the case of both the issues? While the debates would remain and international cooperation would be shaky, vulnerable and hesitant once the exigency passes, the pandemic has been successful in implanting deep rooted questions.

The pandemic has posed very bluntly that the states need to come to a consensus regarding these issues when it comes to global cooperation not because these positions are normative and desirable but because they are essential and primary. The indispensability of cooperation is for the survival of the states itself. It would be prudent to argue that the nature and form of such cooperation would be represented by the distribution of power and order of global relations. However, that is a different story and requires a different assessment which is also subject to time.

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<sup>iv</sup> Gideon Rachman, "Trump, Putin, Xi and the Cult of the Strongman leader", *Financial Times*, October 31, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/39da343a-9f4b-11e6-891e-abe238dee8e2>

<sup>v</sup> Kori Schake, "Managing American Decline", *The Atlantic*, November 14, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/how-bad-americas-decline-relative-china/576319/>

<sup>vi</sup> Stewart M. Patrick, "The Multilateral System still cannot get its act together on COVID-19", Council on Foreign Relations, March 26, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/multilateral-system-still-cannot-get-its-act-together-covid-19>

<sup>vii</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Trump is playing a deadly game in deflecting COVID-19 blame to China", *The Guardian*, April 19, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2020/apr/19/trump-is-playing-a-deadly-game-in-deflecting-covid-19-blame-to-china>

<sup>viii</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "China's opacity contributed to spiralling corona infections and deaths. Its geopolitical effects will be lasting long", *Times of India*, April 18, 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/chinas-opacity-contributed-to-spiralling-corona-infections-and-deaths-its-geopolitical-effects-will-be-long-lasting/>

<sup>ix</sup> Harsh V. Pant, "EU: Death of an Idea", *The Telegraph*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/coronavirus-the-idea-of-a-united-europe-was-dying-even-before-the-covid-19-pandemic-had-struck/cid/1764664>

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<sup>xi</sup> Michael Barnett & Kathryn Sikkink, “From International Relations to Global Society” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 2008

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<sup>xiii</sup> Victor Mallet & Roula Khalaf, “Emmanuel Macron: We are at a moment of Truth”, *Financial Times*, April 17, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/317b4f61-672e-4c4b-b816-71e0ff63cab2>

<sup>xiv</sup> Shibashis Chatterjee, “Globalisation”, in *International Relations: Perspective for the Global South*, edited by Siddhartha Mallavarappu & Bhupinder S Chimni (Pearson: Delhi), 2012

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<sup>xvi</sup> Dipankar Sinha, *The Information Game in Democracy*, Routledge India: Delhi, 2018

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