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The Future of Multilateralism and Global Governance

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Lessons from a global crisis: coronavirus, the international order and the future of the EU

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Challenge

The coronavirus crisis may turn out to be a bump in the road for recent international dynamics. After a period of hibernation in the major global economies, perhaps life will return to normal, the storm weathered thanks to stimulus plans, and the world will once again be flat and hyperconnected.[1] Alternatively, coronavirus may be a turning point in the era of globalisation.

Either way, the coronavirus crisis will confront us with certain lessons. Questions will be asked about our democracies, the authoritarian regimes of others and the values of different societies; changes in the international order, especially at an ideational level; the rise of populism and "my country first" discourse; the prospects for international cooperation in a rejigged global order; and the role of the European Union.

[1] Thomas Friedman. *The World is Flat. A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

Proposal

1.Democracy, authoritarianism and values

Shortly before the confinement from which I write, I was informed that someone I had met had tested positive for coronavirus. The name of the person affected was not given, but as it was likely that physical contact had taken place, I was recommended to take maximum precautions. With the right to individual privacy thus prioritised over the collective knowledge of those who had been present (had we hugged or not?), I followed the health authorities' recommendations and isolated myself for a minimum of fifteen days, something that soon became mandatory when general confinement measures were announced.

The way I was informed shows the value we place in our societies on the rights of individuals and their privacy, which contrasts with the treatment of the coronavirus crisis in certain Asian countries. Some attribute this to a basic cultural difference: Western societies see security from an individual point of view and as a mechanism for protecting the rights of their citizens, while eastern societies perceive it as a social good and, as such, subordinate to the interests of the community. Confucianism is cited as the civilisational root of social behaviour based on the principles of hierarchy, respect for authority, trust in the state and the subordination of individual rights to the benefit of the community.

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In the digital age, treating privacy this way immediately translates to data use. South Korea, Singapore and China have used data provided by mobile phones and other devices to monitor the population and prevent the spread of coronavirus. Some admire this use of digital surveillance and data as a control mechanism, as well as a tool for a higher purpose – the health of the people. In Europe, by contrast, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), an example of the European Union's regulatory power, puts the privacy of people and their data above commercial uses, limiting access to third parties, including the public authorities.

The use of data has attracted a lot of analysis, but above all there is debate over whether digital authoritarian regimes or democracies are better equipped to deal with crises such as coronavirus. It is a somewhat misguided debate, since the same uses of data and limits on privacy have been applied by both authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes (China and Singapore) and democracies (Taiwan and South Korea), and management of the pandemic by democracies has resulted in both good practices (South Korea) and drastic situations (Italy or Spain).

The key factor seems to be the effectiveness of the measures, rather than the type of political regime implementing them. As Francis Fukuyama argues, the coronavirus crisis may mean that the governments that last are those trusted by their citizens for being seen as having effectively fought the virus and its consequences. In this case, the type of regime (liberal democracy or authoritarian) matters less than the speed with which solutions to contain the pandemic are adopted.

Authoritarian regimes have significant capacity to react, to coordinate the chain of command and to limit public freedoms. They also censor critical voices, such as that of Chinese doctor Li Wenliang, whose early warning was silenced by the authorities for disrupting social order, contributing to the global spread of the virus. Democracies, on the other hand, are based on deliberation and the freedom to criticise public authorities. While this results in better public policy choices, the mechanisms of checks and balances and the need to politically manage the trade-offs between health and epidemiological criteria and the negative economic effects of shutdowns slow things down. Decentralisation and the coordination of the different levels of government have also been shown to be decisive factors in managing the pandemic, and come in for criticism from those with a centralist view of state power.

No matter how much the values of Western democracies effectively differ from societies in Asia, using cultural and civilisational factors to define the success or failure of managing the pandemic to date is even more of a dead-end. Is cultural affiliation what underlies the political response to the crisis? This kind of argument recalls theories based on Huntington's clash of cultures or civilisations from the 1990s, which were soon disputed for various reasons.

Firstly, because defining civilisations solely according to cultural or religious criteria is impossible (if multiple cultures and religions inhabit it, does a Confucian civilisation really exist?). Secondly, because it substitutes policy for identity as an explanatory factor. Third, because multiple identities exist in all civilisations, as Amartya Sen wrote. Fourth, due to the predominance of conflicts within civilisations rather than between them. And, finally, due to the cultural reductionism to which we subject international relations when we ignore larger (geo)political, security and economic factors, as Fred Halliday reminded us. In time, we will probably also attribute success or failure in managing the coronavirus to the effectiveness of the governments and the policies they are presently formulating, regardless of the cultural or civilisational roots of the states.

2. An ideational challenge to the international order

While cultural explanations of the responses to this global crisis have their limitations, coronavirus will strengthen the ideational shift in the international system. In material terms, when the crisis hit the changes to the international order were already well consolidated. In 1995, the GDP in purchasing power parity of the E7 emerging economies (China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Russia, Mexico and Turkey) amounted to half that of the G7 (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Canada and Italy). In 2015, the E7's volume was already more or less comparable to that of the G7. By 2040, the E7 could account for twice the G7's GDP. In less than half a century, the world has undergone a drastic material transformation, and today's international system is multipolar.

This changing order, in which China and the United States compete for hegemony, has an ideational element that coronavirus has accentuated. Global public opinion has long felt China's influence growing in the international arena: in 2017 similar numbers held favourable opinions of China and the US.[1] Today, the world wonders whether, despite initial errors in managing the crisis, China's normative power will continue to grow. Shipments of medical and sanitary equipment to European countries and the information war with the United States about the origin of the virus have been promptly instrumentalised by the Chinese regime to sell a better image abroad. China seeks to match its growing material pre-eminence in the international order with a stronger position on the ideational plane.

After decades of crisis in Western democracies due to rising illiberalism, populism and the withdrawal into the national, the change in the ideational order seems to have been consolidated. The West is recalibrating the Western-centrism of the ideas that have governed the international order since the end of the Cold War, in particular the unquestionable predominance of market and democratic liberalism. The rise of China's capitalist authoritarianism fatally undermines the end of ideology proclaimed by Daniel Bell in 1960. To a large extent, the Asian model that the coronavirus has brought into the light is causing a competition between political and social ideas and models at a global level. So far, the dominant ideas have been less dogmatic, which means a reality check for a West that believed itself victorious on the normative level.

3. Populisms and hyperleadership

For the 20 years of the Western normative boom (1989–2008), there seemed to be no alternative to the international dominance of the United States or even the postmodern logic behind the idea of Europe. This brought about a degree of complacency, which the economic crisis caused to implode into populism. A West whose thinking had stagnated saw years of ideational predominance built around the promotion of democracy, multilateralism, liberalism and open societies crumble in favour of a withdrawal into national interests and a "my country first" mindset. Populism became the great rejection of all this thought, despite the solutions it provided being difficult to put into practice. Populism also showed how equal opportunities and the welfare state had been neglected for many years.

With the coronavirus crisis, a new model of ideational contestation of Western dominance is emerging, which has been absent from many post-Cold War debates. Unlike 9/11, the contestation is not restricted to narratives based on conceptions of cultural, religious or moral difference, and in contrast to the financial crisis, it questions certain tenets of globalisation. Looking outwards, we wonder to what extent certain doses of hierarchy and a sense of community prevent us from better tackling a crisis like coronavirus. Looking inwardly, populism instrumentalises the crisis to extol the benefits of national withdrawal, border closures and the dangers of an open world.

The truth is that coronavirus also reveals the limits of populism, both in terms of following the recommendations of experts and the centrality of institutions to managing and emerging from the crisis. The main exponents of Western populism, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, have reversed their initial positions on tackling the pandemic. Johnson was led to abandon the idea of "herd immunity" (generalised infection to promote immunity among the population) following expert opinion from Imperial College London; Trump had to face the evidence that hundreds of thousands of deaths in the United States could have as bad an impact on his re-election chances as the damage to the economy produced by lockdown measures.

But even when populists yield to the evidence, they may still manage to champion a specific rhetorical and political approach to the fight against coronavirus. Hyperleadership, the urgency that managing the crisis demands, and the predominance of strong leaders in international politics normalise the management of leaders such as Johnson and Trump, even after showing what lousy managers they were in the initial phase. Surveys carried out shortly after the outbreak of the crisis show they enjoy high levels of support and popularity and have strengthened their electoral hopes. The coronavirus moves in a breeding ground shaped by the discrediting of traditional politics and institutions, which have long been perceived as representing systemic failure by broad swathes of the population. Populism is unlikely to disappear after the crisis, and neither will the hyperleaders who champion it. And the higher the costs of the crisis, the more institutional mistrust may take root.

In fact, some of the rhetoric and agenda they deploy to _seize power_ may in some places be ramped up. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, sees the state of emergency as an opportunity to strengthen his power, rather than as a temporary and proportionate measure. On March 30th the Hungarian parliament approved a law that allows Orbán to legislate by decree for an indefinite period of time, suspends parliament during a state of emergency with no time limit, postpones elections during this period and toughens up sentences against anyone misinforming about (read: contradicting) the official version of the management of the crisis. In other words, taking advantage of the crisis, he governs by decree as a way of consolidating his power and eroding democracy. He has form: in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis Orbán declared a state of emergency that remains in force and has now been extended indefinitely.

4. Prospects for international cooperation

The coronavirus crisis – and the underlying international dynamics – have left the international system in the paradoxical position of being able neither to go backwards nor forwards in reforming international governance. On the one hand, the nation-state has been strengthened

during the crisis management because of its powers in healthcare, border control and stimulus plans. But this does not mean a lesser role for the global in this crisis, starting with the pandemic itself and the need for an international cooperation framework that facilitates progress on the vaccine. So, while some deglobalisation in the production of health products, medicines and basic consumer goods is likely after the crisis, the world of tomorrow is not likely to stop being globalised, interconnected and interdependent. A wholescale return to the national is neither realistic nor desirable.

On the other hand, "my country first" mindsets and zero-sum approaches, including threats of trade wars, have led international governance down a cul-de-sac. More effective cooperation frameworks are needed, but the closedmindedness fostered by the leaders of the main international powers undermines attempts to reform the international governance system, for which the political will is currently lacking. Along with the consensuses any reforms require, this has brought many international institutions to a standstill, from the World Trade Organization to the United Nations Security Council, as well the Paris climate change and Iranian non-proliferation agreements.

In a context of rivalry between great powers, international organisations become arenas in which geopolitical games are played. Many – Russia and China included – prefer to preserve an obsolete international order that enables them to maintain their position of power. So, while global challenges such as coronavirus and the climate crisis cannot be tackled merely at the national level, we are also failing to forge the cooperation and leadership necessary to effectively advance international governance.

To find a positive-sum approach to tackling the coronavirus crisis a new international "idealism" is needed. In the 1930s and 1940s, shortly after International Relations was founded as a discipline to study the causes of war, the first great debate arose between "realists" and "idealists". The latter, also disparaged as "utopians", believed an international cooperation network should be created that would make the advent of a new war impossible, leading to the (failed) League of Nations promoted by Woodrow Wilson after the First World War. The realists were those who, based on E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, considered the "idealists" to be moralistic pacifists, who failed to understand that states will always prioritise their own power and survival in an anarchic international system.

Today's believers in "my country first" are the realists of yesteryear. With the difference that, despite the international system's present multipolarity, the levels of interconnection and interdependence between states far exceed those after the First World War. Like the world before coronavirus, that which follows it will be one in which the power dynamics of the main international players will continue to combine, with China clearly in the ascendant and high levels of global interconnection. Despite this, no single power will have the capacity to write the rules of a new global re-ordering by itself, configuring what Ian Bremmer has described as a world (not) governed by the G-Zero.[2]

5. Another challenge for European governance

In this context, the challenges and responsibilities before the EU are remarkable. But when the world stops, we ask Europe for speed. After years of crisis, the EU has shown the deficiencies in its governance system and the sluggishness of its crisis management and decision-making mechanisms. The liberal order is in crisis and the EU, as its paradigmatic representative, is feeling the effects of foreign powers like Russia and China stalking it, as well as of the United States' absence and the internal challenges from Eurosceptic political forces of a varied nature.

A decade of uninterrupted crisis has altered the union's foundations. The euro crisis called into question the bases of the single currency and the need to reform a monetary union that remains inadequate at economic level. The refugee crisis affected freedom of movement and the Schengen area. Brexit put an end to the rationale of deeper and wider expansion of the European project. And the coronavirus has led to the re-erecting of internal borders, limitations on the movement of people, placed the single market at risk and demonstrated the insufficient capacity to mobilise common resources to face health and economic crises. The EU's internal crises, when added to the instability in the southern and eastern neighbourhoods, have long since diminished its external projection and characterisation as a "force for good" in the international system.[3]

The EU was born out of war. But despite its severity this crisis is not a war, it is a global, social and economic health emergency. In handling it, the EU has gone through different phases. First came surprise and a lack of EU capacity to coordinate measures whose responsibility lies almost entirely with member states (on health policy and border control). Subsequently, consistent with the prevailing "my country first" mindsets in international politics, exports of medical equipment between member states were restricted and national borders were closed, which was exacerbated by a lack of European coordination of measures taken at state-level.

Next there was a need for a joint response to the crisis: starting with €750bn of public and private assets to be bought by the ECB, and the benefits of the single market to be protected, with the Commission ensuring medical supplies would be distributed to all the states that need it. The EU's policy mix, consisting in a package of emergency relief loans and a future economic recovery fund, were agreed in the European Council on 23rd April. Finally, familiar sensation emerged that the EU will survive only if it is able to thoroughly reform itself (at which point the EU tends to run aground), and which in this case would mean debt mutualisation (euro/coronabonds).

In the medium term, and as the coronavirus is not a war but an emergency at all levels, Europe must refind the social foundations that are as much part of its founding values as the creation of an internal market and the promotion of the rule of law. Years of austerity have severely weakened this social Europe, meaning the legitimacy of a European solution to the crisis also depends on social and economic advances. In other words, on a Europe that works and whose legitimacy derives from results and not only from processes (immersed in a governance crisis) and ideals (with rising Euroscepticism and a contested liberal order). People's health and safety have regained centrality at a time when we thought ourselves infallible, meaning the European project will have to better protect its citizens and guarantee progress on the social construction.

In terms of values, Europe is unlikely to emulate the Chinese. As neither Europe nor its citizens would want to give up their fundamental values, spending time weighing up which political system is best suited to facing a crisis of this nature makes little sense. We will not trade individual liberties for an authoritarianism that is more effective, so the alternative is a Europe of strong, functioning institutions. But reforms to European governance are not around the corner, worsening the feeling of desynchronisation between the speed of the crisis and our capacity to respond.

At the operational level, it is necessary to return to a transactional, positive-sum logic. To avoid blockage and the terminal fragmentation of the EU, the discussion must go beyond the way out of the coronavirus crisis and incorporate elements of reform and pending priorities (multiannual financial framework, Brexit and digital Europe). Transactional logic will prevail when the negotiation framework is generous enough to forge flexible alliances between states, avoiding traditional fractures between debtor and creditor countries, for example.

This political pact for Europe should incorporate solidarity mechanisms between states, but it should also avoid deepening the divides that have recurred since the euro crisis. New alliances must be built based on shared interests, and not only on the basis of the number or category of states involved (north, south, founder, Hanseatic or frugal, to use some common labels). The letter signed by nine member states (of varied origins based on the above criteria) demanding greater coordination between states, a common debt instrument and an ambitious economic recovery plan was a good example of this.

Europe remains better equipped than other international powers to promote a rules-based, multilateral cooperative order. The dynamics of interdependence and hyperconnectivity will return and, in doing so, will reveal that effective cooperation at international level is the best antidote for crises like the coronavirus. But if we fail, the long tradition of state power will prevail as the second-best option in a fragmented international order.

[1] According to Pew Research, in 2017 49% said they held favourable views of the US and 47% of China. The perception was also growing in many countries that China has more influence in the world today than it did a decade ago.

[2] Ian Bremmer. *Every Nation for Itself. Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World.* London: Penguin Books, 2012.

[3] Or "force for good", as its former High Representative, Javier Solana, once characterised it. See Esther Barbé and Pol Morillas. "The EU global strategy: the dynamics of a more politicized and politically integrated foreign policy", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32: 6, 2019, 753–770. DOI: 10.1080 / 09557571.2019.1588227

Existing Initiatives & Analysis