The World HandCOV'd: COVID-19: Challenges to Global Multilateralism

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Key takeaways

- The COVID-19 crisis has shown both the importance of viable global organizations and their limitations.
- China has demonstrated its global ambition and willingness to use global public fora accordingly.
- Lack of US leadership during the crisis has damaged its soft power reputation and might undermine its positions in the multilateral system. However, the US remains the most powerful state and the leader in innovation and research.
- Other Western countries have tried filling the vacuum left by the US.

The COVID-19 pandemic has in many ways worked as an accelerator of already existing tendencies in international politics and in multilateral fora. While it is far too early to predict the consequences of the crisis for multilateralism and the multilateral architecture in general, certain developments can still be seen. Definitive predictions should however be approached very cautiously.

Multilateral organizations matter but have a too limited mandate

> The crisis has demonstrated the importance of viable global organizations and platforms. In a pandemic, regional organizations or alliances certainly matter, but a global pandemic cannot be addressed on a regional level only.

Foremost, the WHO has played a crucial role in warning and advising member states, issuing recommendations, pooling resources, coordinating efforts to combat the virus and providing operational as well as technical support. But also, other organizations, such as the WTO in the fight against hidden protectionist measures, have shown their potential importance. However, the crisis equally demonstrates the limitations of these fora – being underequipped, limited in their mandate and completely dependent on the willingness of member states to cooperate. In an increasingly polarized global environment, the last condition is far from trivial.

The crisis also demonstrates that global organizations are considered as being without alternative by the vast majority of states. Calls for setting up parallel mechanisms to the WHO or others have received little or no resonance.

China demonstrates assertiveness

Despite the fact that the lack of cooperation by China with the WHO at the beginning of the crisis might well have been one of the causes of the pandemic's escalation, the crisis has not stopped China from trying to turn the situation to its advantage. China has demonstrated its global ambition and willingness to use global public fora accordingly (one example was the statement by Xi Jinping at the opening of the World Health Assembly) and to overpublicize its international aid or support. Reports about biased or even fake news, the bullying against Taiwan in global fora even in the midst of a pandemic, as well as the pressure put on EU Ambassadors for their joint declaration, have also shown that Beijing is far from being squeamish in the choice of its instruments.

In short: if there were any illusions left about China's role they have been shattered in recent weeks and, for example, the EU has received a painful reminder how important a joint stance towards Beijing would be.

> Despite its mistakes during the first weeks of the crisis, it does not seem that China's global influence will diminish in multilateral organizations.

Many countries have received substantial material support from China in this crisis and will likely be dependent economically on China to sustain the efforts for economic recovery. Xi's announcement of financial support to African states for fighting COVID-19 is a clear indicator that China seems ready to use the momentum to increase its leverage. It seems, however, that its credibility as a benevolent economically-oriented power has received significant damage.

US's waning soft power credibility

China's prominent role is exacerbated by the accelerated waning of the American soft power or, to be more precise, its soft power credibility in the context of the crisis.

One reason is the perceived shortcomings of the US administration in handling the crisis at home. Secondly and probably most importantly, the lack of US global leadership during the crisis has damaged its soft power reputation: the US has not made efforts to lead a global alliance to fight the virus; on the contrary, it refused to call for a vaccine to be declared as a common global good and even threatened to leave the WHO. While some of the US criticism towards China and the WHO is shared, to at least some extent, in many other capitals, none has echoed the calls for weakening or even leaving the WHO.

> Even though the US continues to be the main or one of the main contributors to many international organizations, its role is not uncontested and its positioning on the COVID-19 crisis has not resonated strongly even with traditional allies.

Multilateral organizations will continue their work despite Washington's criticism. And attacks from the White House are only likely to somewhat weaken the still strong position of the United States inside these organisations.

The West is not done yet – but under increased pressure

Early predictions that because of the crisis the West will lose ground both as a global actor and an attractive normative model seem premature now. The initial argument that autocratic regimes manage the crisis better than democratic or open societies cannot be upheld. Good or bad management could be found both among hybrid regimes, as well as democratic societies. It should also not be overlooked that despite the lack of US leadership in the crisis, many other Western countries did take the lead.

For example, the EU played a driving role in the ACT initiative, which coordinates and financially supports research on therapeutics, diagnostics and vaccines. Also, countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand or Switzerland have been key in the WTO to assemble coalitions against the protectionism of medical equipment or food supplies. Financially, it is overwhelmingly the countries of the Global West that have funded various initiatives to combat the virus. At the same time, Germany and France are

determined to present an ambitious proposal for the reform of the WHO. Thus, other countries from the Global West have stepped in, thereby trying to fill the (temporary?) vacuum the US has left.

However, the West and its governance model continue to be challenged: the attacks through fake news and the aggressive promotion of authoritarian governance models as seemingly more capable alternatives have increased.

The balance of power has not changed completely

While public discourse and soft power are important, hard power still matters. And here, the pandemic has not changed the power structures yet. The US military power remains unparalleled. However, it is likely that during the pandemic and recession new military campaigns, as well as the sustaining of some military capabilities, may be considered too costly. Yet, this is true for every global or regional power.

In spite of the erosion of its soft power credibility in the context of the crisis, the US remains also the most important leader in innovation and research: the development of the first vaccine in the US can still be considered as a likely scenario. Despite the erratic approach of its administration, its (not only financial) contribution to global health is still considered as decisive.

> In summary: while the pandemic has accelerated or illustrated certain existing tendencies of the global power architecture it has not turned the balance upside down.

However, as the WHO correctly argues, the pandemic is far from over and neither is the struggle to handle the health-related, economic, social and societal impact of the crisis. Hence, the quest for influence in international fora and for the establishment of the global narrative on the causes of, performance during and fight against the pandemic will likely continue.

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