

Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

Crisis for multilateralism - and are we facing a new type of war?

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When we emerge from our lockdowns and COVID-19 is on Season 1 on Netflix, what will the new world look and feel like? I suspect a lot like the present one. Wars, conflicts and terrorism will continue; China will remain aggressively expansionist; ISIS will lift its travel advisory; the Middle East will remain a mess; Pakistan will keep its terror factory going; Xi, Putin and Orban will be presidents for life; and US might just re-elect Trump.

But a lot will change. India, for instance, will need to rethink some of its precepts and priorities in both domestic and foreign policy. The multilateral universe, global supply chains, health as a strategic asset, tech and bio warfare. India's global ambitions. China. All will need an upgrade.

The crux of the changes we are likely to see in the future lies in the fact that COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon but its response is intensely local.

For one thing, the whole idea of multilateralism is being re-written as we speak. If the UN was a 1945-era institution before, it is beyond obsolete today. The world's top talk-shop is yet to have a serious discussion on COVID-19 as a peace and security issue, which it is, largely because China and Russia are opposing terms like 'transparency' and 'ceasefire', and the US just doesn't care. The UNGA, which is really a platform for an annual airing of global politics, just passed arguably the most inane resolution on COVID-19, pledging 'solidarity'.

The world's top health body has so blotted its copybook, it's laughable - from being a cheerleader to China's subterfuge and secrecy, WHO has played directly from Beijing's playbook, unconscionable in hindsight, and ruinous for its credibility.

Japan's deputy PM Taro Aso blisteringly called it the Chinese Health Organisation, excoriating it for refusing to declare COVID-19 an international emergency in January, which would have bought time for everyone. Will WHO question China about its actual casualty figures, or the source of the outbreak? Unlikely, which will leave huge gaps in our knowledge, and constrain future actions.

Meanwhile, Taiwan, kept out of WHO under Chinese pressure, showed exemplary success in tackling the virus. Tells you a lot about how skewed the system is. UNHRC, already reeking of prejudice, is silent over Xinjiang or the Wuhan lockdown but loses sleep over Jammu and Kashmir. Different departments in the UN are fully paid-up cheerleaders of China's BRI. As we clear our blinkers, it should be clear that if a western-dominated UN system did not suit India, a China-coloured one does not either.

India should not mourn this 20th century brand of multilateralism. Creating a new multilateral order is important — one could argue that the current world 'disorder' is fertile ground. The

pandemic risks turning us into Hobbesian entities, as each country fights its own battles, so burden-sharing is important. Even more important is setting the rules for a new order.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that complex global supply chains, a mantra of present trading systems, are overrated. Our vulnerability is not that we don't make defence equipment, it is that we're following a China-led manufacturing strategy. That should change.

The overwhelming dependence on China needs reducing, a thought that is uppermost in many parts of the world. As India furiously reopens shuttered Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API) units which fell to Chinese predatory pricing, it is important to revise manufacturing and trade strategies — certainly in the short and medium term, trade, like technology, might follow the same coalitions-of-the-willing path.

Health is now a strategic asset, right up there with technology, defence and security. India will be judged not only on how we tackle the Wuhan virus, but what it says about governance, crisis management and how a democratic system prepares for the day after.

The unspoken thought keeping security experts awake - irrespective of whether the Wuhan virus was an innocuous zoonotic transfer, or a lab leak - is could this be the face of a future war? Could our investments in 5th Gen defence equipment be overturned by a virus, cleverly placed?

In 2007, Estonia had exactly this moment in the realm of cyberwarfare, prompting the world to adopt new security protocols and cyber governance. Could this be another such moment? India, with a demography that could easily be a vulnerability rather than a dividend, will have to think and work differently, factoring in both state and non-state actions.

It's likely therefore the future of multilateralism could be smaller groupings, more cohesive, and among countries that show the ability to come together to not only address large-scale crises, but pool resources to provide global public goods and platforms for the world to use without being 'indebted', rather based on more overt principles of fairness.

At the operational level, this 'coalition of the willing' should take on a more concrete and real-world shape - the Quad-Plus for instance, involving key countries in the Indo-Pacific, needs to re-imagine cooperation where freedom of navigation is not merely parading warships on the 9-dash-line, but involves real exchanges focusing on putting regional economies back together again.

In the neighbourhood, a fairly unsexy meeting between SAARC health professionals went unremarked. But it was important. In South Asia, where most neighbours dislike each other, keeping cooperation at the professional level on areas that affect everyday lives could take the sting out of, say, the India-Pakistan non-relationship. India should lead, focus on a neutral tone and outcomes, which can continue even when India takes military action against Pakistani terror.

In the post-COVID-19 world, the questions we should be answering therefore can be summarised thus:

- How will the US emerge as a global power? It's clear they haven't dealt very well with the pandemic. But the US is also unique in its powers of innovation and resurgence. How will they be used to rejuvenate the US?
- The US-China rivalry. How could that play out and its implications in the region and world?
- China shows no signs of being a less aggressive or nakedly expansionist power. It might believe it has emerged stronger in a post-COVID-19 world. I have my doubts but this is a central question that we should answer.
- How will India emerge in a post-COVID-19 world? Its strategic policies are not likely to change, but a degree of economic nationalism may happen.
- The state of the multilateral institutions - which will survive, and which will need to be recast, like the WTO and WHO?
- What happens to global supply chains, as countries attempt to diversify away from China?
- Many elements of the current world order will continue — balance of power, terrorism, historical conflicts, trade disputes, nuclear weapons, climate change. What will be the global institutional framework to address global challenges?
- If smaller coalitions are the way to go, which I believe, what is the future of the Quad, or even the Quad-Plus (Quad + Vietnam, New Zealand and South Korea).
- If China is successful in 'annexing' the South China Sea, what would be the regional consequences?
- The extent of political and economic nationalism as each country battles the virus and its aftermath in their own way.
- Will the European Union survive?

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