Global Insights: COVID-19 and the Future of the International Order
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This post is part of a larger collection covering the Global Insights webinar series, hosted jointly by Balsillie School of International Affairs (Canada), the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick (UK), the Institute for Strategic Affairs (Ethiopia), American University's School of International Service (USA), and Konstanz University (Germany). This series of Global Insights has finished and the next series will resume in September. You can access a recording of this week's webinar here.

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What impact has the pandemic had on the current rules-based international order of the post-World War II era?

The breakdown of the international order started long before COVID-19, but it has accelerated during this period. If major national governments do not see the COVID-19 crisis as a cause for collective response, the international order will decline. One must acknowledge that there are different kinds of international orders, including the liberal, rules-based, and American hegemonic orders. COVID-19 has clearly had different effects on each. The world has seen challenges to all aspects of democratic practices and structures and is experiencing widespread democratic disengagement. Representative democracy, closely linked to liberal democracy, faces all sorts of challenges. Who speaks for whom? Where does credibility and authenticity come from? The pandemic has threatened global supply chains and may indeed lead to isolationist policies in which countries 'go it alone' if they are faring better socioeconomically.

From the perspective of the African continent, the multilateral world order is in turmoil and breaking apart, or indeed paralysed, in many places. This paralysis has far reaching implications for peace and security in Africa. Transactional politics and the use of resources, coercion and deceit over rules-based institutional politics has increased. In many cases, the conduct of politics has become akin to running a business as opposed to governing a polity for the common good, which the pandemic only exacerbates. Substantial gains should be

recognised and defended, but transactional politics need to be understood in the context of resurgence of power competition. The pandemic has created a deep divide between the fact of being elected and the inclination to represent. In countries such as Brazil and the United States, individuals have been forced to represent themselves, in the Black Lives Matter movement, for example. Questions remain about what further challenges and crises the pandemic will provoke in the coming months and years.

Traditionally, liberal democracies have been the champions of the rules-based international order. But can democracies survive the pandemic?

It's too early to understand what kind of political systems have responded the best to the pandemic. Some democratic governments have performed well, such as South Korea and Taiwan, whereas others have performed poorly, such as the United States and Brazil. Taking a global view, the structure of a political system alone is not necessarily the key to success or failure. Similar variance in the success of authoritarian regimes reinforces this idea.

In general, governments that responded early, quickly, and strategically have seen the best successes. In many cases, these are small liberal democracies able to mobilise resources quickly. Many of these are ruled by women. New Zealand, Iceland, South Korea, and Taiwan have been particularly successful. On the other hand, many larger countries typically understood as main actors in the international order, such as China, the USA, and the UK, have been criticised for lack of transparency and late and sometimes even cavalier responses to the crisis. [Minority ethnic groups have been hit particularly hard in](#) liberal democracies, especially the USA and the UK, in terms of health and unemployment during the pandemic. Additionally, countries led by populist governments have generally fared poorly, perhaps signifying a moment from which populism's appeal may decline in the longer term. When looking to the context of the African continent, most African governments are now the product of some sort of election, of varying degrees of legitimacy. The pandemic has also highlighted that Africa is in a position to manage tension between China and the USA's interests in Africa.

We have seen a rise in illiberalism and a reaffirmation of state sovereignty since 2016, and the pandemic seems to be accelerating this trend. Is the future illiberal?

The pandemic may not extend the trend toward illiberalism, but it has indeed had a strong impact on polarisation. Although illiberalism is unlikely to triumph, the polarization that it generates will lead to deep problems for global governance and may threaten collaboration in future crises, such as the climate crisis. The countries that have fared better in managing the pandemic are countries with a strong, people-oriented state history and robust public health systems. Countries like Germany and Taiwan, for example, have fared better. Others however, such as the USA and the UK (since the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions) have dismantled the state and privileged the private sector at the expense of public goods and thus have not fared well. Countries with a strong tradition of a capable state that delivers public goods could re-organize themselves and play an important role in the restructuring of the global order and serve as influential leaders moving forward.

Strong-man governments, whether democratic, authoritarian, or populist, have performed very poorly (India, USA, Russia, Brazil). In their refusal to consult experts or admit to the true nature and scale of the virus, these regimes have been most disruptive to the international order. In Africa, the anti-scientific perspective has not been as much of a problem, as countries within the continent have a history of dealing with pandemics more than others, relatively speaking. Dictatorships have used this crisis to decrease civil liberties, as in the case of Chinese journalists, the censorship of information, and other tools. However, it is important to acknowledge that illiberal trends within the established liberal democracies have also increased during the pandemic, such as new surveillance technologies in contact tracing apps. This is not necessarily antidemocratic, but it is a significant risk, as political abuse of these new measures is likely. Citizens may get used to measures of control that include not only surveillance, but the quashing of protest and civil disobedience. This 'new normal' could lead to a reduction of individual rights and freedoms after the peak of the crisis. It is important to keep a close eye on how those rights can be protected, and checks and balances, transparency and oversight are more important than ever.

The defining features of the concept of democracy, or the interpretations of the defining features, may be debated moving forward. The idea of burden sharing and a more collective form of social democracy as a kind of modifier or diluter has interesting potential. Similarly, the idea of protective democracy—the idea that states are there to protect the rights of individuals, takes on a wider meaning of protection of citizen lives and wellbeing during the pandemic. Finally, the machinery of democracy has new questions posed against it, not least how to run elections and conduct deliberative forums while keeping social distancing. With regard to the conduct of elections, we have seen good examples from South Korea, and more concerning examples from the USA, in Wisconsin for instance.

Is the sun setting on the rules-based international order?

The danger to this new future of the international order is that liberal democracies have granted themselves significant powers that may not disappear, making a conversation about such powers necessary. There may be a new high-water mark in terms of state intervention into individual lives and businesses, and emergency powers may need to be debated openly. To what extent and over what timeframe and how much accountability are emergency powers tolerable, legitimate, and acceptable? Equally as concerning, many conversations around COVID-19 have excluded children, who are not well-represented in our current political systems - we do not talk much *about* them, let alone talk *with* them. The pandemic is having devastating consequences for children and their rights. It has had a massive impact on education, socialising, poverty and more. Children in conflict zones and refugee camps suffer most. COVID-19 will undoubtedly add to varying forms of trauma that children everywhere experience. The international community needs to take measures to protect children in health, education, and other areas of rights. Save the Children and World Vision, among other organizations, have a role to play. In April 2020, Terre des hommes launched the #CovidUnder19 initiative by mobilising a group of young people, child rights activists, civil society organisations and UN stakeholders. The initiative set out to understand children's views about and experiences of life under Coronavirus, and amplify their voices to inform policymakers, professionals working with children, and governments.

What might the future of international order look like?

The [economic consequences of the pandemic are grave](#) and there will be a tendency to withdraw and look inward, which is as much as a threat to the international order as disruption by one country or another. As states look inward, the pandemic could facilitate the end of state-centric politics, as there are a host of influential non-governmental actors, civil society organizations, and international corporations that are becoming more aware. These actors maintain a certain level of interest and engagement when governments are so focused on inward domestic affairs. The future could allow us to redefine what constitutes a fair, democratic, and accessible participatory global order. Right now, the global order is defined by military and economic power. We can play an important role in having other public goods form a part of this global order. Importantly, the new global order should not reorganize itself based on the current status quo.

The pandemic has created an incredible opportunity for cooperation in a self-selected, voluntary way. Countries previously excluded from playing a dominant role in international order (such as Finland, Norway, Iceland, Germany, France, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea) now have the opportunity to take a creative leadership role. Such a group could think about real policy options that would boost international cooperation and strengthen the existing structures for promoting and defending democracy. The decentralisation of power could also play an interesting role in the idea of a rules-based international order. The pandemic has highlighted the role of local and city governments that were previously often unacknowledged.

While a new international order could have positive elements, there are also grave threats that could lead to the potential for stagnation and fragmentation in global order due to disengagement and deepening conflict between the USA and China. The USA presidential elections in November will play a significant role in the future international order. Similarly, changes in the EU could have an impact on its capacities in the international order, as the EU in some ways lacks democratic legitimacy and it lacks a hold on the imaginations of European citizens. Its mechanisms are effective but capacity to generate legitimacy is weak. The pandemic will have a significant impact on economic inequality and the role of democracy in our societies, as tendencies toward authoritarian regimes may rise. We need a new multilateralism that is suited to the contemporary order and leadership that will make it possible for us to facilitate this. Collective leadership of countries that had previously been content to follow the United States must now provide leadership and come together to articulate a new collective global order. Leadership will need to address the global challenges of gross inequality, climate change, and other challenges in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

1. Revise democratic practices to be more participative and heal the disconnect with citizens.

2. Be more aware of illiberal trends in established democracies, so protect rights and liberties while also safeguarding transparency and oversight, checks and balances, because they are more important than ever.
3. Include children in the democratic process and let them be heard.
4. Do not lose sight of other key global challenges and crises, particularly climate change. Consider the lessons to be learned from this crisis in order to deal with the next.
5. Create a more cooperative and open international order that includes a much larger public than it has in the past.
6. Defenders of liberal order should get together and collaborate (particularly countries indicated previously: New Zealand, Taiwan, etc.)

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