



BFPG Explainers: Coronavirus and multilateralism

How is the international community collaborating on the coronavirus pandemic?

Whilst the World Health Organisation has been issuing guidance to nations on how best to respond to the coronavirus, as well as coordinating scientific advice and evidence, there has been little coordinated global political leadership on the pandemic. States have implemented varying responses, and others have shut borders without notice, vindicating the theory of world politics being a 'zero sum' game in which states compete, rather than cooperate, with each other.

Leaders of the G20 states - including the United Kingdom - have met to discuss the crisis via video conference. The G20 was quick to act in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, but has been criticised for failing to develop a similar response for the current pandemic. The leaders agreed on the call to assess gaps in pandemic preparedness and increase funding for research and development in vaccines and medicines. The joint communique released by the Group said that the pandemic was 'a powerful reminder of our interconnectedness and vulnerabilities'.ⁱ

Foreign ministers of the G7 states, who also met to discuss the crisis, were unable to agree a joint communique after the US insisted COVID-19 be described as the 'Wuhan virus'.ⁱⁱ

Countries - to a large extent - are operating in isolation in order to develop a vaccine, although some nations have contributed to international institutions working to develop a vaccine. The UK, for example, has committed an additional £210 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), a global alliance financing and coordinating the development of vaccines against emerging infectious diseases.ⁱⁱⁱ

How have international institutions responded to the crisis?

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres has said that 'Covid-19 is the greatest test that we have faced together since the formation of the United Nations' and called for 'an immediate coordinated health response to suppress transmission and end the pandemic'.

The 15-member United Nations Security Council, made up of five permanent members: the United States, the UK, France, Russia and China, has thus far failed to produce any action or statement on the coronavirus crisis. This is due in part to the divisions between the US and China, for example American insistence that the Chinese origins of the virus be stressed in official documentation.

Guterres has called for sanctions to be suspended on vulnerable countries, which the United States has ignored, intensifying action against Iran and Venezuela. Meanwhile, the UK, France and Germany have side-stepped United States sanctions on Iran to deliver medical supplies.^{iv} Russia has blocked an attempt to hold virtual security council sessions by video conference. Vassily Nebenzia, in a letter obtained by *Foreign Policy*, wrote to his Chinese counterpart 'we shouldn't be afraid to gather from time to time in the UNSC chamber.'^v

The United Nations' general assembly, made up of all 193 member states to the United Nations, is currently considering a resolution to uphold the organisation's central role in fighting the pandemic. Additionally, Guterres has announced a \$2 billion global humanitarian response plan to fund the fight against coronavirus in the world's most fragile countries.^{vi} He has appealed for support from countries, private companies, and philanthropists.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have released a joint statement calling on all official bilateral creditors to suspend debt payments from borrowing countries that request forbearance.

The International Monetary Fund has also said it is making \$50 billion available through its emergency financing facilities for low income and emerging market countries that could seek support in fighting the coronavirus. The World Bank, for its part, has approved an increased \$14 billion of financing to assist companies and countries in their efforts to tackle the coronavirus.^{vii}

How is the crisis affecting the European Union?

The European Union has found itself at the forefront of the crisis, with Italy experiencing the highest number of reported deaths in the world. It has been difficult for member states to support Italy as Spain, France, Germany and others are confronting their own crisis - guarding their resources in order to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak in their own countries.

The European Union has created greater fiscal space, but at least at first, individual states were somewhat left to manage this crisis alone.^{viii}

The European Union's slow response led other countries to plug the gap. China has provided Italy with masks, with Beijing airlifting 30 tonnes of medical supplies to Rome.^{ix} A number of European countries have since rejected this equipment due to faults.^x Under a direct order from President Vladimir Putin,

Russia's defence ministry has said it will send eight mobile medic brigades, special disinfection vehicles, and other medical equipment to Italy.^{xi}

On a larger scale, the virus is exposing some of the fundamental weaknesses of the bloc. The European economy - already brittle and unequal - is being tested, and the downsides to globalisation, such as the accelerated transmission of disease, are evident. The extent to which the bloc has been tested was echoed by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen who said 'when Europe really needed to be there for each other, too many initially looked out for themselves.'^{xii}

Nationalist leaders have capitalised on this sentiment, with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán saying that the coronavirus crisis has exposed the Union's 'weaknesses'. Speaking on Hungarian state radio, he said that 'help does not really come from here'. 'Help we got from the Chinese, and I turned to members of the Turkic Council'.^{xiii}

Member states have disagreed over the economic response to the crisis, as well as the different responses imposed by individual countries. Germany, for example, introduced an export ban, which halted shipments of medical equipment to Hungary. The ban was lifted when the European Commission threatened Germany with an infringement proceeding.^{xiv}

The economic response to the pandemic is another area of contention. Whilst Italy, Spain, France and others argue that common debt should be a part of the package, others - led by the Netherlands and Germany - say it should not, preferring a temporary relaxation of fiscal rules.

How has the crisis strained international cooperation?

The crisis has emboldened authoritarian leaders to further entrench policies undermining democratic governance.

For example, Hungary's Parliament has approved a bill to allow Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to rule by decree, effectively circumventing democratic institutions. The bill also includes five year prison terms for anyone spreading 'fake news', and has no end date or sunset clause.^{xv} Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has issued a statement in response calling for all emergency measures to be 'limited to what is necessary and strictly proportionate'.^{xvi}

The spread of disinformation relating to the coronavirus has been rampant, with Viktor Orbán linking the virus to migrants, and United States President Donald Trump repeatedly referring to it as the 'Chinese virus', serving to deepen the divide between the two countries.^{xvii}

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has called the coronavirus crisis a 'media trick'. He has dismissed media 'hysteria' over the coronavirus and called the illness 'a little flu'. He has criticised the governors of

states including Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro who have implemented isolation measures in their states after no measures were taken nationwide.^{xviii}

Even in China, where the coronavirus started, officials are blaming the outside world for the crisis. As China's reported number of coronavirus cases allegedly nears zero, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian has drawn attention to a conspiracy theory that the virus originated in the United States.^{xix}

In the United States, the reorganisation of supply chains in the manufacturing and services sectors to limit their exposure to China has deepened the rift between the economic giants. China was angered further by Taiwan's decision to donate 100,000 masks each week to the US. China has called the move 'a rebellion against your ancestral land'.^{xx}

The decision by the US to ban all European travel with no prior warning was not well-received in Europe. The bloc was further scandalised when German officials alleged that President Trump had offered \$1 billion to a German pharmaceutical company to buy monopoly rights to a new COVID-19 vaccine.^{xxi}

The dominance of states that pursue misinformation and view the international sphere as a zero-sum game leaves little room for international leadership and cooperation.

What could have been done differently?

During previous international crises, such as the 2008 financial crash, international organisations have been mobilised to provide a rapid response. The G20 for example, held its inaugural leaders summit in the wake of the crash, to provide a forum for wealthy and developing nations to hold economic discussion.

Gordon Brown, the UK's Prime Minister during the financial crisis and a key architect of the international discussions, has urged world leaders to create a temporary form of global government to tackle the medical and economic crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.^{xxii}

In the European Union, and across the West, where leaders had more time to prepare for the spread of the coronavirus, it is perhaps true that individual countries could have better coordinated their responses, especially those such as export and travel bans that have direct ramifications on other countries. The UK, for example, currently has at least 300,000 citizens trapped abroad as a result of countries closing borders.^{xxiii}

Where to next for international collaboration?

World leaders are already beginning to work together more cooperatively. In the EU, despite initial divisions between Northern and Southern Europe over the possibility of establishing a common debt instrument ('corona bonds') to finance the response, it appears some groundwork is now being laid. Indeed, Dutch Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra has said 'last week, we - and myself included - should have made it more clear that we want to help [Southern Europe]. We didn't do that emphatically enough.'^{xxiv}

Statements like these suggest the coming weeks may elicit a greater degree of international cooperation.

There is the potential for nations to make better use of existing multilateral institutions, such as the UN Security Council and the G20, to better share information about the virus' spread and containment, coordinate responses and vaccine trials, and provide assistance to nations struggling acutely with the virus.

-
- ⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g20-leaders-summit-statement-on-covid-19-26-march-2020>
- ⁱⁱ European statement: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/16/g7-leaders-statement-on-covid-19/> for controversy, see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44427660>
- ⁱⁱⁱ https://cepi.net/news_cepi/2-billion-required-to-develop-a-vaccine-against-the-covid-19-virus/
- ^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/instex-successfully-concludes-first-transaction>
- ^v <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/27/un-security-council-unsc-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- ^{vi} <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/funding-fight-against-covid-19-world%E2%80%99s-poorest-countries>
- ^{vii} <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/funding-fight-against-covid-19-world%E2%80%99s-poorest-countries>
- ^{viii} https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/european-commissions-action-coronavirus_en
- ^{ix} <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-respirators/china-sends-medical-supplies-experts-to-help-italy-battle-coronavirus-idUKKBN2101IM>
- ^x <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52092395>
- ^{xi} <https://www.ft.com/content/b1c5681e-6cf9-11ea-89df-41bea055720b>
- ^{xii} https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_532
- ^{xiii} <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-viktor-orban-criticizes-eu-crisis-response/>
- ^{xiv} <https://www.ft.com/content/1bbdfbd0-5fbe-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4>
- ^{xv} <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/hungary-jail-for-coronavirus-misinformation-viktor-orban>
- ^{xvi} <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-warns-on-emergency-coronavirus-covid19-measures-after-viktor-orban-move/>
- ^{xvii} <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147813>
- ^{xviii} <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/brazils-jair-bolsonaro-says-coronavirus-crisis-is-a-media-trick>
- ^{xix} <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/china-turns-inward-coronavirus-pandemic-foreigners-imported-cases/>
- ^{xx} <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/china-turns-inward-coronavirus-pandemic-foreigners-imported-cases/>
- ^{xxi} <https://bfpg.co.uk/2020/03/coronavirus-vaccine-cooperation-explainer/>
- ^{xxii} <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/mar/26/gordon-brown-calls-for-global-government-to-tackle-coronavirus>
- ^{xxiii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-partnership-with-airlines-to-fly-back-more-tourists-stranded-abroad>
- ^{xxiv} <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-finance-minister-acknowledges-lack-of-empathy-on-corona-bonds/>