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In Multilateralism We Trust?



As the world grapples with COVID-19, multilateralism and its related institutions, such as the World Health Organisation (pictured above), have come under intensified scrutiny. Photo by Yann Forget taken from Wikimedia Commons and tagged under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 [Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Global Health Security – Trust During the Time of Covid-19

By Joel Ng



Leaders of the G7, including the UK's Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab (above), are in the throes of coordinating a continued multilateral response against COVID-19, but will it be enough to overcome surging nationalism during the global pandemic? Photo taken from the Number 10 Flickr account and tagged under a CC Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 [licence](#).

Lack of trust predates the outbreak of Covid-19, but it is an essential element for anyone involved in tackling the outbreak as well as strengthening of global governance.

Commentary

G7 LEADERS on Monday, 16 March 2020 announced a slew of measures to address the Covid-19 pandemic; in a spate of relief for the multilateral system, the emphasis was distinctively on coordination and cooperation: information sharing, global economic relief, and coordinated public health measures.

Its urgency and necessity follow from the sense that multilateralism is facing tough challenges as divisive unilateralism grows popular among those who do not trust the global governance architecture. But

the success of the G7's actions will depend on how much the world trusts its capacity to handle the crisis.

Trust and Governance

If there is one word that encapsulates the governance challenge as Covid-19 wreaks havoc globally, it would be the word, "trust". Covid-19 has disrupted every aspect of life in affected countries, raised fears, and sparked uncertainties. Yet how people respond reduces to a crucial factor: Trust – or lack thereof – in their neighbours, their healthcare or welfare systems, and their authorities.

When panic-buying or store runs broke out around the world, a familiar pattern played out over and over: People, facing uncertainty and fear,

sought safety in stockpiling.

Economists who study bank runs are familiar with this pattern: it illustrates an underlying logic of self-preservation amid uncertainty – and a lack of trust in the system to prevail (sometimes quite reasonably so!) – yet leads from individually-rational actions to systemically-irrational outcomes – in laymen's terms: panic.

Making sure that a system is fit to meet people's needs in a crisis – and then persuading them of such – must therefore be one of the major aspects of tackling the Covid-19 outbreak.

Domestic Trust

Leaders need stocks of legitimacy to be trusted in

a crisis when so many unknowns abound, and they build these stocks outside of the crisis period. Approval of US President Donald Trump's handling of the crisis fell sharply along partisan political lines: according to aggregate surveys by statistical website fivethirtyeight.com, between [10-16% of Democrats trusted his handling of the crisis while 75-87% of Republicans approved](#).

Because Trump domestically has only played to his base, non-Republicans simply did not trust him and a litany of his missteps were carefully documented, which will make it harder for him to carry out interventions that are needed. A leader who senses he lacks trust may also be overly concerned with optics rather than overcoming the situation.

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Experts also need stocks of legitimacy in order to be heeded. Unfortunately, this is not as obvious as it should be. Britain's Brexit process had poisoned the well (the British public infamously had had enough of experts, according to UK cabinet minister Michael Gove) and far too much of the population were eager to dismiss expert advice, especially when that advice would be disruptive to everyday life while the virus still appeared distant.

Put together, there has been a trust deficit that has hampered effectively addressing the crisis. The turmoil on global stock markets suggests most firms and investors have no trust in the management of the outbreak in major industrialised economies and are pricing in for a hard recession.

International Trust

International cooperation also requires trust – between countries and with international organisations. When the crisis in Wuhan unfolded in January, the United States offered to send expert assistance but was rebuffed. One wonders if the reverse will hold true should the crisis escalate in the US and China offered its help.

Countries have always devised foreign policies that support their domestic interests and public opinion but doing so is a delicate matter when it comes to close neighbours whose reactions also have domestic impacts. When one country trusts that the other is handling a problem effectively, things are fine.

But when that trust does not hold because of insufficient information, it may be forced to take preventive

measures, even at economic cost to itself, if only to assuage domestic pressure. In the early days of the outbreak in Wuhan, several countries risked Chinese ire as they announced travel bans from China. Yet today, it is China that is now following this logic to place travel restrictions on other countries.

Attempts to cover up cases, slow rollout of testing (and thus lack of information), or ineffectual responses make it difficult for neighbours to trust that others have a handle on the situation. Lower trust – and therefore raised defences – will be inevitable until they come to grips with the situation.

Multilateral Trust

Multilateral cooperation had been brought to its lowest ebb just prior to the outbreak of the crisis. International organisations such as the World Trade Organisation are teetering on the verge of collapse, with its dispute settlement mechanism broken. The US-China trade war, which had only just begun to show signs of abating, had led many countries to hedge against both superpowers.

Britain chose to go with Huawei in its 5G infrastructure against the US' wishes, while erstwhile Chinese partners were reviewing infrastructure projects on the backs of debt and sustainability fears. A lack of trust in the multilateral system preceded the Covid-19 outbreak.

On Covid-19, the World Health Organisation was initially criticised in Asia for not declaring an emergency earlier in January, sparking a petition with half a million signatures. It did declare an emergency on 31 January

followed by pandemic on 11 March.

However, the emergency declaration on 31 January seemed to be ignored by anyone outside Asia, and many countries are now paying the price for this. Yet one must ask why the WHO's warning went unheeded: Did it have enough legitimacy and trust to be taken seriously immediately?

Rebuilding Fractured Trust

Whatever the case, the pandemic is now upon all of us. National interests around the globe have converged over Covid-19 and will require multilateral cooperation to effectively address it, so the G7's coming together is welcome, though only a first step.

Countries large and small, rich and poor, all have the same interest: To quash this disease as quickly as possible, wherever it may arise, because it could re-enter one's borders if it is out in the wild. It is also fundamentally a technical issue that can, like pandemics before, be defeated without politicisation.

We are now seeing demonstrable success in Singapore, China, and South Korea that have effectively nullified the domestic threat of the virus – they now appear most impacted by importing it from countries where the virus is still uncontrolled. They have managed systems that are effective and trusted to contain their outbreaks.

While many countries still need to put domestic control measures in place urgently, this is also a rare opportunity to strengthen a troubled multilateral system

and should not be wasted. ■

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COVID Corner: Issues in the Time of Corona

Economic Multilateralism and International Political Economy

COVID-19's Economic Fallout: The Logic of Pump Priming

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *RSIS Commentaries* | 03 March 2020

The COVID-19 outbreak is affecting regional economies. To cope with grim growth prospects, governments are leaning on fiscal stimulus to weather the crisis. Such policy measures will largely be determined by politics as different sectors compete for limited resources.

[Full Report](#)

The Pandemic Strengthens the Case for Universal Basic Income

The Washington Post | 10 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

COVID-19 is the IMF's Chance for Redemption

Project Syndicate | 09 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Coronavirus putting world on track for new Great Depression, says WTO

The Guardian | 08 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

COVID-19 and the 'zoom' to new global value chains

East Asia Forum | 05 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

COVID-19 requires gender-equal responses to save economies

UNCTAD | 01 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

ADB to Provide \$200 Million to Support Strained Supply Chains in Fight Against COVID-19

ADB | 12 March 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Political-Security Multilateralism

Governance for Global Pandemics

Alan Chong | *East Asia Forum* | 26 March 2020

Much of the public alarm triggered by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is greatly bound up with the management of cross-border security threats. COVID-19 resembles a 21st century medieval plague in terms of how little we understand its character and how vulnerable we are to its effects.

[Full Report](#)

Covid-19: Time for Emergency G20 Summit

Pradumna Bickram Rana | *RSIS Commentaries* | 24 March 2020

The ever-growing toll of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a growing sense of helplessness and loss of confidence worldwide. Coordinated global responses and action plans, together with a clear statement of solidarity from an Emergency G20 Summit could go a long way in reducing these fears.

[Full Report](#)

ASEAN rallies against Covid-19

The Bangkok Post | 14 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Call for Common EU Approach to Apps and Data to Fight COVID-19 and Protect Citizen Rights

TechCrunch | 08 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Could the Pandemic Ease U.S.-China Tensions?

Foreign Policy | 06 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

The Multilateral System Still Cannot Get Its Act Together on COVID-19

Council on Foreign Relations | 26 March 2020 |

[Full Report](#)

Multilateral Matters: What You Missed

Coming End of Merkel's Era: Whither Future European Leadership?

Frederick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 18 February 2019

A small state parliament in Germany's east elected a new state government, triggering a political earthquake in Germany. This has precipitated several high-level resignations, and possibly the fall of Angela Merkel.

[Full Report](#)

China faces Belt and Road course correction after coronavirus

Nikkei Asian Review | 02 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship 2020: What To Expect

Frederick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 04 February 2019

Vietnam was long perceived as a security threat by other ASEAN members, before it joined ASEAN in 1995. But the country has since emerged as one of the fastest growing economies and the shining stars of ASEAN. There will be plenty to watch this year.

[Full Report](#)

New EU Circular Economy Action Plan Unveiled

Interreg Europe | 17 March 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Proxies and Drones: Can International Law Handle "Invisible Threats"?

Joel Ng | *RSIS Commentaries* | 15 January 2020

The debate over the legality of Qassem Soleimani's assassination misses an essential point: international law is not upheld by moral adherence, but by enlightened self-interest. However, current international law is not working for states given the diffusion of new threats such as drones and non-state proxies and needs rethinking.

[Full Report](#)

G20 Sets Ground Rules Ahead of Facebook's Libra Stablecoin

Reuters | 14 April 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Singapore official will head UN intellectual property agency after beating China's nominee, Wang Binying

South China Morning Post | 05 March 2020 | [Full Report](#)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Co-chairing the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus: The Case of the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine (ACMM)

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit
RSIS Policy Report
09 March 2020

The Dollar as the Dominant Global Reserve Currency: A Threat to Financial Stability?

Duvvuri Subbarao
RSIS Policy Report
18 February 2019

Punishing Cambodia is Going to Backfire on the EU

Frederick Kliem
Nikkei Asian Review
14 February 2020

Post-Brexit UK Should Prioritise Southeast Asia Trade Deals

Frederick Kliem
Nikkei Asian Review
30 January 2020

Critical Reflections on China's Belt and Road Initiative

Alan Chong & Pham Quang Minh
Edited Book
25 January 2020

ASEAN's RCEP and Sustainability Challenges and Achievements

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit
East Asia Forum
24 January 2020

Propaganda and Information Operations in Southeast Asia: Constructing Colonialism and Its Antithesis, Statehood and Peaceful Ambiguity

Alan Chong
Book Chapter
21 January 2020

Singapore Trade Policy Forum

Amalina Anuar & Evan Rogerson
RSIS Event Report
08 January 2020

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Multilateral Matters is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.

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