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THE DAY AFTER COVID-19: CAPACITY, GOVERNANCE AND ORDER

Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar



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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic revitalized the debate on the long-awaited transformation of the international order. Pessimists foresee that a leaderless, chaotic paradigm will fall into place, eventually sealing the end of U.S.-led rules-based, liberal international order and marking the return of national sovereignty with a vengeance. Though optimism is waning, the courageous express the possibility of a post-corona cooperative order built on the principle that global challenges entail global solutions and that the growing great power rivalry will be modified to focus on the common good. In between, national leaders still strive to maintain their conventional tactical attempts to prevail in conflicts with rival nations, curtail national deficiencies via magnifying partial successes in coping with the outbreak, and demoralizing adversaries through recrimination and misinformation. Quintessentially, the latter attempt to deflect responsibility not only signifies the apprehension to uphold the status quo but also preempts rivals to secure prospective stakes in the looming restructuring of the world order.

International Dynamics Resurfaced

The international system is a self-help, anarchical order based on the idea that the world lacks any supreme authority with coercive power to resolve disputes or enforce law and order. Modern efforts to overcome this deficiency through the UN system or, less ambitiously, through regional and ideological blocs—withstanding their sectoral achievements—have proven unable to arrest the aggressive nature of international relations. With the unprecedented shock of the recent pandemic, these traits are reappearing in full force.

Many expected the U.S.-China rivalry to define the prospective order in the 21st century. While the United States was in pains to focus on “the pivot to Asia,” its designated adversaries were hoping to delay the day of confrontation. In that, Russia has been a shield to stall the U.S. ability to shift its primary focus on the Eurasian heartland, i.e., the Caucasus and Central and West Asia. Moscow also

defied its post-Soviet limitations and extended its influence from Syria to Libya and further into U.S. regional allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent India, reclaiming its propaganda as well as hard power. China should have been more than pleased to have Russia coming forth as the fellow adversary of U.S. global interests. However, while the United States became more aggressive against the rise of China and the rest, its rhetorical turn to domestic restructuring through its “America first” agenda undermined its ability to focus on and shape external challenges.

Against this backdrop, second-tier powers such as the European three (Germany, France, and the UK) and Japan and regional powers like India, Brazil, Turkey, and Iran strived to adjust. While the former group insisted on an economy-first approach and was unable to overcome the hard-power deficit, the latter group sought to reclaim their historical grandeur and tried to the break from their minimal roles in the Western-designed international order. However, their countermoves against the dissolution of the extant order did not contribute much to their capabilities to deal with their surrounding security situations and internal dilemmas. Today, middle and regional powers’ overall ability to deflect the consequences of such partial formulas is minimal; they would have to expand their vision to respond to broader challenges with fewer resources and mobilization capacity.

With the pandemic forcing national leaders to demonstrate their will and capability to minimize its effects, the idea that nation-states are the ultimate and increasingly exclusive authorities in international relations is set to prevail. The nation-state has rather haphazardly had to reassume its traditional role to address all challenges within its borders and is inclined to depend mostly on national capacities and resources. The global hand in helping the nation-state to procure, promote, and proportionalize the plight of the pandemic not only in medical terms but also in political and socio-economic terms is mostly absent.

The Death Knell of Internationalism

With the pandemic undercutting all conventions of modern human life, international and regional organizations have proven themselves irrelevant in addressing the all-encompassing crisis. The UN, as the embodiment of the international order, has been out of the game to the point that its specialized agency the World Health Organization (WHO) is losing ground against the politicization of the pandemic in this hour of need. Likewise, in most of the similar and ongoing crises, the UN is powerless, voiceless, and lacking the mandate to realize its founding goal for maintaining global peace and security. In the day after the pandemic, the legitimacy of the UN, short of U.S.-China reconciliation, would further erode and minimize the possibility of international cooperation.

The EU has been consuming its hard-won soft power. Following Brexit, the Franco-German axis could have steered the old continent into further integration. Yet, the EU has three divergent components: i.e., Northern, Southern, and Central European states. As the pandemic first hit the South and then even worse in the North (particularly the UK and Sweden), and Central Europe remains the most vulnerable to geo-strategic and political shocks, divergences threaten to at least put a break on possible joint action, if not question the whole integrity of the Union.¹ Germany appeared unwilling but compelled to act in order to bring a semblance of financial cover for the EU as a whole, which still does not match its ambitions for “further integration.” France, Italy, Spain and others are reopening, but in any case the coming months will witness the return of headlines on Eurosclerosis, with recession resurfacing as a result of widening gaps between regions. With the EU in limbo, the Russian case for protection of national sovereignty and revival of spheres of influence in Europe might gain further credence. As such, the EU’s enlargement-based role in its neighborhood in disseminating the primacy of economic development for regional peace would give way to revisionist and authoritarian proclivities to maximize national interests.

While these two major components of internationalism are losing ground, the void will arguably be filled by revisionist powers the day after the pandemic—especially as Russia and China have been preparing for this day.² Although there is such a prospect, the

past systemic shocks in the international order, i.e., the end of the Cold War and the September 11 attacks, show that there are resistance mechanisms in the international order, and making a new order is a challenging task. Thus, we will deal with a more imminent question in the following parts of the analysis: Will nation-states strike back amid dealing with the pandemic and define a new mode of cooperation and international order in its aftermath?

Benchmarks for Managing the Crisis

Beyond these international dynamics, the need to focus on domestic issues will above all require increased state capacity, which would entail adjustment to the new policymaking environment.³ There have been several takeaways since the early stages of the emergent paradigm: First, the national commitment to focus on unbridled economic growth and GDP has inhibited developing nations from coping with the global health crisis. Nations with larger GDPs, driven by underinvested health sectors and uninsured masses, have struggled to curb, heal, and isolate the health crisis. Even in countries with universal healthcare, such as Britain, the mismanagement of resources was bluntly apparent. Underprivileged groups in developed countries were hit hard, while the wealthy were better able to procure and protect themselves from the pandemic.⁴ Therefore, economic inequality has again proven to be a huge problem, bringing about new debates on food and health security as well as taxation and universal basic income.⁵

Second, the ability of central authorities to effectively detect and respond to local requirements has emerged as a major question mark. Not only in federal states such as the United States, but also in centralized and devolutionary nations such as Italy, Spain, and the UK, governments were clueless about local needs and failed to allocate emergency requirements. This deficit has the potential to spark national debates about the role of central authorities and might give new weight to the principle of subsidiarity, i.e., to delegate authority to regional and local levels. This is a new phenomenon dealing with the nationally and locally rooted capacity of infrastructural power. The ability to deliver essential services will be a key in the post-COVID era. It is an urgent call for

multi-level governance, which will combine central and local capacities to make the best use of both against the crisis. The central capacity has the ability to rapidly implement measures, while the local capacity better grasps the situation and expansion of stakeholders in the process. The major problem in establishing effective multi-level governance is to regulate the relations between local and national administrations, namely putting their differences and power struggles aside during times of crises.

Third, the prospect of a surveillance state begs a new formula to balance freedom and security. As societies strive to lessen the impact of the pandemic, they also need guarantees to secure their civil rights. The urgency of the health crisis has deferred a full-fledged debate on the parameters of—now prevailing—corporatist and, in certain ways, clientelistic economies; infringements on civil liberties; and what should better be called “society-tracking.” In democratic regimes, one would imagine a reinvigorated role for society, with calls for direct representation and further judicial and parliamentary checks on the central authority. On the authoritarian front, even if early indicators point to further centralization of power and leadership, in the long run the inconsistencies of strongman rule (including, in this case, decreasing options to export internal problems to the foreign arena) and possible aggravation of domestic issues might reverse this tendency.

Overall, good governance will become the key to overcome the crisis.⁶ The ability to safeguard public services—above all, healthcare, education, and now more urgently, employment—as public goods will turn into major policy goals for state administration. States with reform capacity will have the flexibility and adaptability to address emerging crises, while the absence of reforms will keep respective administrations from responding timely, adequately, and proportionally.⁷ Notwithstanding the authoritarian urge for status quoism, the way ahead will have to comply with the need for solid institutions and rule of law to make optimum and egalitarian use of national resources. Today, policymakers face the dilemma of either prioritizing the urgent needs of the poor or bailing out big conglomerates to save their economies. As such, they are confronted with a choice of whether to comply with or fan the flames of the populist cause.

To balance both urgencies, policymakers need the support of technocratic expertise. Even if bureaucratic decision-making itself might further instigate majoritarianism, protectionism, and selective/nativist government spending, the political urge to surf the populist anger cannot be a remedy for economic and social reconstruction. Without expert support, populism would have a hard time surviving the contemporary uncertainties. While the destructive effect of the crisis might empower the populist cause to shut down borders and restrict the exchange of goods and ideas, the world will still need scientific solutions. To that end, a Cold War-like Promethean rivalry for technological primacy might this time entail accommodating the technocratic ethos and discredit the populist cause for simple formulas.

Democracies have time-tested advantages for the management of crises, since they are by definition more responsive to societal demands and are in principle more transparent and accountable. Thus, they need to build trust in due process, even if they have been far from successful in the early stages to demonstrate solid leadership, particularly in the case of the United States and the UK. Autocracies would rather delay addressing society’s demands with fewer commitments to transparency and accountability in the policy-making process. However, autocracies would prefer that administrative measures were applied through coercive power, since the risks amplified with the crisis could hamper autocrats’ hold on power in the medium to long term. The crux of the matter for managing the crisis is the extent of the necessary political will and acquired ability to generate responsive state capacity to deliver the required services. There is a pendulum of institutions, on the one hand, and populist preferences, on the other, both in democratic and autocratic regimes. The shift toward institutions would result in better management of the crisis, while the populist turn is more likely to embroil the crisis through hiding the truth and mismanagement, which would amount to crowding out good governance, diminishing public trust, and sticking to exclusionary policies. What would be better is a combination of institutional responses that entail institution and capacity building, multilevel governance of local and national capacities, and an inclusive and transparent policy line vis-à-vis the crisis.

Democracies might in the end feel compelled to seek best practices, while autocracies badly hit by COVID-19 are either playing the misinformation game or the blame game.⁸ Three behaviors have been commonly exhibited in autocratic countries hit by the pandemic: First, limit information on the scale of the outbreak. Second, blame foreigners (read, the United States and the West) for the pandemic. Third, portray mishandled efforts to the health response as better than comparative Western examples. However, neither shadowing the truth nor incriminating others would serve the ultimate need to contain and control the outbreak in such nations, usually with hidden tragedies among destitute masses and minimum resources for social safety nets. The question is, again, whether China, with its “pioneer” role in curbing and normalizing after the outbreak, could serve as an authoritarian source of emulation for others.

The Way Ahead: Alternative Routes to the Way Out

Against this backdrop, the U.S.-China rivalry is spilling over to public health competition. Even while the Trump administration has shown autocratic traits, the U.S. experience and ability to overcome the COVID-19 crisis will undoubtedly be consequential for the future of democracies to prevail or lose further ground in its aftermath. Both the technocratic and bureaucratic solutions formulated in the United States will be testament to the democratic capability to coordinate a free society and economy in times of need and to ward off the call for an illiberal turn. However, this role-modeling is beyond the Trumpian urge for exclusive national interests, which essentially exacerbates the leadership void in the global order.

Given the fact that the virus originated in China and the government’s early inhibitions to confront the crisis head-on, Chinese leadership has been on the defensive. Ending the lockdown and restarting the economy, even if in a slowdown, might stimulate Beijing to prevail against the United States and its allies. China has now risen up into its new role in leading the fight against the virus, marketing its “wartime-like” command mechanism and the strategies formulated with “strong leadership”⁹ as a successful route to ward against the global crisis. Provided this quest for stature is channeled toward international cooper-

ation, we might also see pathways to thaw U.S.-China tensions. Yet, the early signs of a misinformation war¹⁰ would herald Chinese commitment to confrontation rather than seeking common ground. Moreover, whether China could overcome the problems of inaction, denial, and deception in the state structure, causing delays in responding to crises—mainly due to its leadership model of chairmanship and party rule—is also a valid question against Chinese insecurities.¹¹

In all likelihood, international cooperation will be rare and at best a secondary commodity, especially seeing that the preliminary responses merely portend that nationally rooted capacity might optimistically support issue-based international cooperation in later stages. Keeping national economies afloat and arresting unemployment has initially paved the way for a new cycle of debt accumulation and further quantitative easing almost everywhere. However, the emerging markets and least developed countries lack major tools in responding to the looming economic breakdown. The latter hope for financial solidarity with developed nations, who are themselves facing major threats at home. Then, the main question appears whether the financial relationship between the developed and underdeveloped nations ought to be profit-oriented in the form of inflated loans or in the fashion of the Truman-type, long-term plans to keep the world economy afloat. Both have advantages and problems, and a new thinking is necessary in this regard.

As a preliminary observation, amid the COVID-19 disaster it is frustrating to see the absence of a new generation of humanitarian diplomacy led by regional and international organizations, states, and NGOs, which have not yet risen to the role to respond to this unprecedented global crisis. Still, such diplomacy might offer a possible way out of the crisis. To that end, improving regional and international profiles would be as much important as having a functional role in alleviating the humanitarian crisis. A starting point for NGOs would be to adopt a preventive role vis-à-vis the current crisis especially for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) whose well-being is under threat more than ever.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 23, 2020 UN Secretary General António Guterres

boldly called for an immediate ceasefire for all warring parties in the world. He later declared success by arguing that his call has been well-received by a substantial number of parties to the conflicts in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Libya, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.¹² On the one hand, ceasefires can provide opportunities for constructive involvement to turn the tables against conflict. As such, parties with mediation and conflict resolution capacities can make the best of an opportunity for renewed peace diplomacy, particularly in this era of crisis fatigue. On the other hand, a ceasefire does not mean an end to conflict and may even worsen the situation in its aftermath. In the end, Guterres' call failed to persuade most of the conflicting parties all around the world, and even those who agreed to declare a ceasefire broke their promises shortly after making them. Guterres also failed to secure support of the UN Security Council to make this initiative a binding resolution. In addition, we need to be aware that terrorist organizations and paramilitaries are possibly vying for the day when the nation-state fails to cope with the magnitude of the current crisis, which might further give ground for their dark agendas in conflict zones.

The world is changing fast. The pandemic has accelerated the thinking on and possibilities for a new international order. The urge for great power rivalry might disentangle global efforts to overcome this unprecedented challenge. However, long-term vision should not depend on national designs to keep the fire away from territorial borders. To empower global solutions, all nations need to magnify efforts to build capacity at home and coalitions for restructuring a new global order. The idea of the international builds on the concept and nature of the national. The complications arising from national and local approaches vis-à-vis the COVID-19 crisis provide hints about the prospective difficulties for cooperation and broader issues about the international order. Rough seas make good sailors. The immediate agenda is institution and capacity building and the establishment of efficient multilevel governance within nation-states. States that can generate and provide locally and nationally rooted administrative capacity against the challenges presented by COVID-19 will not only survive this crisis but will also create momentum toward international cooperation in its aftermath.

Endnotes

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Dr. Bulent Aras is a Senior Fellow at Istanbul Policy Center and a Visiting Professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY.

Dr. Emirhan Yorulmazlar is a Foreign Policy Institute (FPI) Fellow at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC.

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Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4

34420 Karaköy-Istanbul

T +90 212 292 49 39

ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu



İSTANBUL POLİTİKALAR MERKEZİ
SABANCI ÜNİVERSİTESİ
ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
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