



E-ISSN: 2664-603X  
P-ISSN: 2664-6021  
IJPSG 2022; 5(1): 131-135  
[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)  
Received: 28-12-2022  
Accepted: 03-02-2023

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## Changing notions of international relations and geo politics during the time of COVID-19 pandemic

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2023.v5.i1b.215>

### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications for international relations. The outbreak of the virus and its rapid spread across the globe has highlighted the interconnectedness of nations and the need for cooperation and collaboration in addressing global crises. Countries have implemented various measures to contain the spread of the virus, including travel restrictions, lockdowns and social distancing measures. However, these measures have also disrupted international trade, travel, and supply chains, leading to economic challenges and geopolitical tensions. The pandemic has also raised questions about the role of international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) in responding to global health crises. The pandemic has highlighted the need for better global coordination and cooperation in addressing health emergencies.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Realism, international relations, geo politics

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the world and has fundamentally changed the way we live our lives. The outbreak of the virus, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and quickly spread to become a global pandemic. The pandemic has had significant public health and economic implications, as well as social and psychological impacts. In terms of public health, the virus has infected millions of people worldwide and caused millions of deaths. The virus primarily spreads through respiratory droplets and close contact with infected individuals, and symptoms can range from mild to severe, with some individuals experiencing no symptoms at all.

To curb the spread of the virus, governments and health authorities around the world have implemented various measures, including social distancing, wearing masks, and lockdowns. These measures have been effective in reducing the transmission of the virus, but they have also had economic and social consequences, including job losses, business closures, and mental health challenges. The pandemic has also exposed and exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities. Low-income and marginalized communities have been disproportionately affected by the virus, both in terms of health outcomes and economic impacts. Women and girls have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, as they are more likely to work in the informal sector, have less access to healthcare, and are more likely to experience domestic violence.

The pandemic has also had significant implications for international relations. The virus has highlighted the interconnectedness of nations and the need for global cooperation and collaboration in addressing global health emergencies. However, it has also led to tensions between nations, particularly in terms of travel restrictions, vaccine distribution, and blame for the origins of the virus. In response to the pandemic, scientists and researchers around the world have worked tirelessly to develop vaccines and treatments for the virus. Several vaccines have been authorized for emergency use and vaccination campaigns have been rolled out globally. While this is a significant milestone, challenges remain in terms of vaccine distribution, particularly in low-income countries.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the world and has highlighted the need for greater global cooperation and collaboration in addressing global challenges. The pandemic has exposed existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in our societies and healthcare systems, and has challenged us to rethink the way we live and work. While significant progress has been made in developing vaccines and treatments for the virus, the pandemic is far from over, and continued vigilance and cooperation will be essential in the ongoing fight against the virus.

The coronavirus does not recognize borders; it spreads around the world and affects people in the same manner. Nothing stands its way as race, ethnicity, language or religion, body weight, height, power or fame are as irrelevant to it, as an administrative border. But at a time that the world touts itself as “a globalized world” acts multilaterally and witnessing a rush for regional integration schemes by states why are such short-term emergencies and long-term strategic planning as in the global responses to Ebola virus and HIV/AIDs pandemic, not seen with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? Unpleasantly and unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating such weaknesses of the nation state, as cooperation efforts among the states is like finding drinking water in the Saharan desert.

Solidarity between nations has become an exception rather than the rule, such that agreements on common challenges have been blocked to the point that, economic protectionism is on the rise and the sharing of medical research, now more important than ever, embryonic. Apart from the economic impact of the coronavirus on the world economy, the attitudinal behaviour of nation states to the pandemic tells us the realism of realism in international relations. Realism in international relations is not only alive and well, but is back with a big bang! This school of thought considers states as the primary actors, driven by interests, seeking to maximize security in an uncertain world. A fundamental premise of realism is that states can only rely on their own resources self-help or self-preservation to guide states in the international system. Though dominant during the cold war era, realism was largely discarded in the 1990's and early 2000's as belonging to the bygone era. But over the last fifteen years, this theory has made a comeback, due mainly to certain factors like the rise of Russia and China and the tumultuous developments in the middle east in the aftermath of the Arab spring, which has indeed added to the sense of realism's/resilience. Does these assertions sound obvious and if so why doesn't it sound obvious that a global problem requires a global solution? To attempt to grapple with something portentous about IR, one needs a theory to either defend the behaviour of states during the pandemic, invent a new species of it, or use it as a point of departure for some of the “isms” that should be defended, so as to make sense of the blizzard of information that bombards us daily. More so, the study of IR is best understood as a protracted competition between the realists, liberal and radical traditions. Realism emphasizes the enduring propensity for conflict between states; liberalism identifies several ways to mitigate these conflictive tendencies and the radical tradition describes how the entire system of state relations might be transformed. While this assertion is correct; of course, it seems that whenever a global crisis hits, realism offers the best singular explanatory lenses for analyzing it. It is not only that states remain the central actors, it is also that

current national measures at the expense of international cooperation is precisely what realists would expect to happen in times of crisis. International cooperation comes easy in times of harmony but individualism of states during COVID-19 reminds us once more that such cooperation is much harder to come by when it is actually needed.

### About the study

As a political scientist, theories of International Relations (IR) are usually weapons of choice to try to make some sense of global political and economy dynamics. So, what if anything are the impacts of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the international system in general and globalization more specifically? It turns out; they offer very different interpretations to the crisis. Categorically stated, IR theory cannot help solve any of the current medical problems regarding the global spread of the novel coronavirus/COVID-19 disease. However, what IR theories can do, is to offer informed predictions as to how states reacted to the crises and how they can help us to understand why states reacted the way they did principally in this case *via* realism. As realists would expect, when crises hit, it is not international organizations, not even the World Health Organization (WHO) that countries' citizens turn to in the first instance. For instance, at the onset of the coronavirus, the United Nations was quiet; so were many global organizations like the world trade organization and even regional economic integration schemes like the European union.

It was their own respective governments that states' citizens requested, to take the necessary actions to protect them from the threat and to provide for their relief efforts. In the absence of a global authority governing international relations, the nation state is proving once more that it is the main actor in global politics. On the one hand, modern doctrines such as neoliberalism and institutionalism among others, note how international relations have developed into a cooperative system by essence. On the other, realism believes international cooperation is a mere tool, to be used if required, or to be ignored. Realists adopted the notion of states as rational egoists, with inter state affairs necessitating a higher morality of state interests and survivability, which essentially means minimizing risks and maximizing benefits. Nation states do these things with fear, reputation and self-interest being the main driver of state action. Accordingly, to realists, basic agenda of IR are security issues, thus political and military issues are primary topics and top issues in the hierarchy among the topics they are tasked to manage on the agenda. In such a world, and for all states, maximizing their national interest is the main objective. In order to sustain the state existence, security issues are accepted as high politics while other issues related to commerce, finance, money and health are those of low politics. For realists as noted, power is always the basic means to proffer solutions to a given situation. Therefore, power struggles have inevitably been the central subject of IR. One of the important premise of realism (particularly neo-realism), is the anarchical structure of the international system. There is no central authority to govern the relations among states. In such an international environment, naturally providing security becomes the main concern of states. States have to deal with their own security problems that is called the rule of self-help. Since all states behave the same way, no state can attain utmost security; it rather feeds

the insecurity for all states known as a security dilemma (or security paradox).

### Discussion

In the 1990's, the 'drum-beaters' of globalization believed the world was becoming ever-more-tightly connected by trade, travel, global financial integration, the digital revolution, and the apparent superiority of liberal capitalist democracy, and concluded that we'd all get busy getting rich in an increasing flat and borderless world. But the past decade or more has witnessed a steady retreat from that optimistic vision, with more and more people willing to trade efficiency, growth, and openness for the sake of autonomy and the preservation of cherished ways of life. For example, in 2016, agitation by a majority of people in the United Kingdom, prompted the brexiteers to exit the European union for the purposes of "taking back control" of their destiny. For realists therefore, this backlash is unsurprising. Placed succinctly by a realist in the person of Kenneth Waltz in his landmark book, "Theory of international politics", nation states "want to "specialize" or (localization), while the international imperative is "take care of thy self".

The christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr offered a similar warning in the 1940's, in which he wrote that the development of international commerce, the increased economic interdependence among the nations, and the whole apparatus of a technological civilization, "increases the problems and issues between nations much more rapidly than the intelligence to solve them can be created. Similarly, liberal theorists' have long argued that increasing interdependence between states would be a source of prosperity and an obstacle to international rivalry. By contrast, realists warn that close ties are also a source of vulnerability and a potential cause of conflicts. What Waltz and Niebuhr are saying is that ever-tighter connections between states create as many problems as they solve, sometimes more quickly than we can devise solutions for them. For this reason, states, the critical building blocs of international politics, should try to reduce risks and vulnerabilities by placing limits on their dealing with one another.

### An analysis of the geopolitical impact of COVID-19 in IR

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on international relations, with effects felt across political, economic, and social domains. This essay will provide a detailed analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on international relations. Politically, the pandemic has resulted in a loss of credibility for some countries as they struggled to respond to the crisis. The pandemic has also exposed the inadequacies of some governments in responding to crises, leading to a decline in international cooperation. Governments worldwide have taken steps to limit the spread of the virus, including closing borders, imposing travel restrictions, and enforcing lockdowns. As a result, countries have had to rely on domestic resources, leading to a decline in international cooperation.

Economically, the pandemic has had a severe impact on countries worldwide. The global economy has been severely impacted, with many countries experiencing a recession. The pandemic has disrupted global supply chains, leading to shortages of critical goods and services. Additionally, the

pandemic has resulted in significant job losses, particularly in the service sector. The economic impact of the pandemic has been felt worldwide, leading to increased protectionism and economic nationalism. Socially, the pandemic has had a profound impact on societies worldwide. Lockdowns and social distancing measures have disrupted daily life, leading to increased stress and anxiety. The pandemic has also highlighted inequalities in society, with marginalized groups disproportionately affected by the virus. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of international cooperation, particularly in addressing global health crises.

Geopolitically, the pandemic has had a significant impact on global dynamics. The pandemic has led to a shift in power dynamics, with some countries gaining more influence than others. Additionally, the pandemic has accelerated the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China, with both countries engaging in a war of words and accusing each other of mishandling the crisis. The pandemic has also increased tensions between countries, particularly with regards to vaccine distribution. Diplomatically, the pandemic has forced countries to adopt new methods of diplomacy, including virtual meetings and digital summits. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of multilateralism, with international organizations playing a crucial role in coordinating the global response to the crisis. Additionally, the pandemic has led to increased cooperation between countries, particularly in the areas of research and development.

Notwithstanding the assertions of Robert Keohane, Joe Nye (1977), and other neo liberal institutionalists that some threats create powerful demands for cooperation as they cannot be resolved by states on their own. The posture of countries from the onset of the coronavirus did not indicate that cooperative attitude, as there was no overarching global consensus on the ways and means to handle the coronavirus pandemic by governments. Borrowing a statement from Waltz's piece in his "Man, the state and war", he avers how, in an anarchical situation like the coronavirus, nation-states had to fend for themselves against the impacts of the disease because there was and still no central coordination. In the past, global public health has generally been more favourable to cooperation than other issue areas, particularly, the gains of working together on the Ebola and HIV/AIDS epidemics in some parts of the world and to avoid future infections and minimize economic disruption globally. In a situation as the coronavirus pandemic, many states, especially those in Africa and Latin American cannot meet the wherewithal to tackle the disease on their own, and few if any, can collect necessary information on the trajectory of the disease all over the world or invest in the novel therapeutics and vaccines that are required to treat the sick to ultimately stop the virus. Such nation-states will have to rely on global integrated supply chains, where they will depend on imports of medical supplies such as masks, pharmaceuticals, and machines from the more advanced countries. In "explaining cooperation under anarchy", such as the coronavirus pandemic, Ken Oye, applies the basic game theory metaphors here to international relations, where he reminds us 'to think horse before we think zebra'. Oye's assertion, in relation to what is happening during this time under COVID-19 pandemic is that if actors cooperate, the most likely situation is a harmony game, where actors have overwhelming incentive to cooperate no matter what others do.



If actors do not cooperate, then the situation is more likely to amount to deadlock, where actors have misaligned incentives and strong incentives not to cooperate with each other. In public health, where the costs of inaction are so large, some of these concerns about relative gains should be attenuated. That said, where public goods, such as the vaccine for coronavirus is concerned, there are collective action problems. The hardest being to induce countries to pay for public goods if they can get them for free. Citing Mancus Olson, Todd Sandler, Elinor Ostrom, among others of collective action, there is going to be a problem of collective action provision and free riding, if there is a single, dominant power willing to underwrite public goods the payment of the vaccine. To the extent a dominant power is willing and able to lead in providing public goods, may make other states unwilling to contribute themselves. Scholars of IR have long wondered about the durability of cooperation if there is hegemonic decline. With rising multipolarity in the economic arena, the hegemon could become less willing and able to provide public goods. The rising challenger may not be inclined to do so either.

The United States, beset by its own struggles, clearly has no interest for leadership on the coronavirus. As the New York times noted recently, “this is perhaps the first global crisis in more than a century where no one is even looking to the United States for leadership”. While there is, as yet, no indication that the United States wants to play this game, geostrategic competition may also give rise to competitive dynamics between great powers that leads to more public goods provision, variably referred to as “tote board” or “scorecard” diplomacy and “competitive generosity”. While China has begun to offer donations and assistance to other countries to combat the COVID-19, pandemic, it is not clear how far such “mask diplomacy” will go after sending donations to about 82 countries on record. In all these dimensions, there is strong believe that after the current pandemic is over, the world should return to normal, albeit in the context of the economic crisis. The international community can mitigate the consequences of COVID-19 only through cooperation and a strengthening of the institutions of multilateralism. There are many examples of how, under quarantine during COVID-19, ordinary people, institutions and others alike have tried to assist each other in the form of food, amenities and reliefs. It is now up to the leaders of the nation states and their policy makers not to end multilateralism. Nevertheless, they should remember that we live in a completely different world, different front the time of the first world war, the “Spanish” pandemic, the great depression, or after our victory in the second world war, whose 75th anniversary we are celebrating.

### Conclusion

There is realism and also realism in international relations. The former is the general idea that people are self-interested, that people run states, and thus self-interest will win out over ideas in a crisis. But the realism that this article talks about is embedded in international relations theory; by this I really mean neorealism. While the actions of nation-states during the coronavirus pandemic, termed COVID-19 was mooted on realism, realism in IR is a different thing altogether. Realists assume not just self-interest, but rationality in decisions they make. They argue that great powers are the most important actors in the international system. They claim the only relevant actors are nation states

often viewed as unified black boxes. Therefore, based on such experiences, the only topics that matter to realists in IR are alliance formation in a time of turmoil; which leads to defense strategy and eventually war initiation when everything fails. In its path, the coronavirus has been a huge obstacle and a calamity to the world.

The choice for the world has been self-interest and short-term benefit against a cooperative system and long-term benefits for the world. Definitely, there will be tension after the coronavirus pandemic is over, where the gains made by multilateral organizations in IR will be sliding back to the “state of anarchy”, in which self-interest would stand the only guiding principle. But international organizations have a duty to help countries work together and demonstrate that with shared decisions we will be better off against such an invisible enemy and others to come. Finally, it would be a missed opportunity if nation-states do not use this forced COVID-19 pandemic lessons to refocus on resources-both at domestic and international levels-where humanity needs them, rather than relying on the need to maintain excellent economic indexes. The world will have to recalibrate the very concept of ‘economy’, which should be a tool for the people, rather than the string puller of the whole world. States should, in other worlds put their economies aside and rediscover the power of genuine human relations and of the human family in spite of whatever our so called “economies” tell us. It is becoming clear that even with the action’s nation states are taking to mitigate the continuous spread of the coronavirus through social distancing, the acute phase of this emergency is far from over. Indeed, every day of the pandemic marks a new grim milestone and as the virus continues to hit our countries and our people harder than the day before, we realize that even once the spread of COVID-19 is brought under control-whenver that will be things will not go back to normal as it was before the pandemic. Besides all these, the longer the emergency lasts, the deeper and more permanent the changes will be to all aspects of our social life from now on.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on international relations, affecting political, economic, social, geopolitical, and diplomatic systems worldwide. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of international cooperation and multilateralism in addressing global challenges, including pandemics. However, it has also resulted in a decline in international cooperation as countries closed borders and relied on domestic resources. The pandemic has exposed the inadequacies of some governments in responding to crises, leading to a loss of credibility for some countries. The economic impact of the pandemic has been felt worldwide, leading to increased protectionism and economic nationalism. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of addressing inequalities in society, particularly with regards to healthcare. It is essential for countries to continue working together to address the pandemic and build a more resilient world, taking into account the lessons learned from this global crisis.

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