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Coming Together and Pulling Apart:

How the Coronavirus Pandemic Tested Global Institutions and Reshaped Geopolitical Realities

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

In the early stages of the pandemic, it quickly became clear that this global health emergency would not provide the impetus to repair the recent strains that had become visible in the liberal alliance. As a global phenomenon meeting a deeply connected world, responding to the coronavirus pandemic necessitates a degree of international cooperation on a range of issues – including global health, economic recovery and support for developing nations. Yet, as national governments scrambled to implement lockdowns and dramatic emergency economic packages, first instincts tended towards favouring national interests, and responses became subsequently splintered and esoteric. Many policy areas where coordination could have helped to manage disruption to economic markets and many large-scale employers, such as travel and aviation policy, were addressed through a national frame, without consideration for the broader picture of highly entangled supply chains.

Under immense pressure when they were needed the most, many existing multilateral organisations failed to effectively mobilise and provide the cooperative framework compelled by the scale of the crisis. Although many leaders have argued that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of multilateralism,[1] it has also highlighted the failures and inadequacies of existing international institutions – many of which had been lumbering along, in need of reform, well before the coronavirus pandemic arrived. UN Secretary-General Guterres acknowledged that the pandemic was "a clear test of international cooperation – a test we have essentially failed".[2] Here in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has conceded that the pandemic has left the international community "pretty tattered".[3]

The pandemic has drawn attention to the fragility and limitations of relationships between even the most enduring of allies. The United States, for example, exacerbated its growing tensions with the European Union in March, with its decision to ban all travel from the EU with immediate effect, without giving the bloc – one of its closest global partners – advance notice. Nations across the globe closed their borders and began enforcing strict quarantine regulations, with little or no diplomatic recourse.[4] The UK, for example, gave just 30 hours' warning before removing France from its travel corridor list, prompting chaos for thousands of travellers and leading France to threaten to impose reciprocal measures.[5] Within the European Union itself, the task of synchronising border controls also became fraught at this time, as Member States deployed emergency powers to impede the 'freedom of movement' principle.[6]

With all nations needing to access the same protective equipment, drug ingredients, and medical devices, competition over access to pandemic supplies descended into a competitive scramble. A number of nations, including Germany and South Korea, quickly banned the exportation of medical masks[7] and by the end of April, 80 nations had restricted or limited exports of PPE and other essential goods.[8] As scarcity set in, the competition between allies was keenly felt. In March, German officials alleged that President Trump had offered $1 billion to a German pharmaceutical company to buy monopoly rights to a potential future COVID-19 vaccine,[9] and that the United States diverted an international shipment of face masks intended for German police.[10]

Although the initial rush on essential goods has largely subsided as the pandemic has progressed, nations have remained on high alert to ensure they are well-prepared for subsequent waves of the virus. In July, the United States purchased nearly all of the global supply of Remdesvir, one of only two drugs at the time proven to reduce the effects of coronavirus.[11] As this paper is published, vaccine nationalism is beginning to germinate, as desperate governments clamber to be the first to find a solution to the catastrophic economic and social impacts of the lockdowns necessary to contain the spread of the virus.

Introduction

With Western governments consumed in panic, our strategic rivals have identified opportunities to build international goodwill and exercise their national soft power, through capitalising on their manufacturing capabilities. In particular, both China and Russia have sought to win praise for their 'donations' to Western nations on the frontline of the pandemic, creating photo opportunities and 'media moments' as they handed over thousands of much-needed gowns, visors, gloves and masks.[12] In time, much of this equipment would be found to be faulty or to ultimately come with a bill;[13] however, public opinion analysis suggests that the impact on ordinary citizens' opinions towards these states has been tangible.

In Bulgaria, for example, where donations by the Chinese state and the Chinese diaspora in Bulgaria were well-publicised,[14] public opinion towards China has remained largely stagnant, compared to a sharp decline across much of the rest of Europe.[15] Furthermore, in Italy, which received PPE, ventilators and medical experts from China in the early stages of the pandemic, perceptions of China improved dramatically. Surveys have found that 63% of Italians have either ameliorated or maintained positive views towards China during the pandemic, and 25% of Italians now believe that China has been their greatest ally in tackling the coronavirus pandemic – considerably higher than any other European nation surveyed.[16]

These efforts amongst authoritarian states to build credibility in times of desperation have unsettled liberal nations, and exacerbated frustrations with China in particular, as the source of the pandemic itself. Given the nature of relations between the United States and China in the months preceding the crisis, it came as no surprise that the American President, Donald Trump, sought to leverage attention on the origins of COVID-19 – insisting on referring to the novel coronavirus a the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese virus",[17] and consistently asserting that the pandemic is the result of China's ineptitude or intentional malice.[18] In turn, prominent figures in the Chinese state have promoted unfounded rumours that the virus was engineered in the United States, and intentionally spread to China to damage the nation's global reputation.[19]

Authoritarian states have also sought to proactively seize on this moment of global dysfunction to spread instability in the Western alliance.[20] China, Russia and Iran, in particular, have been at the centre of global disinformation campaigns, attempting to leverage the pandemic as an opportunity to sow seeds of discontent abroad, and bolster their own geopolitical ambitions.[21] Through social and online media, these disinformation campaigns have gathered an alarming reach,[22] forcing social media companies[23] and international organisations, such as the United Nations,[24] to increase their efforts to tackle online misinformation.

In short, the early phase of the pandemic was characterised by Western states pursuing distinct national policies to control the spread of the coronavirus, and falling into competition over limited resources monopolised in the manufacturing centres of less developed and/or authoritarian states. At the same time, the 'great power competition' metastasising between China and the United States has been exacerbated, due to the particular nature of the pandemic's origins in China, and efforts from both sides to control the global narrative in their favour. This specific set of circumstances set the stage for the pandemic to act as an accelerant of existing geopolitical trends, in which the growing influence and belligerence of authoritarian states has been matched by the fragmentation brewing within the Western liberal alliance.

In this paper, we set out how these trends have manifested within multilateralism and global institutions, and how key issues around the response and consequences of the pandemic will create new opportunities, and risks, for liberal interests and Western cooperation.

Multilateralism and Global Institutions

The World Health Organisation

The World Health Organisation (WHO), a specialised agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health, has stood at the centre of the global response to the coronavirus. However, in the early stages of the pandemic, the WHO received extensive criticism for its failure to respond quickly and effectively to the outbreak. The WHO, which is led by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, whose election was supported by China,[25] reinforced the Chinese government's official statements – including declaring in mid-January that there was "no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission" of COVID-19[26] . Furthermore, the WHO did not declare COVID-19 to be a 'pandemic' until mid-March, by which time there were 118,000 cases and 4291 deaths[27] – a decision which some governments now regard as having contributed to inordinate delays in implementing national lockdowns, at the cost of many further lives.[28]

In part, this slow response is a result of the World Health Organisation's structures. At present, the WHO relies on nations notifying it about emerging viruses, something which nations may be reluctant to do, due to concerns about potential reputational damage through allegations of negligence and incompetence. Critics, including former UK Prime Minister David Cameron,[29] have, therefore, argued that the disincentives built into the reporting system, and the diplomatic sensitivities around potentially alienating China, significantly constrained the speed and effectiveness of the WHO's response to the pandemic.[30] Responding to such allegations, the World Health Organisation, after a vote by the World Health Assembly in May, resolved to initiate an independent evaluation of lessons learned from the global response to COVID-19.[31]

Although the WHO failed to halt the early spread of the pandemic, it shifted into gear and began to mobilise as the pandemic progressed. As of the time of publication, the WHO has procured, and shipped, PPE to 172 nations, and deployed nearly 180 emergency medical teams to the areas most in need.[32] These acts have primarily been supported by its COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, which has, thus far, received donations totalling over $230 million from almost 650,000 individuals, companies and philanthropies, including major international corporations such as Facebook, Google and Walmart. The funding has been used to distribute essential commodities, fund vaccine research and development, and support vulnerable communities, including refugees.[33]

The WHO has also helped to lead efforts to find solutions regarding the 'best practice' for treating the disease and optimising medical interventions, by collectively pooling resources and sharing knowledge. It ran the 'Solidarity' Trial, alongside its partners, to help identify an effective treatment for COVID-19. By recruiting over 5000 participants from over 20 nations, the Solidarity Trial aimed to reduce the time taken for randomised clinical trials to be completed, by up to 80%.[34] The Solidarity Trial has since been extended to the search for a vaccine as well, with the WHO supporting the simultaneous evaluation of multiple vaccines to increase the chances of finding a successful vaccine.[35] Underpinning these efforts is a belief in finding collaborative solutions to the pandemic which will "foster international deployment with equity of access".[36]

This doctrine has underpinned a wide range of the WHO's pandemic initiatives. It has also sought to ensure that the medical response to the pandemic is equitable, and launched the 'Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator', to ensure that any COVID-19 diagnostic tools, treatments and vaccines are affordable and available to all states, despite their stage of development.[37] The ACT accelerator aims to provide equal access to vaccines through its

COVAX facility, which hopes to procure two billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2021, mainly for developing and middle-income nations. The ACT accelerator has received $5 billion in funding from both public and private donors, including over $1 billion from the United Kingdom, and has access to a further $4.8 billion in COVAX Self-Financing Participant down payments.[38]

Given the heterogeneity of state-level responses, the WHO has also acted as a centralised hub for information, giving public statements, providing guidance and working to combat the spread of misinformation. It now provides 115 courses in 38 languages, deploying advice and training, to both individuals and governments, on how to respond to the pandemic.[39] For many citizens, the WHO appears as a neutral, scientifically led source of information about the pandemic, and a benchmark from which to assess their government's guidelines, as well as a model for their own individual behaviour. As such, when it released guidance in June that face masks should be worn in public whenever social distancing is not possible,[40] the WHO helped to facilitate a wider societal change around the use of face masks, particularly in nations such as the UK, where there had previously been little appetite for wearing masks and government advice was ambiguous.[41]

However, the WHO's ability to manage the pandemic and the efficacy of its information provision is undermined by the fact it is imbued with relatively little power in terms of governance accountability. Unlike other bodies such as the WTO or the UN, it cannot impose sanctions, and instead can only provide 'guidance' to governments.[42] It is also significantly under-resourced, with a budget of just $2.5billion a year, and it has failed to secure adequate funding for many of the initiatives required to achieve a collective global response to the pandemic.[43] For context, in 2018/19 the NHS had a budget of £115 billion.[44]

The failure of the WHO to respond quickly and effectively, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, encouraged President Trump – already a multilateralism sceptic – to withdraw the United States from the organisation. Donald Trump accused the WHO of misleading the world on the coronavirus, declaring that "China has total control over the World Health Organisation". American officials outlined the reforms they deemed necessary for the WHO to become a more effective and more independent body in April,[45] and cited the WHO's refusal to commit to those reforms in America's subsequent withdrawal from the Organisation.[46] As President, Donald Trump has frequently criticised a range of multilateral institutions, and his decision to withdraw the United States from the WHO should be viewed within the context of the nation's escalating conflict with China, as well as the President's personal mistrust and scepticism towards such global organisations.

Nonetheless, this decision has profoundly impacted the tenor of the global pandemic response. Beyond general criticism of international organisations, which is perhaps to be expected in a time of global crisis, the choice of the United States to withdraw has fundamentally challenged the claim of the WHO to act as a truly global organisation, and exposed vulnerabilities in its funding structure.[47] Global health experts have also warned that the United States' departure may trigger a wider exodus from other nations, led by anti-establishment figures which share the former President's cynicism towards global governance.

Most pressingly for the United States' Western allies, there are concerns that China will seek to fill the leadership void in the WHO left by America's withdrawal, which will make it more difficult to secure the reforms to the organisation that many states wish to see, and ensure the direct of the organisation supports liberal interests. During his election campaign, President-elect Joe Biden pledged to restore funding to the WHO, which, if delivered, could help to avert a significant funding and legitimacy crisis within the Organisation[48] – although broader questions will remain regarding its structure, responsiveness and cohesion moving forward.

The United Nations

In 2020, the United Nations (UN) has been focused on responding to a range of secondary issues emerging from the pandemic. A central tenet of the UN's work has been to support nations' capacity to respond to the socio-economic challenges presented by the coronavirus, and assisting them to rebuild in a more resilient manner, in the pandemic's aftermath. UN country teams have supported governments in building national response plans, which have been finalised in 69 nations, and are under way in a further 50 nations.[49]

Among more fragile states, the UN has also deployed resources towards tackling the significant humanitarian crises that have emerged from the pandemic, formulating a Global Humanitarian Response Plan. The Plan aims to prevent the deterioration of rights and social cohesion during the pandemic and to protect vulnerable communities, including refugees. The UN has provided food, medicine and water, produced policy briefs to support governments' decision-making, and called for a global ceasefire to minimise the compound risk from escalating conflict.[50] As of October, the United Nations' response team had raised $3.24billion in funding, although it still requires a further $6.9billion to meet the requirements of the Plan.[51] It is also important to note that the UN has also sought to address humanitarian crises during the pandemic, particularly in developing nations, through the IMF and the World Bank – a significant example of multilateral institutions seeking to pool their resources.

Another area that the UN has sought to address this year has been the rampant spread of health misinformation. Through its 'Verified' campaign, a group of ordinary citizens across the world are given regular content updates with the latest guidance from UN agencies, which they are encouraged to share among their friends and family. 18,000 citizens globally have signed up, and the content shared through these networks is estimated to have cumulatively reached 400 million people worldwide.[52] A number of major international corporations, media, and social media sites such as Facebook, TikTok and Al Jazeera have also signed up to the initiative.[53]

Nonetheless, like many other global institutions, the United Nations' ability to act during the pandemic has been constrained by in-fighting between its members – in this case, among the P5 members of the UN Security Council. UN Secretary-General Guterres, called for a global ceasefire in March to ensure aid could reach the most vulnerable communities and prevent the spread of COVID-19. By the end of April, this motion had been endorsed by 114 governments and 200 civil and religious organisations. However, the Security Council did not adopt the resolution until July, due to debates between the United States and China over whether to reference the WHO in the resolution.[54] The former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon criticised the stasis, arguing that the UNSC had wasted "valuable months" and "weakened the message", to significant cost.[55]

Furthermore, although the UN's advice has been heeded in some conflict settings, in a number of others – including Yemen and Afghanistan – conflict has continued to escalate throughout this fragile period.[56] There are concerns that the pandemic will only serve to exacerbate these volatile environments, precipitating greater instability, which will in turn compel greater attention and resources from the UN in the longer term.[57]

Like the WHO, the UN's response to COVID-19 has also been hampered by a lack of resources, and the Global Humanitarian Response Plan remains significantly underfunded. As of early December, the plan had received just 40% of the funding it requires.[58] This, combined with the stasis generated by in-fighting between its members, has greatly limited the ability of the UN to swiftly and effectively coordinate a global response to the pandemic. Although the UN's actions have delivered some genuinely transformative support, particularly in fragile states and situations of humanitarian disaster, it has failed to cultivate a common sense of purpose amongst its members to fulfil its ambitions, and its potential, during a time of genuine crisis.

The IMF and the World Bank

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the two primary sources of international financial support, have sought to provide economic assistance to lower-income nations to mitigate the devastating economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis.

The IMF, which works to foster global monetary cooperation, trade and financial stability, has opened up $1 trillion in lending capacity, and doubled access to its emergency facilities. As of November 2020, the IMF had received calls from over 100 governments seeking emergency financing, and financing has been approved for 76 nations. The IMF has also extended debt service relief to 29 nations through its Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust and established a Short-term Liquidity Line to support more stable nations who need short-term balance of payments support.[59]

Jointly with the World Bank, the IMF also called for a pause to debt service repayments for the world's poorest nations at the start of the pandemic. The G20 has since agreed to a Debt Service Suspension Initiative, suspending debt repayments to official bilateral creditors for 73 low-to-lower-middle income nations, should they request it.[60]

The World Bank, for its part, has announced it will be providing up to $160 billion in financing over 15 months to help deal with the health, economic and social shocks from the coronavirus pandemic. It is also redeploying resources in existing World Bank-financed projects, to enable nations to respond to shocks. By May, its initiatives to fight COVID-19 had reached 100 developing nations, which are together home to 70% of the world's population.[61]

However, both international financial institutions have received significant criticism for their failure to effectively mobilise for lower-income nations during the pandemic. Most notably, while the World Bank and IMF have extensively publicised the significant increases in their lending capacity, they have yet to fully utilise this capacity. As of November 2020, the IMF had made lending commitments of just $280 billion out of its $1 trillion lending capacity[62] and projections suggest that the World Bank's emergency funding commitments will total $79billion by June 2021, significantly below its $104 billion target.[63] Furthermore, while new loan commitments by the World Bank increased 118% in the first seven months of 2020, actual disbursements increased just 31%, less than half of the monthly increase in disbursements that occurred during the global financial crisis. As such, many lower-income nations are still facing significant gaps in bridge funding.[64]

In addition, the financial support offered by the IMF and the World Bank is offered in the form of loans, which will leave developing nations in significant debt for years to come. The 76 lowest income nations collectively carry $573 billion in debt, and are due to pay $41 billion to service those debts in 2020.[65] With economies shrinking, and increased domestic demands on the state, developing nations are facing a liquidity crisis. Four nations have already defaulted on debt repayments, and more are expected to follow, likely precipitating record levels of debt defaults.[66] The World Bank and the IMF have therefore called for the G20's Debt Service Suspension initiative to be extended through to the end of 2021, over concerns that developing nations are needing to sacrifice investment in health and education to service debt repayments.[67]

The IMF's lending capacity has, in part, been undermined by the fact that its proposal for a $500 billion issuance through Special Drawing Rights (SDR) – through which the IMF would issue its own internal currency that could be exchanged for hard currency reserves[68] – has been blocked by the United States.[69] The proposal was designed by the IMF to provide billions of dollars to poorer nations, to meet the costs of health and social care during the pandemic. President Trump rejected the proposal for failing to target poorer nations and due to concerns that states such as China, which the United States views as malign, would have access to SDRs. However, during the global financial crisis and when President-elect Joe Biden was Vice-President, he was supportive of a similar proposal, and the IMF is hopeful that under Biden's leadership, the United States – which holds a de facto veto within the IMF – would cease to block the move.[70]

Both the IMF and the World Bank have also recently expressed concern about their financial sustainability. Particularly concerning are remarks made by the IMF Managing Director, Kristalina Georgieva, that the IMF needs further contributions from nations, if it is to continue extending its loans to the developing world during the pandemic. Without this funding injection, loan terms would have to become less concessional and impose shorter repayment periods.[71] Financial constraints have also played a role in the decision by both institutions not to participate in the G20's debt standstill initiative (DSSI), which means developing nations are still repaying debts to these organisations during the pandemic, limiting their capacity to fund economic stimulus initiatives at home.[72]

There are also broader debates about the IMF's policies and ethos, which have been exasperated by the greater role in global financing that it has assumed during the pandemic. While IMF emergency funding has primarily been allocated through its Rapid Credit Facility, which does not impose structural adjustment conditionality, there are concerns that the IMF will seize this crisis as an opportunity to do so in the future. During the global financial crisis, the IMF pushed austerity policies and fiscal consolidation on states within two years of the crisis,[73] and research suggests that 72 nations that received IMF emergency funding during the pandemic will be expected to begin fiscal consolidation in 2021. A number of prominent economists have raised concerns that doing so would damage these nations' recovery, encouraging deep cuts to their public sectors, and potentially exasperating inequalities.[74] Hundreds of civil society organisations and academics have since signed a letter calling for the IMF to cease promoting austerity policies during the pandemic,[75] although others argue that financial prudence will be essential in the pandemic's wake.[76]

The recovery plans proposed by international financial institutions have largely avoided incorporating measures that could have addressed fundamental structural inequalities, which some international charities believe has been a missed opportunity. In particular, Oxfam has criticised the fact that despite WHO guidance to suspend user fees in the health sector, only 8 out of 71 World Bank COVID-19 projects included plans to address healthcare user fees, despite 80% of project nations having healthcare fees above the WHO's recommended 'safe' level.[77]

As such, despite grand visions for extensive lending to support lower-income nations during the pandemic, the support given so far by the IMF and the World Bank has been tempered by inefficiencies and caution. In part, this is due to the failure of higher-income nations to support the measures required by these institutions; but is also a result of the extensive and burdensome bureaucracy within them. While it is essential to ensure that emergency financing is applied effectively and sustainably, the slow speed of this evaluation process has prevented timely responses to the pandemic, and left many lower-income nations facing significant economic difficulties.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

The role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in addressing the pandemic was not immediately clear. In the early phases, it remained focus on the 'bread and butter' of its existing missions, which raised questions regarding its conceptual flexibility, in also considering the pandemic itself as a security crisis. As the geopolitical ramifications of the pandemic quickly became clear, with two of the West's primary strategic rivals in Russia and China seeking to leverage the crisis to their own ends,[78] there was a sense that perhaps the security apparatus had not been able to effectively harness its strategic foresight to anticipate the complex and layered impacts of non-military risks associated with the pandemic, and its consequences for international relations.

With a degree of agility not seen in many other institutions, NATO quickly changed course, and has since supported the largest peacetime military deployment in history to tackle the pandemic.[79] The Euro-Atlantic Disasters Response Coordination Centre within NATO has played an increasingly central role in coordinating support for specific nations in need. For example,

during the first wave of the pandemic, Italy and Spain used the mechanism to request support for the provision of medical supplies, equipment and disinfectants from a range of nations, including Germany, Luxembourg and Turkey.[80]

The Rapid Air Mobility initiative has also been used to ease the process of coordinating military relief flights, and through the Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS) programme, nations have been able to charter commercial transport aircrafts to airlift supplies to one another.[81] By May 2020, NATO had flown over 100 missions of transport, medical personnel and supplies.[82] During Europe's second wave of coronavirus, NATO has been particularly effective in distributing ventilators from its medical stockpile to provide relief to smaller nations in the European neighbourhood.[83] NATO has also helped to build field hospitals and assisted over-run civilian facilities,[84] including transporting a field hospital from Europe to Ghana, with the support of the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force.[85]

However, while NATO has successfully recalibrated the support it provides Member States in order to meet the health risks posed by the pandemic, its direct involvement in the pandemic has been relatively small in the context of other forms of bilateralism and multilateralism. For example, while NATO coordinated seven acts of solidarity with Italy at the start of the pandemic, the Chinese state alone coordinated 13. Furthermore, both Italy and Spain, which were hit particularly hard at the start of the pandemic, received significantly larger shipments of masks from China than from NATO, although it later emerged that many of the masks received from China were faulty. To some degree, the missions that NATO was able to complete to support members succeeded against the odds, with NATO's own Operations Division even admitting it was ill-prepared to tackle the crisis.[86]

In the longer term, while the pandemic has shown that the alliance can adapt, and has the potential to meet new and evolving global risks, it has also shone light on difficulties the organisation was already facing – particularly in terms of its financing. European nations' contributions to NATO's budget has been a point of contention during Donald Trump's presidency, and although President-elect Joe Biden has referred to NATO as the "most significant military alliance in the world",[87] he has also called on Europe to "recommit to their responsibilities" and take greater leadership, including financially, of the organisation.[88] However, with the pandemic pushing many nations into recession, it is reasonable to expect that defence budgets may face cuts – or at least, with the exception of the United Kingdom, to remain static – ensuring the issue of NATO's financial pressures remain a source of friction.[89]

As such, despite having some degree of success in responding to coronavirus, the pandemic has rendered the future of NATO more uncertain. NATO will have to continue to work to adapt to the challenges posed by coronavirus and to show its value and strength to its members in order to secure its post-pandemic future.

The G20

The 2008 financial crash led to the formation of the G20 in its current incarnation, and precipitated a swift response from the alliance. As such, there was a clear desire amongst its constituent nations for the G20 to show similar leadership during the coronavirus pandemic. G20 leaders – including the United Kingdom – quickly established a meaningful discourse via video calls, agreeing in March to assess gaps in pandemic preparedness and increase funding for research and development into vaccines and medicines. The joint communiqué released by the Group after this early meeting stated that the pandemic was "a powerful reminder of our interconnectedness and vulnerabilities" and committed to "presenting a united front against this common threat".[90] The G20 further reaffirmed this ambition in April 2020, with leaders committing to ensuring the continued flow of food and inputs for food production, and preventing the introduction of unnecessary trade barriers.[91]

1. Multilateralism and Global Institutions

The G20 Action Plan was approved in April, which called for the implementation of a $200 billion package of global support from the World Bank Group and regional development banks. Leaders also agreed to suspend debt repayments from the world's poorest nations, approved an enhanced International Monetary Fund (IMF) support package and committed to more joined-up efforts to fight the pandemic.[92]

Nonetheless, the G20's response has not been universally regarded as satisfactory. A letter penned in April to the G20 nations, and signed by over 200 former world leaders, including former UK Prime Ministers, sharply criticised the collective response.[93] In particular, the G20 has been criticised for failing to provide adequate funds to support global solutions to the pandemic, and to support developing nations. For example, the IMF predicted that lower-income nations would require $2.5 trillion to see them through the crisis, but thus far, only a fraction of that sum has been raised.[94] Furthermore, the international aid that is available has taken months to reach nations requiring immediate help – an issue compounded by the failure to regularly convene the G20 during the pandemic.[95]

In June, former world leaders once again spoke out against about the failure of the G20 to hold a second coronavirus-related meeting, and to take leadership in coordinating a global response to COVID-19. The letter they published again argued that aid was too slow to reach nations in need, and called for the G20 to ensure that the IMF receives the $2.5 trillion it needs to deliver sufficient coronavirus support globally.[96] UN Secretary-General António Guterres also raised concerns about the G20's actions in October, arguing that it is "very frustrating" that the G20 did not listen to his calls for a "war-time" plan, including a coordinated global stimulus package worth trillions of dollars.

In October, despite vowing "to do whatever it takes to support the global economy", the G20 continued to largely confine its response to debt suspension. Nations agreed to extend the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) by six months, and signed up to a framework for debt restructuring, yet continued to reject calls – including an open letter from over 500 civil society organisations,[97] – to instigate a debt-cancellation process.[98] The impact of DSSI has so far been limited, as private creditors and multilateral organisations (including the IMF and World Bank) are not compelled to commit to the initiative. As a result, just $5 billion of 2020 debt service has been deferred[99] and the initiative has only covered 1.66% of debt payments due in 2020 across all developing nations.[100] Furthermore, to qualify for DSSI, nations must be in an IMF financing arrangement or have requested financing from the IMF, which the IMF has recognised has left some middle-income nations, which are facing severe falls in growth, in difficulty.[101]

The G20 finally reconvened at the head-of-state level in late November 2020, eight months after the first pandemic crisis meeting was held. The discussion focused primarily on ensuring affordable access to the coronavirus vaccine for poorer nations. However, despite committing to "spare no effort" to ensure an equitable distribution approach, no specific funding was pledged to achieve this objective – despite both the EU and the UN emphasising the need to fill a $4.5 billion funding shortfall. The G20 also did not agree to the request from the UN Secretary General Guterres, to extend the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative until the end of 2021, and instead promised to review the situation in Spring and see "if the economic and financial situation requires" that the initiative is extended again.[102]

The relatively muted leadership and weak economic response from the G20 this year stands in stark contrast to the G20's response to the 2008 financial crisis. Within two months, the G20 had convened in Washington and endorsed the 'Washington Declaration', in which nations agreed to a common set of principles to respond to the pandemic, including commitments to free market principles and to providing liquidity to unfreeze credit markets. Participants also committed at that time to ensuring that the World Bank and IMF have the resources required to assist developing nations through the crisis.[103]

While the coronavirus pandemic crisis is notably different from the financial crisis, in terms of both its structural origins and impact, both have borne significant repercussions for globally networked economies. Hence, despite their distinct consequences for global markets, supply chains and financing, there are questions to be asked, as we move into a new phase of the pandemic, as to why the political will to addressing the pandemic as a collective challenge has proven considerably more difficult to muster. It may well be that, despite the G20's swift mobilisation in the 2008 financial crisis, the bruising period of domestic political and social insecurity that has followed in its aftermath in many advanced nations, has shifted the goalposts for their governments' instincts towards forging global solutions.

The European Union

Although health policy is devolved to its Member States, the coronavirus pandemic has proven a significant challenge for the European Union (EU) project. Indeed, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel has described the coronavirus pandemic "the greatest test since [the EU's] foundation".[104] At the start of the pandemic, its Member States turned inwards, and became preoccupied within their individual responses to the rapidly escalating crisis. The EU's institutions were forced to play catch-up, reasserting their collective value through strengthening external borders and emphasising the bloc's collective bargaining power in a competitive global marketplace.

Irish Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar, criticised the initial EU response for failing to sponsor coordination between Member States, with nations instead responding in isolation as the effects of the virus were felt differently, and at varying speeds, across the EU.[105] Meanwhile the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, condemned European solidarity as a "non-existent…fairy tale on paper"[106] and the EU's Chief Scientist, Mauro Ferrari, resigned in April, citing frustrations with the EU's handling of the outbreak.[107]

The dysfunction was exacerbated by arguments over the preferred EU-level economic response to the crisis. Initially, the bloc was split between those nations such as France, Italy and Spain, which advocated for a Europe-wide common debt package (so-called 'corona bonds') and those more 'frugal' Member States, including the Netherlands and Germany, which opposed the idea, preferring instead to pursue a temporary relaxation of fiscal rules.

Since this initial period of tension and inertia, however, momentum has built towards a common economic response to the coronavirus crisis, and EU institutions and national governments have issued mea culpas for their early reactions. Indeed, Dutch Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra has said that in retrospect, "we – and myself included – should have made it more clear that we want to help [Southern Europe]. We didn't do that emphatically enough".[108] In April, the EU offered a "heartfelt apology" to Italy for its delayed response to the early surge in cases in one of its largest Member States.[109]

The European Union went on to propose using the bloc's Multiannual Financial Framework to finance a pan-European response to the crisis. Eurozone nations would be permitted to borrow money, without the imposition of austerity measures – as was the case following the 2008 financial crisis – to be used for necessary emergency spending to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.[110] A pan-European guarantee fund to secure loans would allow the European Investment Bank to ensure liquidity for small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU. Additionally, an EU-wide scheme to financially support those nations that wish to help employers retain staff throughout the economic downturn was proposed.[111]

Eurozone Finance Ministers met via video conference on 7 April 2020, but ultimately failed to reach a consensus, with Italy resisting any conditions attached to ECB loans, and the Netherlands, Austria and Finland leading those that argued for loans to only be spent directly on fighting COVID-19.[112] Another area of contention pertained to whether or not the debt should be mutualised, whereby all members would contribute to paying for the response.[113]

In the end, the EU endorsed a €540 billion package of safety nets on 23 April. This included €240 billion in pandemic crisis support for Member States through the European stability mechanism, €200 billion through a pan-EU guarantee fund for loans for companies through the European Investment Bank, and €100 billion to mitigate unemployment risks. Core EU funds have also been redirected, with €3.1 billion unlocked from the 2020 budget, €37 billion from structural funds being redirected, and up to €800 million being made available through the EU Solidarity Fund. Member States can also request up to 100% financing from the EU budget for initiatives to respond to the outbreak.[114]

In addition, in mid-July, the European Union agreed an unprecedented €750 billion stimulus fund, comprised of a combination of €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans. Discussions were, however, fraught, and lasted for the second-longest period of any EU negotiations in its history. In particular, four nations – Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Austria - nicknamed the 'Frugal Four' wanted to reduce the proportion of the funds given in grants, while others – such as Spain and Italy, who have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic – wanted to secure the greatest financial support possible. In the end, the proportion of the fund given in grants was negotiated down from the proposed €500 billion to €390 billion.[115] The EU also agreed a €1.1 trillion budget for 2021-2027 at the meeting.

In November, the European Parliament set the 2021 EU budget at just under €182 billion, €15 billion more than the Commission's proposal. Of this colossal sum, €14 billion will be directed to increase funds for flagship programmes targeted at health workers, researchers and climate change.[116] However, at the time of publication, the 2021-2027 EU budget hangs in the balance, as the populist authoritarian governments in Hungary and Poland have sought to veto the budget and rescue package, over a clause that makes access to EU funds contingent on adherence to the rule of law.[117] As unanimous consent is required for the budget and recovery package to be approved, the two Member States hold significant leverage power. With other Member States, led by the Netherlands, advocating for stronger values-based links to funds and refusing to approve a bill without this clause, the release of EU funds to its Member States will be further delayed until an agreement can be reached.[118]

Beyond funding and economic support, the EU has also helped in the wider response to the pandemic, particularly in the production and movement of resources. After a dysfunctional start, the EU has leveraged the crisis as an opportunity to emphasise its enduring significance to its Member States. For example, the EU institutions have worked with industries to convert production and increase the supply of medical equipment, regulated exports of PPE to ensure all Member States have sufficient supply, and created priority lanes to ensure the free circulation of goods and people.[119]

In October, the EU agreed a coordinated approach to restrictions on movement within the bloc, through a coded map outlining the threat level in different regions. While Member States will still able to devise their own strategies regarding the restrictions they impose, they agreed to mutual recognition of tests, and to the provision of clear and timely information about any restrictions that would be imposed. The initiative is designed to "bring more order to a currently confusing situation" and to enable a swifter return to free movement within the EU, without jeopardising progress on controlling the spread of the virus.[120]

The pandemic has also led the EU to rethink its health provision for its Member States. The EU Commission has outlined proposals, which aim to strengthen the existing legal framework for serious cross-border threats to health, to reinforce crisis preparedness by shoring up the European Union's health agencies, and to improve data reporting and surveillance within the health sector.[121] The EU is also harnessing its coronavirus stimulus package to facilitate a 'green recovery', with 30% of the EU's €750 billion coronavirus recovery package being devoted to climate-friendly projects.[122] These approaches signal the emphasis President von der Leyen is placing on demonstrating the added value of EU membership, and the protective and transformative capacities of the EU's institutions.

Nonetheless, the legacy of the EU's slow initial response and the friction generated during debates around its financial package represents a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the European project – a challenge already becoming visible in public opinion. Just 16% of Italians believe that the actions taken by the EU have been sufficient,[123] with the proportion of Italians now supporting the nation's departure from the European Union climbing to 42%, up from 26% in November 2018.[124] These frustrations are echoed, although somewhat less ardently, across the EU as a whole, with 52% of Europeans believing that its response has been insufficient, 69% agreeing that they would like to see the EU do more, and 60% believing that Member States had not shown enough solidarity during the crisis.[125]

The EU's early stumbles in responding to the pandemic were watched closely by China and Russia, who have both sought to leverage their access to pandemic equipment and manufacturing advantages to cultivate influence within the region.[126] The supplies sent by China and Russia during the early stages of the pandemic were met with much fanfare by local media and even local governments, and received a largely positive reception among the European public.[127] In April, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić declared that "European solidarity does not exist" and reached out to China for support. China responded by sending over plane-loads of equipment and six experts, which have led Serbia's coronavirus response. Russia followed by providing medical equipment, particularly disinfectant.[128]

The EU, in turn, has argued that the aid was also accompanied by a disinformation campaign led by authoritarian states, which aimed to sow distrust in the West and undermine democratic legitimacy.[129] It has sought to raise awareness of the scale and long-term nature of its investments in fragile democracies,[130] and is working hard to restore European solidarity, and to limit the attention given to external influence operations. In President von der Leyen's State of the Union address, she emphasised that the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic presented an opportunity for renewal, and declared that this is "the moment for Europe to lead the way from the fragility towards a new vitality".[131]

The D10

The pandemic has intensified debates around the legitimacy and efficiency of many existing international organisations, but it has also generated calls for the formation of new global coalitions and alliances. In particular, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the global reliance on Chinese supply chains and manufacturing capabilities, and the vulnerabilities this may present to the fundamental resilience of democracies.[132]

One idea that has begun to gain traction has been the notion of the formation of an alliance of democracies – the D10 – which would add India, Australia and South Korea to the existing G7 community of industrialised democracies. The UK Government has made clear that it recognises the potential for such an alliance to unite around the common threat posed by China's rising dominance in the provision of digital infrastructure[133] – an issue that has gained significant traction in 2020, alongside the broader concerns that have been escalating regarding China's behaviour during the pandemic. The D10 alliance, it is hoped, would help facilitate collective policy on critical national infrastructure, and produce state-market hybrid solutions to challenge China's competitiveness and strengthen security in the Indo-Pacific region[134] – although it is important to note that many of these nations currently hold vastly different approaches to Chinese diplomatic and economic engagement.

The concept of a D10 grouping is not new, although it has never met at the senior leadership level. Since 2014, the Atlantic Council has been convening 'Track 1.5 dialogues' between analysts and policy-makers within the D10 nations, and a significant degree of consensus has been found towards a series of shared challenges – from climate change to protecting democracy, and the threats posed by Russia and China to the liberal world order. The commonalities expressed within these Track 1.5 dialogues have indicated that there is potential for the scope of the D10 initiative to be extended beyond a narrow focus on mitigating China's dominance in digital infrastructure.[135]

This question of resolving the scope of the D10 remains in its infancy. Suggestions for a range of potential roles for the D10 include the future regulation of international financial markets, the governance of cyberspace and coordinating multilateral sanctions.[136] Particular attention has been made to the possible role that the D10 could play in maintaining and upholding international laws and conventions, with former NATO Secretary-General, Andres Fogh Rasmussen, calling for the D10 to fill the vacuum left by the United States' global retreat under the leadership of Donald Trump, and restore the primacy of international law and order.[137] The EU has also recognised that the model could have potential in supporting the recovery from the pandemic, while extending and safeguarding democratic values.[138] The suggestion has been made that, should the initial focus on technology provision prove successful, there may also be scope for a greater trading and research relationship between the D10 nations as well.[139]

Aside from the D10's proposed focus on balancing against China's rise, there have also been calls for the D10 to act more broadly "as a steering committee of the democratic core of the rules-based global system".[140] Authoritarianism, of course, is not confined to the Chinese Communist Party, and the spread of non-democratic governance remains a troubling trend across the Asia Pacific region and within many other parts of the world. There is some evidence that leaders have sought to harness the pandemic as a means of undermining democratic freedoms.[141] In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the D10 could help to advocate for the transition to reducing emergency powers and easing restrictions as the pandemic subsides and, more broadly, it could work to strengthen coordination among democracies during a period in which the supremacy of the democracy model of governance is being challenged.[142]

The election of President-elect Joe Biden in the United States may provide some grist to the mill to the realisation of the D10. In his campaign manifesto, Joe Biden pledged to hold a global summit for democracy within his first year in office, to generate solutions to shared challenges such as the economic shocks of the pandemic,[143] and gain commitments from leaders on fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights.[144] UK aides have stated that they see opportunities to combine President-elect Biden's summit and advancing their interest in the D10 proposal[145] during the UK's leadership of the G7 in 2021, which could see the D10 taking on a broad and significant role in global leadership within the next few years.

These ambitions of course raise the question as to how the D-10 will interact with other existing alliances – whether in security, defence, trade or diplomacy. Many of the proposed members of the D-10 are also members of other, smaller alliances such as the 'Quad' or the 'Five Eyes', and are becoming increasingly involved in new trading alliances – such as the RCEP, which of course also includes China itself, and the renewed interest in the CPTPP. There is no reason why the D10 couldn't exist alongside these groupings, or even identify means of engaging with them directly, but their existence will need to be acknowledged as part of the argument for the distinct value of the D10's own ratification.

The other major conceptual issue to resolve before the D-10 can transition from an ambition to reality is the question about the constitution of its membership. After a long period of democratic expansion, the 'democratic backsliding' that has been taking place in fragile, emerging and developed democratic nations over recent years has complicated the definitional power of 'democracy' as a singularly meaningful term. The European Union, a project of peace, which precipitated an economic union and now a political commitment towards shared values and priorities, has itself struggled with the challenges of upholding accession criteria amongst its Member States; it is clearly more difficult to remove existing members, even in the face of egregious violations to the Rule of Law, than to prevent their acceptance in the first place. Those advocating for a D10 with the flexibility to respond to evolving threats and opportunities will need to consider whether it is better to prioritise the collective power of a strict membership criteria, or the agility of a looser definition in which 'shared interests' may supersede 'shared values'.

2.

Shared Global Challenges

Vaccine Development

As of early December, there have been over 60 million cases of COVID-19 and nearly one and half million people have lost their lives from infection.[146] Many more have lost their lives in the other health crises exasperated by the pandemic – including declines in physical and mental health,[147] and the lack of medical capacity to address longer-term medical conditions.[148] There is, therefore, immense pressure to develop a vaccine in record time, and to undertake dramatic exercises in state supply chain management to deploy and vaccinate national populations. Progress on both of these areas has been extremely positive and multiple vaccines have been found to offer a high degree of efficacy.[149] On 2 December, the UK Government became the first Western government to licence a coronavirus vaccine after approving the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for rollout by early-mid December.[150]

Yet, it is already clear from these early announcements that the issue of vaccine production and deployment will continue to play into the heightened geopolitical climate and the asymmetrical challenges of national governance that have characterised the first phase of the pandemic thus far.[151] There are tensions between the need for nations to prioritise their own citizens, and the efforts to collaborate across nations to find vaccines and treatments as quickly as possible and ensure widespread distribution – in a climate where vaccine development success offers the opportunity to gain significant soft power and geopolitical advantages.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the few examples of cross-nation collaborations to find health solutions to the pandemic were proven to be effective. Despite the concerns that persist in the international community regarding the nation's transparency at the beginning of the pandemic, China eventually shared the genomic sequence of COVID-19, and there were a number of prominent examples of both nations and private corporations sharing information with traditional rivals, to help speed up the development of a vaccine. In March, for example, Donald Trump announced that he had secured assurances from top pharmaceutical companies to work together to find a vaccine and treatments for coronavirus[152] and in April, pharmaceutical companies GSK and Sanofi brought together their technologies to collaborate on creating a coronavirus vaccine.[153] As has been discussed earlier in the paper, after a sclerotic start, global leaders ultimately pledged €7.4 billion to support global efforts to find a coronavirus vaccine in May,[154] and the WHO launched the 'Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator' to ensure equal access to vaccines and treatments.[155]

However, the ambition towards collaboration quickly came under strain, with the ACT facing significant funding gaps, and major actors – including the United States, Russia and India – refusing to contribute towards the ACT and instead opting to 'go it alone'.[156] It is now being pitched as a 'global race' to find a coronavirus vaccine,[157] rather than a collaborative effort, with Russia naming its vaccine 'Sputnik V' – a nod to the world's first satellite, Sputnik, built during the Cold War space race.

For nations, whose research labs and pharmaceutical companies successfully generate a vaccine, the potential rewards are significant – not only for the health of their populations, but in both economic and geopolitical terms. In many of the nations where vaccines are being produced, governments have invested heavily for the guarantee of privileged access to vaccines. For example, the UK has been guaranteed the first 30 million doses of the vaccine generated by the University of Oxford, in return for its $79 million investment.[158] These nations, and others which have pre-ordered vaccines that turn out to be successful, will be able to start their journey to economic revival quicker than others, conferring a significant advantage. Producing the first successful vaccine also holds considerable soft power value, as an opportunity for nations to prove themselves as leaders in global health, research and innovation.

Russia's 'Sputnik V' was the first vaccine to be approved for rollout; however, it skipped the crucial Phase Three health trials in order to speed up the process – a move that was condemned by many international scientists as "reckless" and "unethical".[159] Russia has also been accused by the United Kingdom of attempting to hack, and either sabotage or steal, critical British vaccine research.[160] As such, there are growing concerns that Russia, and other states, are prioritising the geopolitical dividends of accelerated vaccine production, over the health of citizens in their own and other nations.[161] This is a particularly significant concern on a humanitarian level, given the dependence of developing nations on the vaccine production process in larger nations, and due to commitments made by Russia that its Sputnik V vaccine will be the cheapest available vaccine, which may mean developing nations disproportionately opt for the Russian vaccine.[162]

Now that the Western-led vaccines are beginning to gain regulatory approval, a new set of issues are certain to emerge relating to equalities of vaccine access. From the first stages of vaccine development, wealthier nations, including the UK, used their economic power to speculatively pre-order vaccines from a range of companies around the world, meaning that their citizens will be considerably more likely to receive the vaccine in the early aftermath of successful vaccine production.[163] This has led the WHO to raise concerns about the rise of 'vaccine nationalism' and asymmetrical distribution, calling instead for nations to recognise that "sharing finite supplies strategically and globally is actually in each country's national interest".[164]

Over half of the advance market commitments to secure early access to vaccines have been made by wealthy nations, with the United States pre-ordering over a billion vaccines, amounting to one-sixth of the global advance market commitments. Canada has the largest per-person stockpile, ordering 10 vaccines per person, while the UK has the third-largest at over five doses per person.[165]

With nations having been plunged into recession and now desperate to kick-start their economies again, the scramble to stockpile potential vaccines is unsurprising. After a gruelling year with the inglorious standing of having one of the world's highest per capita death tolls, having spent more money on responding to the vaccine, and experiencing one of the worst economic hits,[166] the United Kingdom's decision to fast-track approval for the Pfizer vaccine offers a chance to shift the narrative about the government's handling of the pandemic. More broadly, this opportunity to pull ahead of its Western counterparts has also arrived at a time when the United Kingdom stands on the precipice of leaving the European Union, and there is a strong political interest in demonstrating its national resilience and comparative strength.

However, the domestic political advantages being sought through vaccine nationalism competition between advanced nations could bear significant short- and long-term consequences for developing nations, which lack the bargaining power to participate in such processes. If developing nations are unable to access the same tools of recovery as wealthier nations, global poverty could become further entrenched – and the disruption that has been seen in global supply chains could continue to perpetuate, slowing the collective global economic recovery.

This trend of 'vaccine nationalism' understandably has precedent, given how important the security doctrine is in the political contract between citizens and their elected representatives. During the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, Australia – the first nation to find a vaccine – prohibited exports of the vaccine to the United States, until after its own order was fulfilled.[167] Wealthier nations went on to place large pre-orders of the vaccine, purchasing almost all the stock that manufacturers could produce. This led the WHO to run an appeal to developed nations and manufacturers to donate to developing nations – an effort that was somewhat successful, but which still led to developing nations only obtaining supplies after the worst of the pandemic had passed. The United States, for example, committed to donating 10% of its vaccine supplies to the WHO, yet later back-tracked on the promise, stating that it would only do so once all at-risk Americans had the vaccine due to vaccine shortages in America.[168]

Although many developing nations have so far avoided major outbreaks of the pandemic, the threat of the future spread of the virus into poorer nations continues to pose a major risk to populations and their health services. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, has roughly one doctor for every 5000 people, compared to one for every 300 people in Europe.[169] Health services are likely to be more quickly overwhelmed, not least of all, because many basic health facilities have closed due to the limited availability of PPE.

As in developed nations, the disruption to other medical services would bear significant consequences for public health; in many developing nations, the greatest concern lies in the disruption of other vaccination campaigns, which prevent the spread of other diseases already on the path to eradication.[170] There are also potential secondary risks to citizens, particularly women, through the impact of the pandemic on sexual and reproductive care. Difficulties accessing these services is likely to lead to a rise in unplanned pregnancies, maternal mortality and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as impeding support for victims of sexual and domestic violence.[171]

As such, the rise of vaccine nationalism, at the expense of international collaboration, should be taken seriously as a threat not only to good relations between liberal partners, but also because of the significant consequences it may pose for the developing world. If poorer nations are unable to get back on their feet, there may be lasting scars the advancement of global peace, security and prosperity.

The Economic Recovery

Beyond the costs the pandemic has posed to citizens' health, the government and private sector responses needed to contain the spread of the disease have also borne a substantial economic impact. The equivalent of 555 million full-time jobs were lost globally in the first half of 2020.[172] The Dow Jones Industrial Average and London's FTSE 100 dropped by 23% and 25% respectively in the first quarter of 2020, the biggest quarterly drops in 33 years.[173] Despite the IMF improving its economic forecast in October, in response to a better-than-expected economic performance by developed economies, global growth is still currently projected at -4.4% for the year. Growth is expected to rebound in 2021, but slow to around 3.5% into the medium term, leaving economic growth and output significantly below the levels predicted before the pandemic.[174]

The economic impact of the pandemic has been felt unevenly both within, and between, nations. Occupational segregation has meant that, as the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic have often been disproportionately reliant on labour from minority groups, minorities have been disproportionately affected by the economic consequences the pandemic.[175] In the United States, for example, the unemployment rate for white people in September was 7%, while for Black people it was 12.1% and for Hispanics it was 10.3%.[176]

Women are heavily employed in sectors such as leisure, domestic work and hospitality, which have been among the most vulnerable industries in the pandemic. Therefore, women have also been more likely than men to become unemployed. Moreover, women have borne the brunt of job cuts within sectors, making up 61% of job losses in America's retail sector, despite only representing 48% of the workforce – likely due to the higher concentration of women in lower level positions.[177] As a result, globally, women's employment is assessed to be almost 20% more likely to be at risk than men's employment during the pandemic, threatening decades of progress on addressing gender inequality.[178]

In the UK, the divergent regional economic impact of the pandemic has been particularly notable, with some towns reaching furlough rates of over 30%, while in others only just over 15% of people were furloughed. Cities such as Burnley, Slough and Sunderland were among those with the highest proportion of people furloughed, while university towns such as Cambridge, Oxford and Exeter had significantly fewer.[179] These differences reflect the fundamentally

asymmetrical nature of the economic structure of different regions in the United Kingdom, and this has in turn held consequences for the transmission of the disease itself. Less economically prosperous parts of the UK have consistently demonstrated poorer health outcomes amongst residents, and the high concentration of low-paid, human-facing roles in these areas proven a source of greater transmission risk.[180] The higher prevalence of the pandemic in poorer areas means towns and cities already carrying economic disadvantage are more likely to be trapped in longer periods of tougher restrictions on economic activity[181] – compelling the Government to announce programmes of rapid mass testing of populations to 'level the playing field'.[182]

As in the 2008 financial crisis, young people have been the on the frontline of the constraints the pandemic has placed on employment opportunities. In the UK, a quarter of 18-24 year olds were furloughed during the first phase of the pandemic, and one in three of this age group are now earning less than they were at the start of the pandemic.[183] Globally, one in six young people have stopped working since the start of the pandemic[184] and 98% of technical and vocational training has been closed or partially closed. Young people are therefore struggling to gain the training, qualifications or the employment experience they require to succeed in the job market, and to contribute to their national economy. This will affect their productivity and employability, as well as global output, well into the future.

Despite hopes for 'v-shaped' recoveries, the economic impacts of the pandemic will be felt for many years to come. Many businesses will never reopen, devastating individual and community outcomes, and accelerating the trend towards automation, which will carry its own disruptive potential for many workforces.

Developing nations have been particularly affected by the pandemic's economic turmoil, not only due to their relatively poor institutional health infrastructure, but also because they are more reliant within the global economy on sectors that have been most significantly impacted by the pandemic – such as tourism, contributing to disrupted supply chains, and on external finances, including remittances.[185] On average, in the two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging and developing economies grew by 4.1% annually. In 2020, real GDP is expected to decline in these nations by 3.3%. This decline in output is expected to cause an increase in incidences of extreme poverty for the first time in two decades, with up to 150 million more people in extreme poverty by 2021 compared to pre-pandemic predictions.[186]

Oxfam has warned that 12,000 people per day could die from hunger by the end of the year, more than those claimed by the virus itself.[187] The problem is multifaceted. The global recession triggered by the pandemic is expected to push half a billion people into poverty as many are left unemployed and as lower-income nations are often unable to afford social protection programmes to support these groups, many have been left struggling to afford food. This issue is compounded by disruption to food production, the escalation of conflicts, and the looming climate crisis.[188] The aid sector that provides the safety net to struggling nations has itself been suffering in the pandemic, as charity donations fall with the cancelling of fundraising events and decline of retail. Oxfam, for example, has lost £5 million a month from projected income from fundraising and retail events.[189]

The economic crisis affecting high-income nations has compromised the political and social will to support aid expenditure, with many facing difficult decisions with high unemployment and deprivation at home. In the United Kingdom, the Chancellor announced that the Government's 0.7% of GNI aid target would be temporarily reduced to 0.5% for an unspecified period, as economic pressures domestically could not justify such a considerable investment abroad.[190] It is true, however, that failing to invest in the recovery of developing nations will necessitate the deployment of even greater resources in the future, and threatens to unravel the gains that have been made through investments in areas such as education.

The global aid and development sector has been working for many years to highlight that providing every child with an education would boost GDP by 28% per year in lower-income nations.[191] With 24 million children expected to not return to school after the pandemic,[192]

there is an urgency to ensure that the advancements of recent decades are not set back too deeply. Over 160 nations worldwide have suspended educational activities at some stage during the pandemic in a bid to contain the spread of the virus.[193] In developing regions, where access to information and communications technology remains limited, the impact of schools closing has been especially profound. In Cameroon, for example, only 30% of the population has access to the necessary ICT to undertake online learning, meaning many are missing out on the benefits that education brings.[194]

The geopolitical implications of the financial impact of the pandemic are profound. Nations' capacity to recover from the pandemic on an economic level is entirely contingent on their capacity to manage, and ultimately suppress, the spread of the virus amongst their population. Despite being the origin of the virus and its primary epicentre, China has been one of the first nations to successfully control the spread of the virus and kick-start its economy again. As a result, and despite the economy shrinking 6.8% in the first quarter of 2020, China is the only major world power to have avoided a recession in 2020, with the economy growing 3.2% in the second quarter while the economies of other major powers continued to shrink.[195] China's role in the early stages of the pandemic has undoubtedly damaged its global reputation; yet, its effective management of the virus – often achieved through authoritarian means – will enable its leaders to take advantage of a superior economic position as the West endures a period of constrained growth.

Although the experience of the pandemic's financial impacts has been asymmetrical between highly developed nations, and between developed and developing nations, very few economies have emerged from 2020 unscathed. The significant costs for governments in addressing the health and social crises precipitated by the pandemic, and the efforts to create employment safety nets, have suppressed public finances and ushered in a new period of austerity and restraint. As a result, redistributive global economic cooperation has been minimal, and aid and development spending is likely to face a difficult period as national governments are compelled to focus their attentions at home.

Climate Change

In 2019, the global average temperature was 1.1°C above the pre-industrial period, making it the second-warmest year on record.[196] The Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that in order to keep the rise in global temperatures below 1.5°C this century, and prevent irreparable damage to global ecosystems, emissions must be cut by 45% by 2030.[197]

Successive climate agreements, including the Paris Climate Agreement, have compelled nations to commit to curbing climate emissions, in order to prevent global temperatures increasing to more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. However, the commitments made in 2015 are not sufficient to meet this target. The commitments were expected to be reviewed and updated at the COP26 conference hosted by the United Kingdom, which was scheduled to take place this year[198] – the conference has now been postponed until 2021, to allow states to "focus on fighting the immediate crisis of coronavirus".[199]

Scientists have warned of the dangers of governments diverting their focus away from climate change at a crucial junction.[200] At the UN General Assembly in October, island nations spoke of an "environmental Armageddon" and highlighted that for many island and developing nations, rising seas are a bigger threat to human life than coronavirus. They called for world powers not to abandon their financial commitments to fighting climate change during the pandemic.[201]

The immediate effect of the pandemic on global emissions has, however, been positive. Although analysts disagree on the exact figure, the International Energy Agency estimates that emissions will have fallen by approximately 8% in 2020, compared to 2019 levels[202] and energy demand was 3.8% lower in the first quarter of 2020 than at the same time last year.[203] Nonetheless, the

environmental benefits of this fall in emissions are not necessarily transformative, not least of all because reduced NOx emissions have been offset by falling SO2 emissions, which weaken the aerosol-cooling effect.[204]

Furthermore, considering the extent to which daily activities such as travel, as well as manufacturing, have been disrupted by the pandemic, it is perhaps surprising that the fall in emissions is not higher. In fact, the 8% reduction is similar to the annual reduction levels required anyway between 2020 and 2030 in order to avoid an increase in the global temperature.[205] If anything, the pandemic has shown how reducing consumption alone will not resolve climate change, and how investments in technology and innovation will be central to reaching climate targets.

There are also ways in which the pandemic may have set back progress against unsustainable materials, such as plastic, with experts warning that the damage caused by single-use plastics during the pandemic "would last forever".[206] Efforts to reduce the spread of coronavirus has increased the use of single-use plastic packaging and bags, as well as PPE and other medical equipment.[207] It is estimated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, every month 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves are now being used globally –contributing to a significant increase in the global consumption of single-use plastics.[208] Many governments have also postponed policies designed to reduce the use of single-use plastics, with the UK delaying its ban on plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds for several months to "avoid additional burdens for firms at this challenging time".[209]

The dramatic economic impacts of the pandemic do, however, present a critical opportunity to reshape advanced societies in a more environmentally sustainable manner. The investment decisions that governments make in their economic recovery packages will fundamentally shape the propensity for nations to collectively achieve the emission reductions necessary to halt the advancement of climate change, including their choices around support for low-carbon technologies and divestment from fossil fuels.[210]

The UK economic recovery package is one of the 'greenest', committing £3billion to climate action, including £2 billion in grants for home-efficiency upgrades and £1 billion for green measures in public buildings. £100 million has also been allocated for research into direct air capture.[211] However, it is also true that industries such as aviation and oil and gas – all of which have committed to a 'transition' – have been some of the biggest recipients of Bank of England support.[212] Meanwhile, in June, Germany announced a €130 billion economic recovery package, of which €50 billion will be used to address climate change, innovation and technology.[213] This included a €9 billion in green hydrogen and significant investments in public transport and electric vehicles.[214]

The European Union's €1.85trillion recovery package is also environmentally conscious. The package earmarks 30% of spending to be spent on climate protection, and states that all spending must not negatively impact efforts to cut emissions. For context, however, even the EU's extensive package has been branded insufficient, as it is well adrift from the €2.4 trillion investment that scientists say is needed to meet the EU's climate goals.[215]

Most concerning, across the G20 nations as a whole, is the fact that many of the stimulus packages announced to date are expected to impose a negative environmental impact.[216] The United States' $3 trillion stimulus plan announced under President Trump is particularly notable for its generous provisions towards oil and gas companies, with 37 fossil fuel companies claiming $1.9 billion in CARES Act tax benefits.[217] The American oil and gas industry has also been granted royalty relief, and environmental restrictions and reporting obligations have been eased for oil companies that state that their non-compliance is COVID-19 related.[218] It is expected that, under President Biden's leadership, the United States will seek to strike a more balanced approach that better emphasises its commitments to global climate action.[219]

There is also hope that the short-term responses to the pandemic will quickly give way to longer term thinking about the capabilities of states to respond to crises, which could support the step-change in thinking needed to sufficiently address climate change as a shared risk. For example, the heads of UNESCO, WHO and OHCHR have come together to call for the model of collective intelligence and open access research to continue after the pandemic.[220] With the failures of international collaboration in the early phases of the pandemic now plain to see, there is an opportunity to reset mindsets and move to a more robust and decisive form of cooperation around another existential threat.

China's Pandemic Response

China's role in the origins of the novel coronavirus, and its efforts to minimise and suppress information about its early stages, has placed it at the centre of the geopolitical story around the pandemic.[221] The Chinese state initially sought to downplay the severity of the virus, propagating theories that it was an animal-borne disease, and minimising the possibility of human-to-human transmission.[222] China failed to immediately notify the WHO about the virus, and then withheld key information from the Organisation and the international community for several weeks. Some scientists have argued that a more speedy and productive engagement between China and the WHO could have significantly slowed the global spread of the virus in the early stages.[223] One study found that if China had imposed lockdown measures three weeks earlier, infections could have been reduced by 95%.[224]

China also sought to suppress discussion of the virus and its origins, and silenced medical practitioners who spoke out about a potential outbreak when the pandemic began – at great personal cost.[225] The CCP disputes this framing and insists on its transparency, having launched an aggressive public relations campaign to improve its public image.[226] The regime's particular focus has been on shifting the narrative towards its responsibility as a global actor, and encouraging its population at home to recognise the generosity it is able to deploy as a result of its strength of governance. Beijing has distributed much-needed medical supplies – although of varying quality – to Europe, Africa, and North America, as well as to the World Health Organisation.[227] There has been an emphasis on targeting fragile democracies or those with complex evolving relationships with their Western allies.

Hence, China focused on shoring up its influence in Africa, through promising both medical assistance and debt relief. China began sending bilateral medical aid, including face masks, testing equipment and other medical equipment to African nations in March, with some donations coming directly from the Chinese government, and other donations from the diaspora and Chinese companies, including Huawei, being facilitated by the Chinese state. China's state-owned enterprises have also given donations, with Jiangxi International Economic and Technical Cooperation Co. providing 10,000 masks to Ghana's Ministry of Roads and Highways at the start of the pandemic, likely with a view to fostering a closer partnership on transport with the agency in the future.[228] China also cancelled all of Africa's interest-free loans, although this accounts for less than 5% of Africa's debt to China.[229] As vaccine deployment begins, China has also pledged to make its coronavirus vaccine a "global public good" and promised that, "once the development and deployment of a COVID-19 vaccine is completed in China, African countries will be among the first to benefit." [230]

After its efforts to win over Italy,[231] China also sent doctors, ventilators and masks to Serbia in March, to which Serbia responded by declaring China to be "great friends of Serbia and Serbs".[232] Billboards and other prominent displays of gratitude to China have subsequently appeared in Belgrade.[233] These developments led the European Union foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, to declare that China's success in engaging in this supply chain diplomacy was made possible by the United States' absence of leadership under Donald Trump.[234]

China's aggressive public relations offensive has, however, been consistently undermined by the poor quality of its merchandise, and revelations that much of its 'aid' provision has in fact been invoiced orders. The Netherlands, for example, was forced to recall hundreds of thousands of facemasks it had received from China, while Spain found that 60,000 testing kits it had received were defective. China's relations with Africa have also deteriorated, endangering its Belt and Road Initiatives, after the paranoid, xenophobic atmosphere cultivated in China during the pandemic precipitated the targeting of African residents in Guangzhou for forced quarantines and evictions.[235]

Following Australia's demand for a formal international inquiry into China's actions during the pandemic, many other nations – including the United Kingdom – have indicated their support for an independent investigation.[236] However, no substantive plans have yet succeeded in progressing this ambition amongst global institutions, with a motion prepared for the World Health Assembly conference watered down to make no reference to China.[237]

The disputes around the pandemic have sharpened the deterioration of relations between China and many Western nations, including Australia, but also the specific geopolitical situation between China and the United States.[238] The United States has been vocal in attributing blame to China for the spread of the virus, and the significant number of deaths it has caused in the United States, arguing that "it could have been stopped at the source". President Trump has even threatened to seek financial damages from China.[239] Chinese state media have in turn lodged an aggressive counter response, and sought to draw attention to the United States' own domestic failings.[240] Meanwhile, the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic has thrown China off schedule for completing its commitments under Phase One of the US-China trade deal, threatening the future of what, in January, was seen as a landmark victory for the two nations.[241]

Overall, the pandemic has made it difficult for Western nations already growing increasingly sceptical of China's behaviour in its region to ignore the implications of this powerful authoritarian state's rise on the international community. Its deep lack of transparency has fundamentally undermined global trust, and forced the acceleration of new security initiatives to safeguard Western states against economic exposure and dependency on China. This has precipitated national efforts towards the on-shoring of manufacturing production and supply chains,[242] threatening the future of global supply chains and raising concerns about the future of free trade.

For example, in April, Japan set up a $2bn fund to allow firms to examine their supply chains, and move production away from China.[243] In the UK in May, Prime Minister Boris Johnson instructed civil servants to draw up plans for 'Project Defend', to protect national security after the pandemic by identifying key vulnerabilities and ensuring critical supply chains are not dependent on any individual nations for non-food essentials.[244] The United States had already begun to reduce supply chain reliance on China, but since COVID-19 it has begun to 'turbo-charge' the process.[245]

The legacy for China's public relations campaign has therefore been rather mixed. A large proportion of Europeans reported having developed more negative feelings towards China during the pandemic.[246] In the UK, 82% of Britons do not trust China's reporting on coronavirus, and just 1% fully trust China's reporting on the number of COVID-19 deaths.[247]

However, perceptions of China's behaviour in the pandemic are also being experienced alongside the deteriorating public opinion towards the United States under Donald Trump's leadership. For example, 73% of Germans have lowered their opinions of the United States due to its handling of the pandemic, compared to 36% in relation to China.[248] The BFPG's own research has found that in the United Kingdom, opinions of the United States fell comparatively more greatly than those towards China.[249] Globally, only three out of 53 nations believing that America has handled coronavirus better than China.[250] It should be noted, however, that public opinion towards the United States is expected to dramatically improve under President Biden.[251]

This gulf between public perceptions and elite perceptions towards China is largely explained by the recognition amongst citizens that China has ultimately been successful in containing the worst of the pandemic. Although this has been achieved through authoritarian means[252] and there are still ambiguities around the CCP's reported data, it is certainly true that, while other nations flounder as they tackle second and third waves of coronavirus and major economic recessions, the Chinese economy has bounced back, successfully avoiding the recession that has been seen across much of the rest of the world.[253] Life in China, has, broadly, returned to normal, with social distancing and mask regulations being relaxed, and large events returning.[254] During China's 'Golden Week' in October, over 600 million tourists travelled, injecting 466.6 billion Chinese yuan into its economy. Images of tourists flocking the streets stand in stark contrast to much of the Western world, which is increasingly coming to terms with the prospect of a difficult winter.[255]

At a time when anxieties about China's geopolitical ambitions and economic dominance are reaching a fever pitch, the prospect that the nation that brought the pandemic to the world might streak ahead in the recovery is a source of great consternation across the West. This prospect has heightened the urgency being felt in democratic capitals around securing and deploying effective vaccines, as nations scramble to prevent themselves falling too far behind. More broadly, it is certainly the case that the pandemic has sharpened minds in the West about the need to cooperate and band together to tackle the tremendous reach and influence of China – yet, whether this recognition will be matched by action remains to be seen.

Misinformation and Disinformation

Disinformation has been harnessed by authoritarian states as a key weapon during the coronavirus pandemic. The crisis began with Chinese officials seeking to cover up the outbreak and downplay its severity, and then saw the state subsequently propagate multiple conflicting theories about the origins of coronavirus, including through its large network of diplomatic and official social media accounts.[256] Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian has been particularly vocal in his online claims that the United States army might have brought the virus to Wuhan, in an audacious series of tweets which Twitter has subsequently tagged to alert users for disinformation.[257]

Russia was also named by the EU alongside China as central to the spread of coronavirus disinformation.[258] Russian outlets are alleged to be producing intentionally socially polarising content and consistently emphasising the weakness of European democratic institutions[259] in an attempt to discredit the EU and strengthen the legitimacy of the Russian state.[260] Russia's disinformation content is commanding a worrying degree of reach, with French-language coverage from RT, a Russian state-run international news network, achieving up to five times the number of engagements per article share on Twitter and Facebook than the major French news outlet Le Monde.[261]

Disinformation has not only been deployed for the purposes of external audiences. To his own personal and geostrategic aims, American President Donald Trump has also spread misinformation online, suggesting at various points of the pandemic that the coronavirus could be cured by sunlight, or by digesting disinfectant, and promoting the use of the drug hydroxychloroquine as a potential cure.[262] Furthermore, as coronavirus cases soared in the United States in June and July, President Trump sought to play down the severity of coronavirus in the United States in a bid to protect the United States' reputation on the world stage.[263] He has also sought to deflect attention away from the United States by drawing attention instead to China's role in the spread of the virus. He has insisted on calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" in official documentation, and briefed Republicans to blame China and praise Trump for his hardening stance towards China.[264]

Trump's behaviour in the pandemic has also been replicated amongst other populist and authoritarian leaders. Bombastic Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, has called the coronavirus crisis a "media trick", dismissed media "hysteria" over "a little flu", and has also placed unproven drugs, hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, at the centre of his government's solution to coronavirus. When Bolsanaro himself contracted the virus, he videoed himself taking hydroxychloroquine and claimed that he felt better almost immediately.[265] Facebook has begun to remove online disinformation networks connected to staffers of Bolsanaro and pro-Bolsanaro politicians, including his sons, which included efforts to spread baseless claims that the threat of coronavirus had been exaggerated.[266]

In Iran, which has since become the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East, rumours abounded in its early stages that officials were covering up the true scale of the crisis.[267] Iran's Supreme Leader has alleged that the virus is "specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians", and refused support from the United States, over suspicion that the virus was man-made in America.[268] State-affiliated news channels and accounts belonging to Revolutionary Guards have also spread similarly unfounded claims about the origins of coronavirus.[269]

Efforts to tackle the spread of disinformation have been led from both the diplomatic and platform levels. France and Germany have publicly criticised China's lack of transparency over coronavirus,[270] and after initially watering down its criticism of global disinformation campaigns,[271] the EU has since publicly condemned "targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood, and globally", which it argued are being run by China and Russia.[272] For its part, the World Health Organisation has been working to proactively spread accurate information about the virus and its containment.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have become noticeably more responsive in shutting down disinformation networks during the pandemic. In March, Twitter announced it would remove tweets that risk causing harm by spreading misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic including posts that deny recommendations from health experts and unverified claims about potentially harmful 'cures' such as drinking bleach.[273] In April, Facebook introduced a pop-up alert for those who have read or shared misinformation, encouraging them to go to the WHO's website.[274] As a result, significant numbers of social media posts have been removed, with 7 million posts being taken down from Facebook and Instagram between April and June alone for promoting COVID-19 misinformation.[275]

Nonetheless, both diplomatic and technical efforts appear to be fighting an unwinnable war. It is estimated that 90% of posts reported for misinformation on Facebook and Twitter remain online, without any warnings attached. The difficult balance of respecting freedom of speech against threats to public health mean that posts that do not pose an immediate threat to life, such as posts from anti-vaccination groups, are rarely removed. However, in the medium term, the information contained within these messages can help to shape powerful and persuasive narratives that take hold amongst large swathes of populations.[276]

In particular, significant amounts of misinformation, especially on social media, has encouraged disturbing levels of scepticism around the coronavirus vaccine. In the UK, the proportion of the population enthusiastic about receiving the vaccine appears to be falling. Similar trends to participation appear to have taken hold across Europe[277] and the United States.[278] Concerns about the impact of misinformation narratives around the vaccine are rapidly escalating amongst Western governments, encouraging political leaders – including former American Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton – to pledge to take the vaccine in public. In November, the UK Government also agreed new measures with Facebook, Twitter and Google to respond more quickly to flagged content and promote factual and reliable information about the vaccine online.[279]

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has been a truly transformative event, and has accelerated many of the geopolitical trends that were already coagulating prior to its emergence and spread. The question of its impact, therefore, is largely a story of hastening forces, rather than reshaping realities.

The notable exception to this process is the influence of the pandemic on global inequality, and the potential for the considerable recent gains in health, prosperity, security and access to education throughout the developing world to be reversed by the disruption of a single year. Advancements in these fundamental areas in many of the poorest and most conflict-ridden nations are often extremely fragile, and the way in which the pandemic has upended global supply chains and reduced the aid investment capacity of wealthier nations may well leave lasting scars. There will be an urgent need in 2021 to ensure that the institutions and initiatives that support aid provision and the protection of citizens are adequately equipped with the resources and leadership to prevent this backsliding from becoming entrenched.

Geopolitically, the major development has been the escalation of tensions between China and many other Western nations, with the gap between the 'great power competition' being exercised with the United States, and the position of its allies, narrowing considerably during 2020. China's belligerence as a global actor in the early phases of the pandemic, coupled with its authoritarian domestic behaviour, its increasingly aggressive stance in its region, and its unrelenting – if largely ineffectual – efforts to advance its soft power through 'wolf warrior diplomacy', have shifted the goalposts on Western governments' policy positions towards the rising power. The increasing convergence in these positions, recognising the distinct security risk posed by China's entanglement with the West, and the danger its irresponsibly towards the global community can inspire, will undoubtedly precipitate the establishment of a new paradigm to China-Western relations.

Although the United States has also suffered severe reputational damage for its handling of the coronavirus pandemic – and in many ways, the relative falls in trust are more profound – the blame for its inept and inconsistent response is largely placed at the feet of the outgoing President, Donald Trump. Therefore, although both China and the United States share a miserable report card for 2020, there is an expectation that incoming President-elect Joe Biden will be able to restore a considerable degree of the power and positive influence of America's global standing – while China will enter the new year with a profoundly compromised international reputation.

It is significant that the coronavirus pandemic arrived in a period of significant instability in the liberal world order, after four years that have tested the strength and endurance of alliances, the distribution of resources, and questioned the ongoing relevance of multilateral institutions. Many of the core relationships at the heart of the West have been especially strained during the past four years, and it is clear now that the opportunity to leverage the pandemic as an opportunity to restore these has not been seized. Although there are many important examples of the collective global response having mobilised effectively, there are equally as many examples of where instincts towards cooperation were missed, or actively dismissed.

The most productive period for international coordination was during the late-Spring and into the Summer of 2020, when the initial shock of the crisis in advanced nations had begun to subside, and governments felt more capable of looking outside their own borders. However, as we edge towards turning the corner with the welcome news about the production and deployment of coronavirus vaccines, it appears that the pandemic will end in the way in which it began – with nations turning back inwards to focus on delivering on the needs of their people and scrambling for a competitive advantage to hasten their recovery.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, despite the proliferation of the rhetoric of vaccine nationalism as this gruelling year comes to a close, the emergence of the vaccine itself reveals much about the fertile ground that remains for strategic partnerships – especially those that approach the question of solving shared challenges with the creative power and ingenuity of both the market and the state. With the existential risk of climate change continuing to loom large, and China's economic dominance now conceived as a fundamental security threat, the vaccine development process shines a light on a path forward for a renewed era of liberal cooperation.

Moreover, although the pandemic has ultimately failed to prove the socially unifying force that many hoped it would become, healing the wounds of a bruising period of populist and polarising politics in advanced democracies, it has certainly underlined the importance of well-functioning institutions and cohesive societies, and shone light on the tremendous capabilities of scientific advancement. There is a generational opportunity for democratic leaders to seize the moment for a period of social and political renewal, to rebuild their economies in a more sustainable and equitable fashion, and to forge an era of productive cooperation to address the challenges we mutually recognise and must collectively solve.

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Our core objective is to bridge the link between the domestic and international spheres – recognising that Britain's foreign policy choices and obstacles are shaped by our social landscape at home. Through pioneering research into the UK's social fabric, we seek to build understanding of the nuances of public opinion, and how our foreign policy can become more inclusive, responsive and relevant to citizens' lives.

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