

# **To what extent COVID-19 challenges our thinking about International Relations?**

**OUPA MUNASHE MUCHENGA**

This paper gives the views of the author, and not necessarily the position of the Zhejiang University.

# To what extent COVID-19 challenges our thinking about International Relations?

**Oupa Munashe Muchenga**

Zhejiang University, School of Public Affairs.  
International Relations Theories.

COVID-19 has indeed wrought near-absolute havoc on the world's economies as much as it has devastated lives of the Earth's population. The extent of damage the coronavirus has inflicted on humanity has probably altered the global landscape in as yet undetermined ways. In my opinion, the COVID-19 pandemic has plunged the world politics of International Relations in the Hobbesian interpretation of 'anarchy' itself. The ideation of Realism's ontology of states when it comes to the national interest, survival motivation, self-help anarchy, human nature, self-interest, power struggle and balance of power is surely called into question in this pandemic era. Hence, if anarchism is the characteristic of international relations that have been imprinted by the realist theories according to the theories of Hobbes, Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and Mearsheimer, which all emphasized that conflict rather than cooperation in times of crisis, is what characterizes international relations, then the shape and all that we know of contemporary IR, may be coming to a change in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In whatever view of it, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our thinking in the issues of IR to a greater extent in so many dimensions.

**Keywords:** *Coronavirus (COVID-19), International Relations, International Systems, China, United States of America (US), Realism*

## Introduction.

Every global crisis impacts the international system, its structures, norms and institutions. Without doubt, the spread of the coronavirus was one of the most serious global crisis threatening the planet and from past analysis of IR, in the face of crises, the shape of IR is rearranged and challenged to an extent. The pandemic of COVID-19 has an enormous impact not only on health services across the globe but for world politics as well. For instance; this global pandemic has almost plunged the world into another point of rivalry between the contemporary superpowers of the US and China, interrogated the ideals of cooperation in face of a global public bad, questioned the issues of national interests, social identities and norms. One can surely tell that there is, in so many ways that IR, as we know it, in the future, is likely to be influenced in the events brought forth prior, during and after the novel coronavirus. Bold collective multinational efforts are needed to fight the crisis. However, there are slim chances that common sense is going to prevail.

**The pandemic and the shift of the political order, a question on the balance of power and status quo.**

The pandemic has and will shift the political order of world politics to a great extent, thus challenging international relations. As evidently the impact of the pandemic has caused shifts in the world politics particularly the intensified tension of US-China relations, whose impact has resonated the discourse of international relations and world politics as echoed in many IR theories. As according to John J. Mearsheimer Structural Realism theory, Tim Dunne (2013) notes that, 'with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union many realists argue that unipolarity has arrived (Wohlforth 1999). The USA, in other words, is the sole great power. It has achieved global hegemony, a feat no other country has ever accomplished. Other realists, however, argue that the post-Cold War system is multipolar, not unipolar. The USA, they maintain, is by far the most powerful state on earth, but there are other great powers, such as China and Russia.'<sup>1</sup> With this, an assumption on unipolarity that defined the world politics in the 21st Century that saw the US enjoy the political and economic hegemony although other powerful states existed, the impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic can cause a shift of that power balance and challenge

<sup>1</sup> T. Dunne, M. Kurki and S. Smith; International Relations Theories Discipline and Diversity: THIRD EDITION, Oxford University Press 2013.

the international relations. Major crises have major consequences, usually unforeseen. The Great Depression spurred isolationism, nationalism, fascism, and World War II—but also led to the New Deal, the rise of the United States as a global superpower. Likewise, in this particular pandemic and catastrophe, there is a threat to the US as a global hegemon with the rise of China as a possible global hegemon. As remarkably evident, in the face of the pandemic, the US has bungled its role badly and seen its prestige slip enormously.<sup>2</sup> The global distribution of power will continue to shift eastward since East Asia has done better at managing the situation than Europe or the United States.

The coronavirus pandemic has worsened relations between the US and China. Although there has been a long extending literature of the origins of the relationship between the two world great powers, the COVID-19 pandemic did not better their already strained relations. The former President of the USA, Donald Trump repeatedly chose to call the coronavirus the “Chinese virus”, whilst his Administration staff personnel chose to hold media press calling it the “Wuhan virus”, something that causes huge offence in Beijing (China). Despite the spats of the two world powers, this is not just a war of words, but something more fundamental is going on which place us to validate IR as we know it in terms of power struggles – not essentially military capabilities but claiming of hegemony postulated in the rationalist thinking of neo-realism. For instance, the moments of huge symbolism in the face of the pandemic as seen in the two states: when the US announced that it was closing its borders to travellers from many EU countries, the Chinese government announced that it was sending medical teams and supplies to Italy where the virus was most devastating. It also sent help to Iran and Serbia too. On the other hand, US belated despatch of a small mobile US Air Force medical facility to Italy was hardly going to alter the equation. In such actions one can see China emerging from this crisis with renewed status as a global player meanwhile indeed, it is a battle which the US - at the moment - is losing hands down.

This also brings about the neo-realism debate on China ascendancy into perspective. The debate by the structural realists that have been trying to predict whether the rise of China may come peacefully or not, where offensive and defence realists have taken their part trying to explain it. Henceforth, T. Dunne (2013:90) summarizes by noting that, there is no consensus among structural realists (offensive and defensive) about whether China can rise peacefully. The diversity of views is not surprising since these same realists disagree among themselves about how much power states should want as well as what causes war. The

only important point of agreement among them is that the structure of the international system forces great powers to compete among themselves for power.<sup>3</sup> With this summation, the intensified relations of US and China as a result of the past relations and now COVID-19 is brought into perspective, with the hegemony of US threatened and a likely rise of China that has been taking quite a leadership role in face of the global pandemic better than its counterpart, will challenge the international relations as we know it and shape global politics going onwards.

**The COVID-19 pandemic may arguably threaten an abandonment of the international order. – A possibility rise of fascism sentiments, de-globalization, and the rise of nationalism and xenophobia.**

Considering the national policies by different governments trying to safeguard their nationals and curbing the pandemic, many states have resorted to the anti-global movement of people to protect national citizens, may over the years to come, the pandemic could lead to the relative decline and continued erosion of the liberal international order, and at extreme a resurgence of fascism around the globe. Pessimistic outcomes are easy to imagine in this time of a global crisis. Nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, and attacks on the liberal world order have been increasing for years, and that trend will only be accelerated by the pandemic. For instance, governments in Hungary and the Philippines have used the crisis to give themselves emergency powers, moving them still further away from democracy. Many other countries, including El Salvador, and Uganda, have taken almost similar measures like many African statesmen taking advantage of the pandemic to move away from democratic values. Further, the barriers to the movement of people have appeared everywhere with the lockdown situation prevailing across the globe, including within the heart of Europe. Rather than to cooperate constructively for a common benefit, countries have turned inward, bickered with one another, and made their rivals political scapegoats for their failures. One can point out that if this trend of ‘anti-globalisation’ and nationalism continue to swell up, this may lead to being a new normal of international relations, which goes a long way to question the liberal international order that has characterised world politics for decades. All these facts put into perspective, one can argue that the COVID-19 pandemic challenges IR to a great extent. However, other IR thinkers argue that the global crisis may even lead to a rebirth of liberal democracy, a system built on resilience and renewal. Elements of both visions will emerge, in different places. Unfortunately, unless current trends change dramatically, the general forecast is gloomy.

2 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-09/pandemic-and-political-order>

3 T. Dunne, M. Kurki and S. Smith; International Relations Theories Discipline and Diversity: THIRD EDITION, Oxford University Press 2013.

## **The rise of liberal democracies – the resilient institution of democracy.**

Just as the Great Depression not only produced fascism but also reinvigorated liberal democracy, so the pandemic may produce some positive political outcomes, too. Some IR thinkers, argues that the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic may not have extremely negative outcomes in the make-up of international society but may inspire the rise of liberal democracies and show the resilience of the institution of democracy, sovereignty, identities and norms as prescribed in the English School. The pandemic has shone a bright light on existing institutions everywhere, revealing their inadequacies and weaknesses. The gap between the rich and the poor, both people and countries, has been deepened by the crisis and will increase further during a prolonged economic stagnation.<sup>4</sup> But along with the problems, the crisis has also revealed the government's ability to provide solutions, drawing on collective resources in the process. A lingering sense of "alone together" could boost social solidarity and drive the development of more generous social protections down the road, just as the common national sufferings of World War I and the Depression stimulated the growth of welfare states in the 1920s and 1930s.

Moreover, the pandemic has been a global political stress test. Countries with capable, legitimate governments will come through relatively well and may embrace reforms that make them even stronger and more resilient, thus facilitating their future outperformance. Countries with weak state capacity or poor leadership will be in trouble, set for stagnation, if not impoverishment and instability. More so, the crisis may ultimately spur renewed international cooperation. While national leaders play the blame game, scientists and public health officials around the world are deepening their networks and connections. If the breakdown of international cooperation leads to disaster and is judged a failure, the era after that could see a renewed commitment to working multilaterally to advance common interests.

## **The pandemic exposed the chaotic liberal order and its institutions.**

The chaotic global response to the coronavirus pandemic has tested the faith of even the most ardent internationalists. Most nations, including the world's most powerful, have turned inward, adopting travel bans, implementing export controls, hoarding or obscuring information, and marginalizing the World Health Organization (WHO) and other multilateral institutions.

4 Foreign Affairs May-June 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-05-06/the-world-after-the-pandemic>

The pandemic seems to have exposed the liberal order and the international community as mirages, even as it demonstrates the terrible consequences of faltering global cooperation. Without doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged international relations up to its limits and with the prevailing trends experienced during the pandemic, it questioned the Kantian liberalism ideals to international order. A century ago, when pandemic influenza struck a war-torn world, few multilateral institutions existed. Countries fought their common microbial enemy alone. Today, an array of multilateral mechanisms exists to confront global public health emergencies and address their associated economic, social, and political effects. But the existence of such mechanisms has not stopped most states from taking a unilateral approach in the face of the pandemic, evidently superpowers like the US withdrawing out of the WHO can just serve as ample evidence to the chaotic and near-death of the liberal order and its institutions. As B. Russett summarises the liberal order by stating that, a Kantian liberal perspective on world politics can provide means for sustaining a stable peace, promoting democracy, deepening linkages of international trade, and extending the multilateral network of IGOs offers the possibility of strengthening existing peaceful relations and expanding their scope to most of the world.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a threat to the liberal order may be detrimental to international relations.

## **The COVID-19 as a complex intergovernmental problem in global public policy.**

The COVID-19 era exposed the challenges in policies in terms of policy actors (i.e. principally the states and agencies) institutional context and consequences of the pandemic. Paquet and Schertzer (2020) noted that the concept of "complex intergovernmental problems" helps us understand the challenges of intergovernmental policy-making on COVID-19<sup>6</sup>, which exposed the loopholes in the liberalism glorification of agencies and intergovernmental organisations as pivotal in the management of International Relations. Federations and multilevel governance systems increasingly face complex policy challenges, from managing climate change to mass migration. COVID-19 is a prime example of this emerging type of problem – The concept of complex intergovernmental problems (CIPs). While political leaders and media often describe COVID-19 as a crisis, the concept of CIPs generates more analytical power to understand the management of this pandemic in federations and multilevel governance systems like in international relations. The nature of this problem requires intergovernmental coordination and cooperation

5 B. Russett in T. Dunne, M. Kurki and S. Smith; *International Relations Theories Discipline and Diversity: THIRD EDITION*, Oxford University Press 2013.

6 Paquet, Mireille, and Robert Schertzer. 2020. "COVID-19 as a Complex Intergovernmental Problem." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53 (2): 343–347. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000281>.

for effective policy responses. Highlighting how COVID-19 intersects with intergovernmental relations allows us to better assess how governments have responded. It is in this regard that the liberal international order has been tested and questioned on multilevel governance system of international relations.

Paquet and Schertzer (2020) defined CIPs as distinct from crises because of their inherent intergovernmental nature and related consequences. A novel CIP like COVID-19 has exacerbated poorly functioning aspects of intergovernmental relations—representing a stress test that exposes cracks in the system. Failure to effectively respond to CIPs can also have trickledown effects on intergovernmental relations in other sectors, including conflicts or disengagement. COVID-19 as a complex intergovernmental problem has certainly challenged the way we think about international relations and how the state actors have chosen to react through the pandemic. As Schertzer (2020)<sup>7</sup> summarizes it: CIPs generate pressure to act in novel ways and to establish new forms of collaboration (one example of China recently joining GAVI). These problems also create barriers to collaboration because they call into question the existing power equilibriums and dominant narratives about how to work together and share responsibilities within intergovernmental systems (one example of US pulling out of the WHO). CIPs are thus somewhat paradoxical: they demand intergovernmental collaboration for effective and legitimate policy responses while making the necessary collaboration difficult to achieve.

### **A total challenge for all international Society Ideals.**

According to the English School of IR perspective, according to Bull's classical definition, IS comes into being when 'a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, forms a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (1977: 13). Which in this context Bull tries to postulate that members of the international society work to uphold the rules – which in this can be upholding the rules and regulations of the institutions, thus recognizing they will benefit from rules. However, Trump's withdrawal from the WHO amid the coronavirus pandemic goes to contradict the notions.<sup>8</sup> This reaction received a response from The United Nations Foundation condemning the move.<sup>9</sup> Such actions

come to challenge all that we have learned about IR in the perspective of liberal order thoughts of English School of IR that believes in the beliefs of international society that binds states together. On the other hand, such actions have echoed the realist approach of self-help anarchy as much explained about the rationalisation of Realism particularly the classical realism.

It has become apparent that the repercussions of the Coronavirus disease have cast a shadow on the relations within the EU, which are threatening the future of its existence, and that has strengthened the growth of the power of the right-wing populist currents. This will enhance the politics of self-sufficiency and isolation which leads to the destabilization of the EU and its institutions, this has been evident in Italy, Austria, Spain and Portugal and even Germany. The EU has already faced the same predicament of facing its near end posing a question on the Kantian liberal order, which saw the withdrawal of Britain in the institution through the Brexit. This dynamic may persist that many countries are likely to withdraw and that will make us validate the IR from the perspective of Westphalia phenomenon of international interdependency.

### **Conclusion.**

It may be too early to make definitive statements of the future of IR after COVID-19. However, the catchphrase 'nothing will ever be the same again' seems not to be outrightly wrong. It makes sense to ask what might change in international politics after coronavirus but, at this stage, however, any answers remain by nature provisional. To see the extent COVID-19 has or rather will have on world international relations, it will probably be fully observed when and if a lasting cure is found to the coronavirus. As it stands, the pandemic remains undisputed in its challenge for IR, which will keep IR enthusiast in debates for a while now in trying to explain and make of the current International Relations dynamics after the coronavirus pandemic.

7 Paquet, Mireille, and Robert Schertzer. 2020. "COVID-19 as a Complex Intergovernmental Problem." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53 (2): 343–347. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000281>.

8 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53327906>

9 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2020/jul/07/coronavirus-live-updates?page=with:block-5f04f7018f08bd8a00313fef#block-5f04f7018f08bd8a00313fef>