

# Student Spotlight: What Does The Global Response to COVID-19 Suggest about Global Governance? by Ankhmaa Ankhbayar

Written by [David Blunt](#) on [June 17th, 2021](#).

Our Student Spotlight highlights the excellent work done by students in the Department of International Politics.

## Introduction

COVID-19 has brought many challenges in the lives of many nations in the world. The virus was first identified in China, the City of Wuhan in December 2019, however, it took months for some states to react. It is one of the most serious events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Caparrós, 2020).

Globalisation is one of the biggest facilitators in the spreading of the virus (Drezner, 2020). And today, we can barely count the number of countries that have not been affected by this virus. States responded in different ways; some introduced very strict measures from the earliest periods of the pandemic, whereas others took relatively lighter measures. From one point of view, the world today can be explained by the liberal institutionalist approach as many nations are cooperating. However, there are shreds of evidence of nationalistic behaviour of certain countries which corresponds to realist ideas.

The global response to coronavirus pandemic suggests that global governance is failing when it comes to international cooperation because of the nationalist leaders, however, certain international organisations are succeeding in integrating many countries and assisting them. The goal of this research is to answer the following questions: Are countries

collaborating and fighting together against the problem or independently? How effective are international responses when it comes to COVID governance? To answer these questions, firstly, the essay will look at background information about coronavirus and early period of the pandemic. Secondly, the essay will introduce approaches to global governance that are influential in this paper. Thirdly, the research will go through findings and analysis relating to the theories from previous sections. And finally, the conclusion will be made based on the research. The observations will be useful to anticipate the world in the future and, also, to predict behaviours of political actors when it comes to any other unexpected events. The pandemic is threatening the health of people as well as reshaping all four aspects of human life such as spiritual (religion but, art, moral, culture, education and science), social, economic and political spheres, thus it is worth to acknowledge consequences of COVID-19.

This topic is very intriguing as there is an uncommon situation for international society and it does not only concern health but also politics, economics, international relations of millions of people (Davies et al, 2020). COVID-19 is a new issue area, which means the literature on this topic is limited, so the research will use materials from primary sources of particular intergovernmental organisations besides academic sources.

## **Background information**

The virus of the infectious disease is called "coronavirus" and, as mentioned earlier, it was discovered around a year ago in Wuhan, China. Main symptoms are similar to such of the flu: fever, cough and fatigue (WHO, 2020). Whereas for some people experience mild symptoms and can be treated at home, for others the virus can be hazardous and these people should seek the doctor immediately. The virus is transmitted mainly through the air and the best ways to protect yourself and others are wearing masks and practising social distancing.

Countries needed to provide such measures to stop the spread since the early stages of a pandemic. However, there was a lack of transparency by the Chinese government regarding the novel coronavirus (Gilsinan, 2020) which led to delayed international response. In January, the WHO thanked China for the quick announcement about the novel virus, however, the truth was that China did not report immediately (Forbes, 2020). Moreover, not only Chinese authorities did not give enough information to the WHO, they also tried to hide the virus at the very early stages. Chinese doctor, Li Wenliang, who was working at Wuhan Central Hospital, tried to let his classmates know about the virus with the same symptoms as SARS on December 30, however, the police accused him as spreading false information (The New York Times, 2020). Doctor Li had to apologise to the public accordingly. From one point of view, the behaviour of the officials in China can be justified as preventing public panic and fear, but from the other point, people have right to know what is happening and the situation could have been better than the world is experiencing now.

As a result, the damages of COVID-19 are severe: many countries had to close their borders for several weeks or months, some for shorter periods, therefore, the economic and political impacts are enormous. According to the Global Economic Prospects presented by the World Bank, the global GDP decreased by 5.2 percent, which is the “deepest global recession” since World War II (2020). Especially in developing countries and emerging economies, the pandemic hits hard with mass unemployment, loss of wages, closure of education establishments, decreased supply of products for the population. The more time we spend fighting with COVID, the more damage we receive, consequently, we need “health and economic policy action—including global cooperation—to cushion its consequences, protect vulnerable populations, and improve countries’ capacity to prevent and cope with similar events in the future” (World Bank, 2020).

## Theory

Realist approaches are useful to answer the question because of the main assumptions of the theory. Many important concepts are discussed within realism such as power, nationalism, self-help strategy and security dilemma. To introduce, central realist idea is that in anarchic world system without a supreme leader, states try to pursue power and self-help strategies in order to survive in this international system and to protect themselves from threats of other states (Weiss et al, 2018). Power is an essential concept in this school of thought and it does not always refer to military capacity, but also, the economic ability of a state. In this anarchic world order, states are "suspicious" about the behaviour of their neighbouring states and there is not much evidence of harmony between big powers in the history (Weiss et al, 2018). One's accumulation of power causes the defensive reaction of other states in the form of increasing military and economic powers. This idea is one of the core concepts of realism commonly known as the "security dilemma". As Thomas Hobbes argued, it is the fault of human nature that one is thriving to become more powerful, dominant and resourceful than the others. Similarly, states will always want to become greater by strengthening economic and military potentials. To sustain peace and stability, realists suggest that there has to be a balance of power or the equilibrium in the international system which corresponds to the idea that no state can dominate and rule others. This strategy is mainly supported by Classical Realists, Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau. One more fact is that realists give a strong emphasis on state actors under the idea of "statism" and less on non-state actors because only states possess military force and they make laws (Bakunin, 1990). International organisations, therefore, play less role in realist thinking.

Liberal institutionalism is another important theory to analyse global response during COVID governance. In the first place, it is important to note what the theory is about. The international society is not always competitive, especially in contemporary politics where we see many cases of global cooperation. Whereas realism believes that the cooperation can

exist only if there is a major threat for several states (Weiss, 2018), like in the cases with World War I and II, cooperation can be also driven by the common goal and collective ideals for purpose of safety, security, the well-being of the nations and environmental rescue. Here, we need liberalist approaches that highlight collaboration of states, mutual gains and interdependence. Liberal institutionalists are pretty optimistic about the international system; they agree with realists in terms of the anarchic global environment, but liberalists argue that states can reach absolute gains without any harm to one another in this anarchic world. Unlike realism, the role of non-state actors is significant which include international organisations, non-governmental organisations and transnational corporations. The behaviour and actions of state and non-state actors can be regulated by institutions – set of norms and principles in the written and unwritten form (North, 1990). Liberal institutionalism will be perfect to examine global COVID governance, especially to explain what is the evidence of global coordination, for which purposes the countries are cooperating and if liberalist behaviour is successful to deal with the pandemic.

## **Findings/ Analysis**

### ***Nationalism***

First of all, in the summary of the theory, we have seen the importance of the state's self-interest in the realist approach. As mentioned earlier, realists argue that states should act for their good and this was evident in COVID responses. During the past few months, especially at the beginning of the crisis, national responses overrode cooperation in almost all the continents of the world. Nationalism is the concept and set of action that encourages the interests and activities of a certain nation above others (Smith, 2010). One of the top realist thinkers, Hans Morgenthau's "national interest" highlights the survival of a nation among the others is the main important point (1949). With the increase of

coronavirus around the world, the goal of each state was to reduce the spread of the virus to protect the health of the population and save the economy. To achieve these, many countries provided nationalist policies like border closures and even more, export protectionism, particularly the restriction on exports of masks, food supplies and medicines. There are so many examples of such governments' operations in regards to coronavirus management, however, this essay focuses on the US as a case study. This makes the crisis look like it is not very health-related, but more of states' problem of national security.

The US has been internationally known as one of the nationalist countries even before the pandemic and American nationalism gives special importance and takes pride in the national identity of American people.. Ideologies of American exceptionalism policies and the President Donald Trump's "America First" are the recent examples of exclusionary nationalist perspective (Bieber, 2020). Under Trump's administration, the country made some self-serving decisions starting with the restriction of travellers entering from China to the US at the beginning of February. Later, the US imposed a ban on people travelling from Europe to the US. This is not very new because border closure has been existing for centuries to control the health crisis even before COVID-19 outbreak (Kenwick, 2020). But one of the biggest news this year was Trump's announcement about the US's withdrawal from WHO. This decision was made under the assumption that WHO is failing with COVID-19 management and even before the disease (Smith, 2020). This is another example of the pandemic response that led by realism, showing international organisation is not important.

The "medical nationalism" has become one of the major impacts too (Youde, 2020), meaning that countries and states paid more attention to their national medical supplies. Eventually, the cooperation between the states decreased (Bieber, 2020). It became a problem in many places around the world, in our case with the US as well. The White House put

export restrictions on supplies of medical goods to other countries. Besides, Trump's Defence Production Act is one of the important events that happened to prove the nationalist administration of the US. The act has been brought up to enforce local mask producing factories, especially 3M, to provide more masks for American citizens and cease the export to foreign countries (Fabian, 2020). This move caused a lot of dissatisfaction from its neighbouring countries such as Canada and Mexico. Trump's decision not only justified ideas of realist thinkers including Morgenthau or Walt on nationalism but also, created international-scale conflicts. This suggests the problematic situation in world politics.

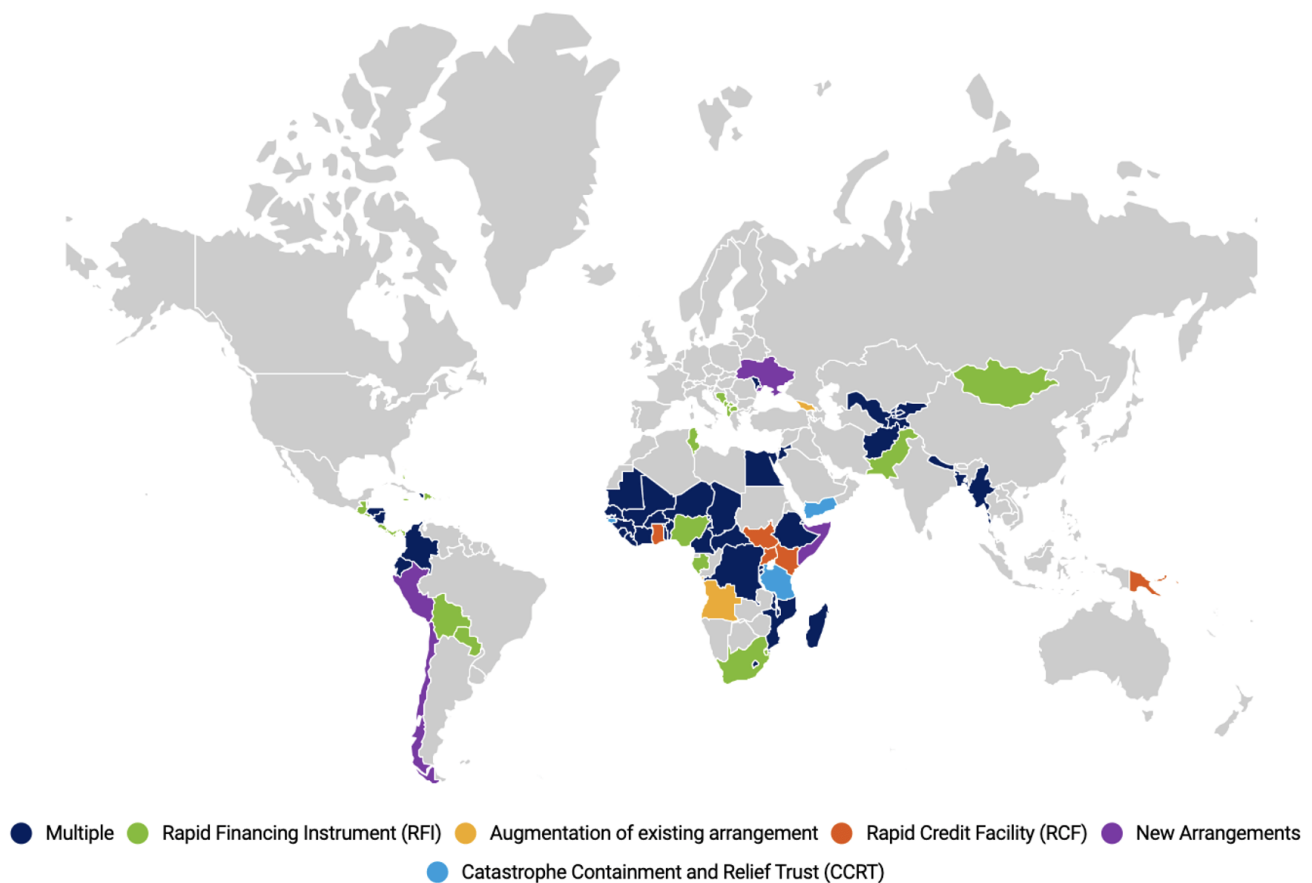
International response and the global governance of COVID-19 slowed down and hindered globalisation like nothing ever did it before (Bieber, 2020). It will take the quite long time make everything go back to normal, distribute the vaccine, open the borders and operate businesses. Nationalist leaders in certain countries (in our case, the US) are likely to continue with their nationalist policies in the future. As Stephen Walt, one of the realists in our time, noted "The pandemic will strengthen the state and reinforce nationalism. Governments of all types will adopt emergency measures to manage the crisis, and many will be loath to relinquish these new powers when the crisis is over" (2020). In a way we cannot argue with nationalistic behaviour because even if globalisation did not fall entirely, governments are the only "family" to support its citizens and they provide holistic solutions in the times of disaster before any other international actors.

### ***Cooperation under challenges***

Like any other global crisis, the pandemic "requires some form of cooperation" (Harman et al, 2020). As the international society is getting more "used to" the virus and the pandemic, the cooperation among the states is rising. Not only that but also, natural disasters and illnesses cause "exogenous shock" in public and it can create substantial

cooperation (Kelman, 2011). And here, liberalist thinking takes a huge part in the understanding of the global governance of the pandemic and it proves the countries do cooperate and they are interdependent. In such cooperation, domestic and international institutions are acting as “facilitators” to promote order and stability (Weiss et. al, 2018). The world has seen many great examples of international cooperation, and where international institutions helped countries who are in need, especially developing countries.

Until now many scholars, political leaders talked about WHO, some complimenting and many criticising, but not many of them mentioned organisations like the World Bank or the IMF and their contribution to global governance. The economic impacts brought by coronavirus is also useful to note besides health consequences. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an important international institution in our times of health crisis that provided very effective contributions to many countries whose economies were weakened by the pandemic. Its decisions are very appropriate and considerable to benefit the poor and most vulnerable people, governments to deal with the economic crisis brought by COVID, businesses and enterprises to stay operating during the hardships and institutions to recreate a better society. As of today, the IMF provided financial assistance to 83 countries with a total amount of USD 102,219.65 million (IMF, 2020). One important fact to note is that the IMF is supporting some of its members with debt relief, which is a necessary help for poorer countries. Figure 1 below demonstrates these countries who are receiving financial assistance and debt service relief. Despite its financial support, the IMF established a “Policy Tracker” that presents the summaries of governments’ policies and actions on COVID-19 management from around the world. This assures the transparency of international community and keeps the people updated with the recent information.



Source: International Monetary Fund

Cooperation is needed if we want to win the battle against the virus. Currently, several vaccines have been registered against COVID-19 such as Moderna (US), Oxford (UK), Pfizer (US) and Sputnik V (Russia). Even though there are different types of vaccines that have been made by companies of resourceful countries, it will take several months to distribute around the world. If governments of developed and rich countries exercise nationalist behaviour on vaccines, others like low and middle-income countries will have to wait for long (Bollyky et al., 2020). In these countries the situation will keep on getting worse and worse: the population will be at the risk, more people will die and the economy will decline. High-income countries, on the other hand, might fight against each other by offering a higher amount of money, consequently, the price will be more expensive for vaccine and related resources (Bollyky et al., 2020). Abandoned countries might not just sit and wait for the vaccine to come, which seems logical. There will be a lot of hardships if things go this way, so the international community have to find a way to allocate the

vaccine sufficiently, therefore global cooperation is useful. Additionally, countries should think of creating a new institution to regulate and assist this cooperation (Caparrós, 2020).

## Conclusion

To sum up, coronavirus pandemic taught us some very important lessons. The last few months were very challenging for international society; even rich countries like the US could not handle the virus and became one of the biggest failures in virus management. The essay aimed to give an analysis of global governance during pandemical hardship. On one hand, nationalistic behaviours in the international stage mainly suggest a non-success of global governance. On the other hand, international organisations like IMF show that states can collaborate and to help one another in difficult times, which proposes the successful side of the global governance in COVID period. This research used two classical theories to support the argument: whereas liberalist thinking explained the cooperation and mutual gains of the states to fight against the virus, realist approach was useful to “equate liberal ideals” (Weiss et al, 2020). We cannot really criticise leaders of certain countries who prioritised their citizens and their health before anyone else’s. However, since the crisis is global that covers more than two hundred countries around the world, it needs a global response and decisions too, meaning that states and institutions should cooperate even more in vaccine distribution and in dealing with the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic. COVID-19 and global response “has deeply shaped and will continue to shape the world” and the world will not be the same as it was before the pandemic (Bieber, 2020). It is up to international society to decide how the world look like after the pandemic. Also, if countries do not know how to cooperate or do not even have intentions to do so in the current case with the pandemic, they will not be able to cooperate in the future in likely situations (Fazal, 2020).

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