

## Human security in pandemic times

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The COVID-19 pandemic provides us with an opportunity to conduct a reality check on the state of affairs of international relations in the 21st century. By definition, a pandemic will usher in a new chapter in international relations in that it upsets the pattern of relations that is taking place as each actor in the international system seeks to crisis manage the health scare in a manner that is least disruptive economically and politically.

The massive health crisis plus economic shutdown that reverberated across the globe forced states and international organisations to adopt rapid draconian measures to try and prevent the pandemic from evolving into complete pandemonium. The COVID-19 contagion had a domino effect across the entire world commencing in China and quickly spreading to Europe and the Americas. The interdependent global system of states facilitated the rapid spreading of the coronavirus to all parts of the world.

The fact that the post COVID-19 pandemic character and structure of world politics will be radically altered is indisputable. But it is too soon to interpret whether this new phase will be a transitory or permanent one. Some observers claim that the post-pandemic period will be a temporary phase that may have a negative impact that lasts a few years and will largely consist of trial and error episodes of managing to live with the new normal. Others argue that the new uncertain moment we are in is here to stay as the international system of states comes to terms with the fragility of living in a globalized world of close to 8 billion people.

The reaction to the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 has highlighted how decentralized and anarchic the international system of states remains. Given the highly effective and elaborate global intelligence network that the World Health Organization (WHO) had at its disposal, how was the pandemic not anticipated before it spread across the globe? Why weren't



global alarm bells rung and borders closed to contain the spread of the virus? The largely ineffective stance adopted by the system wide authority in this regard, the WHO, has undermined any semblance of order in world politics.

The task at hand is to ensure that the new post-pandemic chapter ushers in a new world reorder that maintains stability in the international system and does not give way to a new world disorder where regional fragmentation and a resurgence of nationalism is rampant. If such a modality of co-operative security is to emerge, it is essential that scholars focus more of their attention on formulating crisis management practical guidelines to contend with transnational security challenges that have become a permanent fixture in geopolitics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with a real time case study of the transnational nature of security in a world of global mobility.

## Festa 2020

If such a borderless world is to continue to be the hallmark of twenty-first century relations, what contingency planning and mechanisms are going to be set up to contend with this new reality? It is essential that action be taken to implement a more holistic security agenda that embraces human and environmental security policy action plans. In the decade ahead, a much higher proportion of future security budgets need to be dedicated to enhance human security by ensuring access to universal health care. Malta's excellent management of the pandemic to date serves as a model in this regard.

Security is all about planning for the worse and hoping for the best. But when it comes to health care, in some countries the strategy seems to have been plan for the best and hope the worse does not happen. The time has come to recalibrate security priorities by adopting a much more holistic security framework that places a premium on health care, environmental protection and universal education. In future, expenditure on military procurement should only focus on resources required to defend one's country.

The lockdown that was imposed by most governments resulted in a breakdown of the fabric of society and undermined globalisation in all sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace at which technology has become an even more fundamental factor in

our daily lives, as can be witnessed by the fact that social media has grown exponentially via Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom, and other technological platforms. Yet, while technology can assist in making up for the absence of human contact during an emergency, it is clear that technology is no substitute to humans being able to interact with one another on a permanent basis. Social interaction is fundamentally important if the mental wellbeing of the people is to be maintained.

Globally, most states went into a three-month full or partial lockdown. While the scope of such an achievement is bewildering, restarting social and economic activity is proving to be the hard part. As the disruption to global political and economic activity results in massive job losses in all sectors especially those linked to the service industry such as tourism, it is impossible to predict in which direction the global economy will eventually turn. One certainty is that the outlook will be a volatile one. Instability is a sign of the times. Individuals and corporations everywhere are finding that they must either learn to live with instability or drown. The so-called new normal will consist of more security challenges and less resources to combat such threats and risks. One of the most important lessons to learn from the pandemic is that we must not return to a world that operates upon a false sense of security doctrine.



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