EXPERTS CALL FOR GLOBAL OUTLOOK ON COVID-19 CRISIS AT TRENDS E-SYMPHOSIUM

Panelists highlight medical, economic, and political dimensions of coronavirus pandemic and discuss ways of dealing with its aftermath

- “It is not just the peak of the epidemic but the bumps on the way that will have to be managed,” WHO’s Prof. Maurizio Barbeschi said.
- “Scientific community is united against Covid-19 but a lack of preparedness has also been exposed,” said Prof. Gulfaraz Khan, Professor of Viral Pathology at the UAE University.
- According to Prof. Yong Wang of Peking University, “global crises need global solutions but some adjustments in globalization are justified”.
- “There will be re-thinking in some areas but we still don’t have an international mechanism for a coordinated response,” said Hussein Ibish, Senior Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.
- Dr. David Meyer of the American University in the Emirates: “The US will continue to demand favorable trade deals in spite of who wins the election.”

ABU DHABI, March 31 – Experts participating in the first-ever E-Symposium organized by TRENDS Research & Advisory on Tuesday highlighted the ongoing struggle between forces of globalization and protectionism but emphasized the need for a collective response to the Covid-19 challenge.

Addressing the E-Symposium – Confronting the Challenges of COVID-19: A New Global Outlook – panelists discussed the lessons learned from the pandemic and the growing need for a concerted and collective approach to tackle the challenge.

Besides looking into the adequacy of the medical response they also underlined the geostategic and economic fallout of this public health crisis which threatens to derail the global economy.

Prof. Maurizio Barbeschi, Adviser to the Executive Director, World Health Emergencies (WHE) Program at The World Health Organization (WHO), delivered his view in his personal capacity.

“We have been preparing for pandemic since SARS and it is impressive how not prepared the planet was,” Prof. Barbeschi said adding that it is not just the peak of the pandemic but also the bumps and re-entry to normalcy will have to be managed.

“Even vaccines may have to be handled with extreme care for not creating groups of haves and have-nots,” he said. Prof. Barbeschi also said that it is obvious that travel bans
did not work well. “The first reaction of governments so far wasn’t smart, quick or big or large enough to stop the exponential move of the virus,” he said.

Gulfaraz Khan, Professor of Viral Pathology and Chair, Department of Medical Microbiology and Immunology at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, UAE University, said that the scientific community is united against Covid-19 at one end of the spectrum but a lack of preparedness has also been exposed.

“All these viruses infect animals and there is a spillover into humans. Our practices such as farming and handling and transport of animals will have to be relooked if we have to tackle these in the future. Infectious diseases don’t need borders and we need to collaborate to prevent such a huge crisis from happening in the future,” Prof. Khan said.

According to him, it must be acknowledged that the Chinese authorities identified and made the virus sequence available to the international community within two weeks of the outbreak. “We have also seen an unprecedented number of publications on Covid-19,” Prof. Khan said pointing out that the world failed to identify the threat early.

“We had approximately a month to look at the outbreak even though the disease was spreading. The majority of the world’s cases happened after February so we need to learn lessons as a global community. It is absolutely essential to do our best in research and development to prevent another global pandemic from killing so many people,” he said.

Prof. Khan also ruled out the possibility of a vaccine coming out soon. “It could take 12-18 months if you add the time needed in mass production and in making it available around the world,” he said.

Delivering an international security perspective, Dr. Hussein Ibish, Senior Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, said it is not yet clear whether parochialism will triumph over populism in the aftermath of this crisis.

“There is discourse emerging from Europe that may not reflect the ground reality. There seems to be an adrenaline rush for insularity and parochialism promoted by populism which is not helping,” he said.

Dr. Ibish said that when it comes to international cooperation, he foresees the need to revive multilateralism but the bad actors are not changing their ways.

“Any thought that aggressive would-be hegemons like North Korea and Iran would be re-thinking their destabilizing policies are refuted by their own behavior. It’s a real question whether Turkey would be in any way inhibited in pursuing its own eastern Mediterranean hegemonic project,” said Dr. Ibish.
According to Dr. Ibish, the crisis also poses a real threat to democracy in many countries. “Authoritarian states like China, in particular, say they are better at the discipline and population control needed to contain the virus. It is very remarkable that China is using the pandemic to promote its system and its international brand and leadership,” he said.

Dr. Ibish also argued that demagogues may use this crisis to consolidate power. “Populism has taken hold in the West because of the idea that globalism cost the working classes their former position,” he said. He emphasized that the problem isn’t globalization but income inequality, which is the result of a series of laws since the 1980s.

Dr. David Meyer, Associate Professor of Security and Global Studies and Program Director, Master of Arts in Diplomacy at the College of Security and Global Studies, the American University in the Emirates, said the US will continue to demand favorable trade deals as national interest cannot be wished away.

“After this crisis ends, protectionism will come back with a vengeance as more and more countries slip into recession. If the quarantine lasts more than six months then we are looking at economic depression,” he said.

Dr. Meyer also said that the advantages of China’s lost-cost labor will now have to be looked into in the context of security. “China-America war is a lot more possible than a lot of people think. Just because the US and China are trading a lot doesn’t mean this possibility is over,” Dr. Meyer said.

Sharing China’s experience with Covid-19, Prof. Yong Wang of the School of International Studies and Director, Center for International Political Economy at Peking University, said China did the right thing by taking very tough measures such as locking down Wuhan.

“Chinese scientists shared genetic sequencing, which helped in data compilation and intelligence gathering to tackle the virus. The pandemic is under control in China and factories and companies are opening now. However, the government is still applying a very cautious approach,” he said.

Mahmood Mohammed Sharif, Director of Economic Studies and Dr. Stephen Blackwell, Director of Research & Strategic Studies at TRENDS Research & Advisory moderated the E-Symposium.

Follow this link for the entire E-Symposium: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGBeS9jtthE

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TRENDS Research & Advisory strives to present an insightful and informed view of global issues and challenges from a strategic perspective. Established in 2014 as an independent research center, TRENDS conducts specialized studies in the fields of international relations and political, economic and social sciences. It undertakes rigorous analyses of current issues and international and regional developments, especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Center analyses opportunities and challenges at various levels of the geopolitical spectrum. It evaluates scenarios and prospects to find scientific and objective answers and seeks to influence the decision-making process. TRENDS Research & Advisory aims to champion national and regional causes and build a strong network with research centers, organizations, and institutions around the world. It also seeks to benefit from the expertise of international research and academic institutions.