E-SYMPOSIUM

Confronting the Challenges of COVID-19: A New Global Outlook
Executive summary

Amid the largest crisis of modern times, which has encompassed the world in its entirety, this symposium provided a unique and innovative online platform gathering of international experts to discuss the global impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.

The symposium also included a special perspective on how China coped with the initial outbreak of the pandemic and adopted measures and solutions that could offer valuable lessons for other countries.

Covering medical, geostrategic and economic perspectives, five panelists offered their insights on multidimensional aspects of the crisis and gave comprehensive evaluations of the factors behind its emergence, the steps that might be taken to mitigate its negative effects worldwide, and likely future scenarios.
The key themes that have shaped the e-symposium were the following:

COVID-19 pandemic as a potential catalyst in reshaping the global geostrategic order;

The interplay between geostrategic rivalries and a globalized response framework;

Uncertainties and possibilities in the global race for a vaccine;

The tension between negative economic impacts and healthcare needs as the drivers of the global response;

Prospects of a COVID-19-induced global recession in 2020;

Competition between short- and long-term solutions in mitigating lasting consequences.

The e-symposium discussed an array of policies adopted to tackle the crisis, ranging from ad hoc measures to proactive and preventative global efforts.
With the COVID-19 crisis representing a historical milestone for the global community, this symposium performed a critical function in identifying its key aspects.

Above all, good practices and imaginative initiatives to mitigate the ongoing spread of the virus and galvanize global action; in this context, the window of opportunity for concerted international action in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic has not closed yet.

**Speakers’ main points**

**Professor Maurizio Barbeschi** (Adviser to the Executive Director, World Health Emergencies Programme (WHE) at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, Switzerland)

As the single most important form of societal defense in the current situation, Professor Barbeschi underscored the importance of learning how to live with the virus as humanity’s newfound reality. He warned that the COVID-19 virus will not cease to exist and, for that reason, the global community ought to find the most effective way of tackling it in unison and moving forward in the timeliest manner.

Prof. Barbeschi laid out his approach to the virus along three dimensions:
We need to focus on the nuances in societal systems around the world and the way different communities understand a virus outbreak in order to facilitate context- and location-specific solutions. As there is no universal panacea and an all-encompassing solution, we have to develop a deeper understanding of several moving targets, including population density, median age, disease baselines, the most prevalent socio-economic issues, and general socio-economic uncertainty at a particular place, in order to optimize our effectiveness.

The design and improvement of the healthcare system should be the first line of reflection for policymakers and the public around the world. Herein, he emphasized the importance of early detection and immediate response to minimize and potentially mitigate the risks that the exposure to infected populations poses to healthcare professionals who are on the front line. In other words, saving lives should be the priority of all stakeholders.

The third dimension is the race for the vaccine and the global efforts to understand the nature of the virus, whether it is cyclical like influenza or constantly present like the measles. With respect to successful practices, it is essential to reiterate that lockdowns, testing and contact tracing are all measures that have been proven to help in alleviating the acuteness of the situation.

All three dimensions require broad levels of reflection on personal and societal levels, in addition to the execution of responsible governance, which is reflected in the preventative deferment of major global events such as the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games and the Dubai Expo 2020.

Overall, good practices can help galvanize other good practices, albeit in a more localized manner.

**Prof. Gulfaraz Khan** *(Professor of Viral Pathology and Chair, Department of Medical Microbiology and Immunology at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, United Arab Emirates (UAE) University, United Arab Emirates)*

Concurring with Prof. Barbeschi, Prof. Khan highlighted the importance of recognizing the role of public health professionals as the first line of response to any virus outbreak. With respect to healthcare professionals, he stated that the COVID-19-induced crisis has revealed systemic weaknesses and the absence of preparedness around the world, in developed and developing countries alike.

Prof. Khan reminded the e-symposium that viral outbreaks are not a novel phenomenon in human history, as is best exemplified by the case of the 1918 pandemic influenza, also known as the “Spanish flu,” the 1957 influenza, known as the “Asian flu,” and the 1968 influenza outbreak, also known as the “Hong Kong flu.” The two latter influenza outbreaks led to over a billion deaths, an appallingly massive number that indicates the severity and mortality rate of these pandemics.
Moreover, the last 30 years alone have seen a number of viral outbreaks, including the H5N1 influenza outbreak in 1997, also known as the “bird flu,” the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002 and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2014, in addition to the Ebola outbreak in 2014, which killed 12,000 people and infected more than 28,000 others.

This snapshot historical narrative outlines that emerging and re-emerging infections are not historically unprecedented occurrences, implying that the COVID-19 outbreak will not be the last one either.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, the world has learned a number of lessons even at this early stage of its progression, including the following:

Diseases do not respect borders. Therefore, the sharing of best practices across borders is essential for the prevention of future infections, given that no country can act alone to fully address the COVID-19 pandemic.

The global scientific community has worked much more closely together compared to previous outbreaks to better understand the causes, mitigation and suppression of the pandemic. The WHO announced the virus at the end of December 2019 and, within two weeks, the Chinese authorities had identified the causative agent and sequences of the virus’s transmission, thus making it available to the international community. Such a quick action catalyzed the development of early diagnostic kits, essential for addressing the viral outbreak.

There has been an unprecedented number of scientific publications on different aspects of the virus, all of which have worked to deconstruct the core characteristics of the virus and paved the way for creating a potential cure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed numerous shortcomings, especially in regard to inadequate levels of preparedness. Timeliness, early testing, self-isolation and quarantine are all essential to minimizing the impact of the virus. In the early stages, we had a window of opportunity to prepare; however, in general, the global community failed to effectively rise to the challenge, albeit with some positive exceptions.

The world ought to be better prepared for future outbreaks. Given that the common theme among all the above-mentioned viruses is their zoonotic origin; namely, that many viral pathogens causing infections in humans have originated from animals or products of animal origin, the world ought to re-assess its policies with regard to animal treatment, farming practices and procedures for animal transport as part of more comprehensive preventative strategies for the future.
Dr. Hussein Ibish (Senior Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, United States of America)

Providing greater insight into the international relations angle of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Ibish focused on political narratives around the world.

From the very early stages, populist and nativist narratives seized the opportunity to address the crisis by capitalizing on accusatory speculation. Dr. Ibish pointed out that this is best exemplified by efforts to spread the rhetoric that refugees and migrants have brought the virus into Italy, thus exacerbating the already present fear of foreigners across the country.

In the United States, this narrative has been evident in increased attacks on Asian-American communities and a number of accusatory statements coming from the administration with reference to the virus as “Chinese.”

Moreover, Dr. Ibish iterated that selective travel bans, the most prominent example being the ones implemented by the current administration in the United States, are not the most effective solution as they reinforce the values of national separateness, and potentially provide justification for nativists to continue promoting divisive rhetoric.

In addition, Dr. Ibish highlighted the fact that there is a need to revive multilateralism to work together against the further spread of the virus and prevent greater damage to the world’s communities. The global community’s efforts to address the pandemic ought to be done in a holistic manner, rather than separately and in an insular manner by each country. Only then will the world start to fully recover and move forward.

Conversely, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that those actors who are seeking to distort and regress the global order are not changing their policies. Herein, any expectation that aggressive regional hegemons in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), such Iran, would change their rhetoric has proven to be unrealistic thus far, leaving the future of the MENA regional order highly uncertain.

Further, international disagreements over oil prices have been intensified by the COVID-19 outbreak. The first quarter of 2020 has seen a rapid price decline, thereby compounding the economic impact of the spread of the virus.

In highlighting specifically alarming situations of governance outside the MENA region that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Ibish mentioned the case of Hungary and the country’s potential to revert back to a fascist dictatorship if left unchecked. Hungary, in short, is a clear example of how demagogues can use the virus to hoard political power with little regard to the public health of their own populations.
One particularly alarming aspect of the current crisis is its spillover effect on the mass migration and refugee flows. The spread of the virus across Asia has the potential to produce migration movements similar to those in Syria or Latin America. Herein lies the danger of countries using the migration question as a political tool to gain strategic ground.

Despite a short-term crisis of democratic governance, the COVID-19 pandemic has confronted the world with the fact that administrative expertise and experience are the most important tools in addressing the crisis, both in the early stages and when devising and implementing future preventative measures. In the long-run, the nativist bubble is expected to burst and the value of administrative expertise will be rehabilitated.

**Dr. David Meyer** (Associate Professor of Security and Global Studies and Program Directory in the College of Security and Global Studies at the American University in the Emirates (AUE), United Arab Emirates)

With a focus on global geo-economics and international security, Dr. Meyer stated that the current crisis will not stop a number of ongoing conflicts and may even potentially deepen existing rifts. For instance, the United States and China have engaged in a blame game about their failure to stop the spread of the virus, among other things, while the European Union and Russia have been accusing one another of generating fake news about the virus.

In the MENA region, such accusations have been floated between Iran and some GCC member states regarding deliberately infecting people from both sides in order to reinforce their respective regional positions. In the US and the EU, migrants have been showcased as a potential biohazard with the outbreak of the virus.

With respect to the economics of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Meyer argued that the first quarter of 2020 has been the worst quarter for European equities since 2002, thus shedding light on the uncertainties in the global markets in the next quarter, especially in the scenario of a protracted crisis.

The virus has already been made into a political weapon internationally, with a possibility of it being transformed into a bio-weapon in the future.

Dr. Meyer agreed with Dr. Ibish and pointed at an increase in international cooperation, albeit without information sharing, which is the most important aspect of addressing the current pandemic. In other words, knowledge is power and many countries have been accused of either fabricating statistics or failing to release any data, including China, Russia and North Korea. In the terminology of political theory, the sucker’s payoff and the free-rider effect have already been prevalent with respect to information sharing and not much will change in the second quarter of 2020.
Moreover, Dr. Meyer highlighted that international interdependence increases vulnerability and there has already been competition among countries concerning acquiring basic goods, such as toilet paper, medical equipment, hand sanitizers and protection gowns. While international trade will continue to exist, it will come with some caveats that had not been seen prior to the crisis.

More specifically, the tolerance of the United States toward other countries’ tariffs on American goods, especially China and Canada, will be diminished. To that extent, the US will continue to demand more fair-trade deals regardless of the complexion of the next administration.

While the international community cannot be sure about how long the outbreak will last, Dr. Meyer iterated that economic protectionism will sharply increase. At the cost of economic efficiency, the need to produce essential goods domestically will be primarily driven by the countries’ sense of national security. An increase in inefficiency in certain industries through redundancy must be accepted to ensure no threatening embargoes. In other words, the world will have to accept national self-sufficiency as the new status quo, albeit this being a sub-optimal outcome in economic terms.

With more countries entering a recession, the prospects of another Great Depression are increasing. The geostrategic impact is such that, as the US and the EU become economically poorer, they will become less receptive to China’s mercantilism, which will have global economic repercussions for the world.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, major geopolitical alliances will remain unchanged as the virus is not a game-changer.

Professor Yong Wang (Professor at the School of International Studies, a Director of the Center for International Political Economy, and a Director of the Center for American Studies at Peking University, China)

Given the vast interconnectedness of the world today, Prof. Wang emphasized that the virus has been spreading more rapidly than in any previous outbreaks.

Moreover, the nature of the virus has shown to be quite dangerous. The manifested infection is quite strong and fairly unpredictable with a long incubation period. Many people had to test several times with varying results, in addition to those that were asymptomatic and yet infectious. The world, however, is still lacking deep knowledge of the virus, which ought to be the driving force behind any future efforts in addressing the current crisis.

Providing a comprehensive overview of China’s policies and efforts to contain the virus outbreak, Dr. Wang outlined measures such as a strict lockdown, social distancing, quarantine and testing that were implemented very early on. We have to acknowledge
some personal discomfort in the short-run; however, these measures are imperative to effectively overcome the crisis.

Dr. Wang emphasized the differences between the Chinese model and measures being implemented in the United States and across Europe in terms of the robustness of the different approaches. Dr. Wang advocated timeliness and tough measures, which have not been implemented on time in the US and the EU, which contributed to the rapid spread of the virus. China, on the other hand, implemented strong mobilization efforts very early on despite these efforts earning a global label of “draconian”.

Moreover, the Chinese authorities have immediately transformed local factories to produce protective suits and facial masks for medical practitioners, in addition to building additional Intensive Care Unit (ICU) hospitals to alleviate the shortage. Science and research have played an important role since the crisis onset in China, including remote diagnostics, big data analysis and the use of artificial intelligence (AI).

Overall, Dr. Wang emphasized that China stands prepared for what the future brings. Despite a great deal of uncertainty felt across the world, he believes that global crises require global solutions. International cooperation ought to be the way forward. Ideological differences and strategic rivalry between great powers will only produce more suffering and push us away from a lasting solution. The key to avoiding worst-case scenarios and massive fatalities across the world is by conducting effective dialogue between countries.

Herein, Dr. Wang did not believe that making a divisive distinction between democratic and non-democratic systems of governance in addressing the crisis necessarily precludes joint international efforts toward finding a solution.

In conclusion, a collaboration between nations is the way forward. In this regard, Dr. Wang believes that the United Arab Emirates and China can assist the world together, especially given their mutual collaboration on a number of previously implemented projects, the most prominent being the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

**Key themes**

Throughout the course of the e-symposium discussion, several key themes came up that have marked the global understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications on global communities:
1. The COVID-19 pandemic as a potential catalyst in reshaping the global geostrategic order

The discussion identified the potential of the COVID-19 pandemic changing the global status quo. Despite great uncertainty about the short- to medium-term future for the world, there was a consensus among the speakers that the pandemic will not introduce great shifts in global alliances.

While some short-term shifts are expected, especially in the national politics of many countries, as seen by the rise of accusative populist rhetoric, the medium- to long-term period will see the perseverance of international cooperation.

In economic terms, the pandemic might catalyze trade negotiations between great powers; however, it will not mark the end to the international free trade of goods and people in the foreseeable future.

2. The interplay between war-time analogies and a globalized response framework

As the world is witnessing extensive use of war-time analogies by political leaders and decision-makers in many countries when speaking of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a coordinated, international effort is now greater than ever.
The divisive narrative has served the populist politicians’ purpose of looking inward; however, such a response will not alleviate the massive deficiencies in governance and preparedness that country-level responses to the crisis have revealed.

Differences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic between global powers have not reduced human suffering and have impeded global efforts in finding a lasting solution. The key to tackling the current crisis in the most optimal manner is by conducting effective dialogue between countries, which results in both effective and proactive action around the world.

3. Uncertainties and possibilities in the global race for the cure

While there is no panacea for all global communities, the race for the vaccine requires global efforts.

Despite the wealth of data and scientific studies produced on the nature of the virus, it remains highly unlikely that a mass-production vaccine will be produced within the next 12 months. There are, however, a number of existing drugs being tested at the moment, with potentially fruitful results.

The existence of anecdotal evidence regarding the use of some existing drugs cannot prevent us from finding the cure and addressing the virus, whether it turns out to be a single outbreak or recurs in waves around the world over the next few years.

4. The tension between economic fallout and healthcare as the drivers of the global response

One necessary factor in creating an optimal response to tackling the virus is the existence of expert leadership on a country level and economic collaboration between countries in order to facilitate the flow of goods and trade.

While the COVID-19 pandemic may not be the game-changer for the development or cessation of free trade, re-addressing the laws and policies that have produced an unequal distribution of the fruits of globalization will be necessary for the virus’ aftermath.

In addition to widespread economic concern and the looming threat of a global recession, virtually all countries around the world have put the primary focus on supporting and boosting the effectiveness of their healthcare systems.

5. Prospects of a COVID-19-induced global recession in 2020

Global markets have suffered losses unseen since the financial crisis in 2008. Central banks and policymakers around the world have been increasing liquidity and cutting interest rates in an attempt to stabilize national economies amid a massive disruption of the flow of goods and supply chains.
Moreover, many countries, including Italy and the United States, have tapped into their national armies to assist them in addressing the crisis on the ground, while over a third of the world’s population remains in self-isolation.

With the crisis still ongoing, it is virtually impossible to calculate the extent of its cost on the global economy. All speakers, however, agreed that the repercussions will be felt for years to come.

6. Competition between short- and long-term solutions in mitigating lasting consequences

While populist politicians have been inciting fear around the world from the very early stages of the outbreak, long-term solutions will require expertise, administrative experience and international collaboration, all of which are available or attainable.

Several examples were highlighted during the e-symposium, including Hungary and the country’s potential to revert to a fascist dictatorship amid the current crisis if left unchecked. Hungary poses as a real-time example of how populism can utilize the spread of the COVID-19 virus to expand political power, even if such expansion goes against public health.

In the short-run, widespread fear and uncertainty propel the spread of accusatory rhetoric against minorities and non-nationals of many countries, with the most prominent example being the use of refugees and migrants to exacerbate fear of foreigners. Among other countries, populist politicians across Italy have used this tactic to increase fear among their constituencies with little regard for the overall societal well-being.

Across the Atlantic, similar rhetoric has been propagated with a sharp increase in attacks on Asian-Americans under the pretext that the COVID-19 outbreak in the US has been caused by a “Chinese virus,” initially supported by the official administration as well.

Moreover, selective travel bans, the most prominent example being the ones implemented by the Trump administration, have diligently worked to reinforce the values of national separateness. They have also potentially provided justification for nativists and populist politicians to continue promoting divisive rhetoric while not providing solutions.

These short-term negativities catalyze the need to revive multilateralism in the long-run in order for the world to persevere through the current crisis.

Policy recommendations
The e-symposium discussed a number of potential policy recommendations in optimizing the global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting crisis. These recommendations range from immediate ad hoc measures to proactive and preventative global efforts.

1. In the realm of global governance, one of the most important recommendations focuses on the re-assessment of global administrative expertise in crisis management. Reversing globalization is not the answer to the COVID-19 pandemic and, as such, it will not alleviate the massive health and socio-economic losses that have already affected societies across the globe.

2. Re-assessing the laws and policies that govern crisis management, in addition to re-evaluating the inequalities inherent in the global system of free trade and have reinforced unequal distribution of the fruits of globalization, is one of the best ways forward.

3. In the realm of economics, tailored re-negotiation of the conditions of free trade might be required for the continuation of trade and international flow of goods. Moreover, globalization and multilateral collaboration between countries need to be at the focus on global responses to the current crisis, which will prevent a complete halt to global trade and a virtual collapse of the global systems of economic exchange in the short-run.

4. Given the zooptic origin of the virus, the re-negotiation of global policies on animal control is imperative. Herein, countries around the world should re-evaluate their
policies with respect to animal treatment, especially wild animals, safe farming practices and procedures of animal handling and transport. Periodic testing, optimization of already implemented practices, and assessment of current laws and regulations should minimize the risk of a potential new outbreak in the long-run.

5. Above all, the medical sector in developed and developing countries are in urgent need of additional funding and reform to optimize their responses to future crises. As all the speakers emphasized, healthcare systems should be prioritized for future action. Regardless of other factors including economic considerations, saving lives should be the main objective of all stakeholders.

6. In tackling global governance, truthfulness and trust were emphasized by all speakers as the keys to long-term success and a sustained approach to any viral outbreak. Drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic is essential in re-establishing societal trust both within and among countries in the coming times. It is worth noting that all types of political systems have had degrees of success in tackling the outbreak, some more than others. However, it is strategy and governance capacity rather than political ideology that will prevail as the factor that determines success at the end.

7. The essential element of all future efforts is research and unified scientific inquiry to raise the levels of global preparedness for future crises, given that the COVID-19 pandemic is not the last of its kind to spread. Anticipating a vaccine in the next quarter of 2020 is highly unlikely; however, significant efforts have been made to test existing medication and further analyze the biochemical structure of the virus in order to catalyze the finding of a potential cure in the coming times.

While there is no panacea for the current crisis, expert leadership and economic collaboration, with an emphasis on strengthening public healthcare systems around the world, are required as the optimal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

With the COVID-19-induced global crisis representing the greatest test that humanity has faced in modern history, this symposium provided a unique e-platform for gathering together renowned experts to analyze the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting crisis, in addition to tackling potential responses and complicating factors.

Covering medical, geostrategic and economic perspectives, five panelists covered a comprehensive range of angles and offered thorough insights on the emergence of the crisis and the steps that might be taken to mitigate its negative effects worldwide.

As one of the key themes, the re-assessment of global administrative expertise in crisis management has been highlighted as an imperative in the coming times, in
addition to tailored re-negotiation of the international economic order. As one of the most important aspects of the collective global response, the race for the cure and the international collaboration and competition for the vaccine were outlined as well.

Given that the world finds itself in a crisis of previously unimaginable proportions, the window of opportunity for a globally coordinated response should remain open for the foreseeable future. The emphasis must remain on saving lives, especially in times of great uncertainty as has been seen in the first quarter of 2020.

Above all, and with respect to the state of public health around the world, an optimized and timely collaboration between nations is the way forward.