

Opinion – Realism and the Coronavirus Crisis

Written by Frederick Kliem

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FREDERICK KLIEM, APR 11 2020

IR scholars are often mocked for their obsession with theory and often dismissed by those outside the field as a purely academic exercise. And true enough, IR theory cannot help solve any of the current problems regarding the global spread of the novel coronavirus/Covid-19. What IR theory can do, however, is offer informed predictions as to how states will react to crises and they can help us to understand why states react the way they do – principally in this case via realism. As realists would expect, when crises hit, it is not international organisations, not even the World Health Organisation (WHO) or NGOs, that citizens turn to first. It is their own respective governments that citizens ask to take the necessary actions to protect them from the threat and to provide for relief efforts. In the absence of a global authority governing international relations, the nation state is proving once more that it is the main actor in global politics.

No realist would be surprised to learn of the national self-help, the “Us First” mentality, currently on display. Travel and entry bans, international scapegoating and pharmaceutical protectionism is ubiquitous. Even in the world’s only truly supranational organisation, the European Union (EU), we witness how the member states readily violate otherwise sacrosanct principles, such as the “four freedoms of movement” (goods, capital, services and people). EU members do so, because it is the national self-interest that is the only truly sacrosanct currency of IR.

Italy is thus far the worst affected country after China. When Rome asked fellow EU members for emergency relief with critical medical supplies, for weeks it was met with precisely what realism would expect: national self-help. Italy’s neighbours violated the EU’s single-market spirit by decreeing an export ban on pharmaceutical equipment. Dismayed by the lack of European solidarity, Rome was happy to accept China’s support instead, which, badly affected themselves, sent medical equipment and experts. Fearing for its global reputation as the point-of-origin of the coronavirus, Beijing landed a noteworthy PR-coup.

Similarly, Germany closed its borders with its southern and western neighbours to all but the most essential of cross-border travels to prevent Covid-19 import and cross-border panic buying, as some neighbours confined their citizens to their home. Even during the refugee crisis in 2015, sealing-off borders was a highly contentious issue and practiced only partially and very sparingly, while especially countries like Germany, felt compelled to uphold the spirit of a borderless Europe. In a similar story, we also witnessed the US President trying to acquire a German company close to developing a Covid-19 vaccine. Europe’s closest ally and partner attempted to exploit the German research success by giving his own people exclusive access to German pharmaceutical discoveries – possibly the bluntest display of national self-interest of the Covid-19 crisis to date.

Even more worrying may be the immediate suspension of virtually all critical EU regulations by its members: competition law, fiscal discipline requirements, and the four freedoms. Possibly the closest to a perfect international rules-based order, European nations violated otherwise steadfast rules at will once a crisis hit. The immediate astonishment over how quickly lofty European ideals and norms make space for national self-help aside, even if those measures are temporary in nature, the damage is done and may permanently change the nature and the spirit of Europe.

Perhaps to the dismay of neoliberal institutionalists, it is interesting to note how little the WHO features in the Covid-19 crisis. In Singapore for example, the WHO was mostly noted for praising the exemplary (and unilateral)

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measures that Singapore had undertaken, such as banning foreigners from entering or confining them to their hotels or houses very early on. Indeed, it is not unthinkable that liberals may wake up from the Covid-19 crisis and find a large scale back of economic interdependence as multinationals decide that the risk of supply-chain disruption is greater than the higher price-tag of producing locally, and they may well rethink what Marxists call “supply-chain capitalism”.

“No single theory explains it all” as Stephen Walt frequently reiterates. And while this is correct, of course, it seems that whenever a global crisis hits, realism offers the best singular explanatory lens. It is not only that states remain the central actors, it is also that current national measures at the expense of international cooperation is precisely what realists would expect to happen in times of crisis. International cooperation comes easy in times of harmony – but Covid-19 shows us once more that such cooperation is much harder to come by when actually needed.

Going forward, a realist would expect further restrictions on international exchange in order to minimise threat – a temporary scale-down of globalisation, as it were. The crisis also indicates possible scenarios as to what global climate change action/reaction could look like in the future as it may not present an opportunity for global cooperation and may instead spur nationalism and zero-sum state competition to secure national interests. Realism also tells us that states usually try to outdo their peers. Governments may jealously look towards one another and adopt measures that show themselves to be working. In that sense we can place hope in the ability of western states to copy successful measures taken by some Asian states to contain the spread of Covid-19. Finally, realists may also highlight the fact that once a crisis has struck, authoritarian governments seem better equipped to quickly curtail it, and we may therefore see China specifically touting its governance model on that basis.

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Dr Frederick Kliem is a Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. His research interests include regional integration and multilateralism in Asia and Europe. At the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, he studies ASEAN, Southeast Asia and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. He is also Consultant on ASEAN-EU matters to EU consortia in Brussels. His latest publication is ‘Asia’s Troubled River: Dam(n)ing or Managing the Mekong?’, *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies* (2020).