

Opinion – Challenges to the Realist Perspective During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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GAZALA FAREEDI, MAY 6 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has acted as the *coup-de-grace* to the efficacy and capability of the global institutions. The United Nations and the countless regional organizations have seemingly failed humanity when people needed the world to act together the most. The talk of the town is that the state has become the sole provider of security and stability and that globalization is in retreat. In this context, one needs to ask whether the failure of these global institutions mean a failure of liberal institutionalism in its totality? And, what does the realist theory of international politics have to offer at this point of global crisis? The most targeted organization has been the World Health Organization (WHO). Amidst the allegations that it helped China cover up the spread of the disease and did not propose travel restrictions on it, one must not forget the fact that it had declared coronavirus as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020. Yet large scale accusations against the organization especially by US president, Donald Trump, have done much to discredit the organization.

Such charges and counter-charges need to be explicated within the context of the relationship between states and international organisations (IOs). Although most international organizations, especially those based on a charter/constitution/treaty have their own independent legal personality, that does not give them absolute authority. The reality is vastly different where there is a constant pull and push between the power of these organizations and the various states. The fundamental contradiction lies in the fact that international organizations are mandated with the task of governing the behavior of states which comprise them. The present structure of the international politics dictates that states are sovereign entities and they are voluntarily a part of these multilateral forums. If their interest demands, they can opt out of these institutions. The actual power of international organizations depends on how much the states are willing to delegate, authorize and empower them in all manners.

Even if we agree to the hypothesis that with this pandemic, states have returned to the world stage as a stronger entity against the forces of political and economic globalization, one needs to ask who is making these claims? Is this coming from the states that already have a certain degree of power and were in the competition for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council? This is important as small island states or states with limited resources/power do not have the capacity to make such arguments. They rely on international organizations and their allies for a number of basic goods/services in the field of health, education, technology and others. The United States has the resourcefulness to opt out of climate change negotiations or the WHO, but underdeveloped and developing countries in the Global South do not have that option.

From another perspective, not only did international organizations seemingly fail humanity, but many of the most powerful sovereign states are also failing in handling this pandemic. Yet, if humanity has no option but to fall back to the state as a last refuge, then one also needs to re-imagine the nature of the state both domestically and internationally. Domestically, the dangers of authoritarianism are lurking in the backyard of emergency powers that have been obtained by most states which needs to be checked once the crisis is over. Internationally, there has to be a growing acceptance that states are worse off in dealing with such crisis alone.

The realist paradigm posits that since the international structure is anarchical because it lacks a world government, sovereign states have no option but to engage in self-help in order to survive. The states become the main actors and

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international organizations become a mere tool in the hands of the powerful. Within this realm, which is akin to Hobbes' 'state of nature', competition and conflict is the order of the day. The paradigm falls short in giving a framework to understand and analyze a global threat like this pandemic. The continuity of the discourse of great power rivalry with the politics of blame game and passing the buck to the enemy outside/inside one's country becomes anachronistic in such a situation.

For example, calling the virus as a Chinese Virus/conspiracy by China with the WHO being complicit or some people in India blaming Muslims for the spread of the virus comes in this category. Such ruthless pragmatism done for the sake of saving one's government electorally has enormous possibility of bringing about more chaos internationally. On the other hand, the liberal framework proposes that though there is no global authority above the states, this does not automatically make states behave only in an egoistic and self-seeking manner. Here, the role of international organizations is one of not only providing a common platform for negotiations but also mitigating the selfish tendencies of states by making them realize the benefits of mutual co-operation.

Within the domain of liberal institutionalism, varied global institutions have been created at different points of time to benefit humanity on a number of fronts. The argument against their existence from a realist perspective is that states are not only worried about cheating and the 'free rider' problem, but also about relative gains. It is assumed that states will find it problematic if another state gains more by their interaction than itself. Such a standpoint is turned on its head in a case like a global health pandemic. Presently, the point is not whether states seek to co-operate or not, but that their choice of non-co-operation will bring about a great collective loss. The realist logic of absolute versus relative gains falls flat when it comes to problems like global health and climate change. As an oft quoted line says 'global problems require global solutions.'

As can be observed from the domestic level, non-governmental organizations and civil society have often provided for the distraught masses and covered up for the failures of the state. The same is true in the international realm with regard to the developing countries and the support provided by international organizations. In fact, even the most powerful countries have required help in terms of medicines, ventilators and personal protective equipment. The pandemic has truly questioned the limiting theories of global politics which posit self-regarding/egoistic behavior by states as the only natural behavior. The majority of the humans are at such a stage that states, international organizations and the global civil society will have to work together to bring people out of this chaos towards healing, stability and prosperity. This is not only ideal but also an imperative considering the nature of the challenges that the future holds for humanity. One cannot give up on the values of global fraternity at this point.

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