Reframing Globalization: COVID-19 and 21st Century Institutional Retreat

On March 30, 2001, US President George W. Bush announced the United States was leaving the Kyoto Protocol on global warming. Eventually, this move signalized the regime's end. On July 7, 2020, President Donald Trump notified the United Nations that the US was leaving the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 epidemic (by then, with more than 10 million infections worldwide, 3 million-plus in the US). The move could further weaken an organization under fire since the announcement of an international health emergency earlier that year on January 30. Within days, the WHO launched an independent investigation on its handling of the epidemic, after admitting delays in releasing critical data and reviewing the possibility of airborne contagion. Across the two decades that set apart Kyoto's demise from a new disease from Wuhan, international relations experienced a steady institutional retreat. The zeitgeist of a new century shows a reversal of the late-1990s hopes spurred by the end of the Cold War and Berlin Wall's fall. In this sense, COVID-19 was no game-changer. It built upon already established trends.

Pulling Plugs: Two Decades on Retreat

International institutions had already been facing prolonged disillusions when COVID-19 set in. The arch of transformations that encompassed the end of the Cold War initially brought renewed enthusiasm for the institutional architecture built after World War II. The UN, the Bretton Woods institutions, and a plethora of regional organizations (among others) had roles (and budgets) expanded since 1989 – but burgeoning activities collided with ambivalent outcomes. By the turn of the century, governments from different tonalities of the political spectrum called for a retreat. Emerging powers (spearheaded by China, Russia, India, and Brazil) vocalized the lack of representativeness and efficiency of the Bretton Woods institutions after financial crises that roamed between 1994 and 2008. After shaking cobwebs from the Cold War decades by responding vehemently to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1991), the UN's collective security system has not been triggered ever since – and became a matter of relentless strife.

Following a host of unilateral interventions that began in the late 20th century (the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 – both carried out by US-led coalitions, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in Yemen's civil war since 2015), the UN recognized a "new normal". The Security Council acquiesced to already-deployed warring coalitions of the willing engaging the "Islamic State" in Syria. Fighting international terrorism beyond the UN's boundaries has been a constant feature of the post-9-11 international system. During the same period, UN-centered peacekeeping operations experienced the apex of their activities and a noticeable retreat (in the number of operations and budgets) into the new century, with regional organizations gradually claiming responsibilities and prerogatives from a contested UN.

When in 2001 the US withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, leaving didn't create an opportunity for rising powers to carry on the torch. On the contrary – by pulling the plug, the US triggered a downward spiral of the regime. Canada, Russia, and Japan soon followed on. A decade after, during COP-21 (2015) major industrialized and developing economies reached less ambitious agreements on reducing carbon emissions voluntarily. However, the Paris Agreement was imploded by Trump's US in 2017 (by then, more compliant with voluntary reductions than Xi Jinping's China). A similar fate befell the 2018's Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. The Marrakech Pact was shunned *en masse* by members of the European Union (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic,

Reframing Globalization: COVID-19 and 21st Century Institutional Retreat

Written by Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama

Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia) and scorned by Trump's US. Brazil quickly retreated and Russia accepted the pact with reservations. Implementation remains cryptic.

After a ballooning late-1990s, the World Trade Organization dispute settlement system fell into deadlock after the 2008 crisis, with succeeding US administrations (from Obama to Trump) exploring bureaucratic fragilities in face of increasing trade deficits with developing nations. The push for global accommodation and cautious reform under Director-General Roberto Azevêdo engendered crestfallen outcomes, falling short of the magnitude of relentless pressures.

Across the 21st century, attempts of providing institutionalized responses to global hazards were countered by recalcitrant states unwilling to further their commitments. The worldwide effects of ongoing coronavirus epidemic accelerated the erosion of international norms and multilateral institutions already on course by 2019 (Brexit's fulfillment, UNASUR's nadir, the crumbling of the WTO under pressure of the US-China trade war escalation). International institutions were under siege and under fire before COVID-19. A pattern of descent unfolds from this recapitulation, shedding light on the pandemic's impacts.

Patterns of Descent: Impacts of COVID-19 on international institutions

In the "age of the deal", selective erosion of international institutions and regimes can seem attractive for a while. Shortcomings, inconveniences of international bureaucracies are easy targets for domestic discontent and aggressive rhetoric by national governments. Early instances of "flexible normativity" on grounds other than multilateral ones have already been laid across the 21st century. The arrival of COVID-19 was wrapped in ambivalence.

A first move was comprised of attempts to reach out to the crisis' magnitude. By broadening the scope of chronically underfunded institutions, states open the gates for contestation from elsewhere rooted in efficiency. Therefore, the "new teeth" postulated by enforcing new tasks or increasing current ones might never properly arrive. Ernst Haas explored this scenario under the conceptual umbrella of "turbulence without learning"[1]: institutions become simultaneously more ambitious, more contested by different public, and less desirable for their constituencies. One of COVID-19's earliest effects was enhancing estrangement between states. The quick adoption of containment policies suddenly raised walls upon multitudinous intercourses. At the same time, the reference institution in global public health, the WHO, remained underfunded, lacking "teeth" and thereby restrained during the greatest challenge of its history.

The second act has states indulging in competitive autarky and re-franchising the costs of fighting epidemics to fragile international institutions at odds with public opinion. A pivotal element in the workings of international institutions, the dissemination of expert, up-to-date information was hampered by lengthy delays. Between notifications of a new disease in Wuhan, China in late 2019, and WHO's announcement of an international health emergency on January 31, 2020, traces of COVID-19 had already reached European shores. As the WHO cautiously pursued data from the Chinese government, curbing the global spread of disease lost momentum to unilateral imperatives of (regional, national) lockdown – already in place as it finally announced a global pandemic on March 11.

COVID-19 eclipsed the the WHO's previous responses to emerging diseases (as SARS, MERS, and Ebola). However, with cautious restraint, dire information, and shell-shocked by hostile publics and states, WHO could not build integrated multidimensional responses upon lessons learned. Such responses were subcontracted by default to regional bodies; even their spare advice fell on deaf ears, as states readily adopted "war economy" packages, hiding in their own shells. Large portions of the world had already descended into lockdown when the burden from labeling delays was squeezed into WHO offices by hostile governments, embroiled in trade wars amidst a harrowing recession.

The next scene sees an already fragile international cooperation landscape overwhelmed by twin shocks. Rising contestation of international institutions built upon previous waves of resistance to multilateralism, discrediting

Reframing Globalization: COVID-19 and 21st Century Institutional Retreat
Written by Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama

technical advice. Additionally, uncoordinated responses on a strictly national basis provided a centrifugal force for the first 100 days of epidemics. COVID-19 brought further turbulences to already shaky grounds. The closure of Schengen space and Trump's removal of WHO's funding were not linchpins of sudden multilateral debacles. Unsuspectingly, the epidemic rather reinforced pervasive liabilities and shortcomings.

Multilateralism[2] is a normative process based on joint reflection upon shared challenges and diffuse reciprocity. As states adopted autarchic routes to face the epidemic, they were denying reciprocity on grounds of national emergency. Global labeling of COVID-19 as a complex emergency suffered accordingly. A virus rush ensued, with states racing to the bottom for health services, supplies, and human resources. Shot from both sides, multilateralism remains in a precarious situation in a world of narrow transactionalism.

Another conflictive effect of the arrival of COVID-19 was the urge to replicate the most successful measures, as soon as new continents joined the race. The spread of the coronavirus created a situation in which leadership in the lines of Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and Hungary's Viktor Orbán deceptively fit in. Initially, at least, their grip on nationalistic imaginaries and national resources seemed replicas of the forceful Chinese responses to COVID-19. As they eventually faced burgeoning infection rates, that proved not to be the case. Suboptimal responses were revealed and the US and Brazil surpassed China as epicenters of the global epidemic.

A "new normal": Turbulent Interdependence in Times of Pandemic Complexity

Under the aegis of a transformational pandemic, many are tempted to forecast future shocks. We are either on the verge of planetary transformation or in the throes of inept leaders. Maybe the crisis laid bare our governments' shortcomings; we are stuck with manic reiterations of rulings of diminishing returns. That is to say, COVID-19 may change everything or change nothing – or anything in-between. In the meantime, we still have not been consulted as to the conditions of change. Any of those premises would derive from everyday life in the global context of December 2019. Last year's features – unexpected civil society protests worldwide mixed with the complexities of international intercourse – were interrupted by COVID-19. However, they are still there. We do not lack a starting point (or a handful of dimensions to explore). Though we may be looking for Minerva's owl and there are no unbounded conditions available for change.

Already waiting for a full economic recovery, we may be missing parts of the "new normal" picture. Even though this is not the most important factor in international institutions' long-standing decline, COVID-19 brought a host of challenges to international relations. Health investments worldwide have been lost by austerity and adjustment policies in 2008's aftermath. In stagnated economies under lockdowns and curfews, such decisions take their toll. How to mobilize resources to support precarious health systems has become the most urgent task for different societies, which cannot afford confinement for long. Lockdown had a massive impact on fragile countries beset with weak economies and deficient health systems. Legitimacy on the wane in the economic and political fields demands more than impromptu measures. The pandemic raised uncertainty in an already weakened *status quo*. Disconnections between quick responses in developed economies and timid international responses are startling. Asymmetries in the global distribution of health professionals are on the rise. The erosion of the WHO's stance reduces the likelihood that vaccines, therapies, and diagnostics will be shared equally.

The sudden drive to self-reliance runs contrary to the pervasive effects of interdependence. The coordinated assistance from different sources, handled by proper leadership, informed by reliable data and sustained expertise seems a high tally for the time being, but long-standing inequalities showing up on peoples' lives can no longer stand apart from international dynamics. With each corner of the globe looking to different diseases of the past searching for lessons, there is a lack of international initiatives for turning vaccines into global public goods or devising incentive systems to muster producers. The creation of cluster quarantine areas around big population centers is an early sign of the scale of new social relations.

During the Cold War, the international system was divided according to supranational lines of ideology. Walls, fences, color patterns, standing armies, nuclear warheads were superimposed upon those lines – whose shadows reached outer spaces and political imaginations. The gravitational center of this world of containers, to where all

Reframing Globalization: COVID-19 and 21st Century Institutional Retreat

Written by Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama

roads lead, was the infamous Berlin Wall. As it was torn down in 1989, three-pronged signposts spilled over the system: sovereignty, democracy, liberalism. The Wilsonian amalgam turned clocks back to 1918 (when international relations emerged as a scientific discipline). Nostalgically, the international institutions of 1945 were remodeled after their predecessors' images.

Scenes of Europe under siege were not seen since WWII. 75 years after the conflict, much of the continent remained on lockdown, confined not by war, but by national responses to a pandemic. After 1989, forecasting often presupposed spatial homogeneity. Fukuyama's "end of history"[3]. Hardt & Negri's borderless empire[4]. Wendt's "world state"[5]. Kupchan's "no one's world"[6]. Acharya's "multiplex"[7]. Situations of containment change structural features of the international system. It gives way to state differentiation. The Berlin Wall was an embodiment of this transformation. During the Cold War, states didn't behave as like-units; most couldn't aspire to full-bodied sovereignty. The Wall's fall promised porous, fluid globalization in the way of integration. And, paradoxically, it ushered in an age of state-building.

Under COVID-19, states retreat into territories-as-containers. In a contained system, one size does not fit all. Containment propels renewed state differentiation. And, paradoxically, it fragments states into different clusters of social activity associated with the virus. COVID-19 woke us up from recurring IR national epistemologies. Working on a national basis proved inadequate to deal with the virus' dissemination not only beyond borders (to which our knowledge remains minimal, in a locked-down world) but *within them*. Understanding subnational entities as hotspots/clusters poses increasing challenges to social norms such as sovereignty *and* multilateralism. We already know global commons cannot be reduced to nation-states. Now, we face additional complexities and discomforts.

Rethinking polities among a pandemic is just the first task. We may bring back early notions of global governance in multiple levels, though hardly concentric circles. However, what defines such levels is a division of social labor (social norms) about which COVID-19 leaves us puzzled, with mixed feelings. Overlapping, competing social norms don't amount to swift accommodation. We may expect further politicization of daily lives plus renewed surveillance moves.

Global health's geography approaches the width of circles. States get less adequate as gravitational centers in a global context but *international* organizations still rely on state intercourse, remaining unable to access subnational unities. This also applies to the European Union; communitarian institutions had a limited grip on national decisions to lockdown entire regions and preemptively sever Schengen. Lockdown also produces a negative externality on migration (internally and internationally), which enhances the contradictions of a contained world. It is no surprise that a steady sequence of suboptimal responses followed suit.

In terms of global pandemics, national responses proved wildly uneasy for comparison. Searches for 'best practices' and 'lessons learned' proved difficult in a period of sprawling uncoordinated activity. Clearly, one size does not fit all present demands. As most societies restricted their intercourse, tightened up inner dynamics, we were propelled into isolation. However contingent this situation may be (as it seems), it didn't undergo lengthy public discussion. Debate overtly precluded, preemptive or reactive manners prevailed, ponderations left for later, whose duration we still endure.

During pandemics, complex interdependence renders connectivity more dangerous, agents more reluctant to depend on one another – precisely because one's local acts spillover its consequences far beyond. Societies shutting down have incentives to look for autocratic policies and attempt unfeasible self-sufficiency moves. National governments are refranchising the cost of the crisis at the expense of the current institutional framework, globally and regionally. Severed multilateral ties will not easily spring back. The scenario sketched by James Rosenau 30 years ago (just as the Berlin Wall fell) comes to fruition now: turbulence in world politics unmotivated by international warfare[10]. We are deeply unfamiliar, uncomfortable with this enforced peace's outcomes.

Despite global ambitions, there is scarcely any kind of global leadership. China is still blamed for the pandemic's outburst, the US moved to leave the WHO for allegedly being "too close" to Beijing. Europe dwells on the remains of a walled Schengen, hesitating before devising unified answers. Emerging economies are more vulnerable to COVID19 effects. Regional dynamics enhance deep-seated asymmetries, contributing to a more oligarchic

Reframing Globalization: COVID-19 and 21st Century Institutional Retreat
Written by Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama

(dis)order. The resulting pull and push evidence a continuing lack of meaningful global governance.

Overlapping crises – environmental, economic, epidemic – render international institutions altogether more fragile and contested, less prone to binding decisions than governments on the ropes. That applies to WHO, the WTO, and the UN's Security Council. Deep silences, broken by nationalistic lingo, autarchic efforts, don't comprise any return to normality. COVID-19 severed multiple channels that linked societies until 2019. It became the high-priority issue in different societies and on a global scale. Military power seems inadequate for it. With 2 out of 3 conditions of "complex interdependence" absent, we deal with a different "globalization".

Aggressive economic acceleration is counter-productive to investments in international institutions, as norms remain in lockdown. The global economy remains interconnected – but different stages of economic "recovery" alongside different stages of the epidemic truncate such entanglements. Resulting inequalities enhance other overlapping diseases – smallpox is on the rise in Brazil, the DRC experiences an Ebola outbreak. Even if eventually the US takes a U-turn, picking up pieces of multilateralism with renewed alliances, this may not be enough to lead international institutions back on track. Soft Power has been overtly state-led. COVID-19 hampers these efforts. In "new" globalization, one size does not fit all purposes.

A world of containment breeds autocratic impulses – *coronationalism*. International responses fall into a tailspin. National answers to global problems are, on average, suboptimal ones. The aggregate of national answers promotes further imbalances in the asymmetric anarchy. Short-run responses prevail over long-term concerted action. Beggar-thy-neighbor policies during epidemics may backfire. *Ad hoc* actions fuel nationalism as well as global insecurity. People become more skeptical of their governments since they can no longer contribute to the safest possible international environment.

Quarantines, lockdowns elongate uncertainties. In a world of containment, rising anxieties and control of space turn into readiness for action. States may benefit from multilateral delays of their own making in the short run, shunning international bodies at too high a cost. Then, global delays in responding to epidemics get in the way of angry confined populations. Against this backdrop, we get closer to Zygmunt Bauman's imperative of coexistence[11]. Accepting one another regardless of differing circumstances, we may be able to coexist in conflict-prone, contingent cooperation. An emergency brings opportunity for joint leaps ahead.

Efforts to bring production closer to home, fostering self-reliance are compatible with a systemic, cooperative basis grounded on multilateral rules. Building healthcare infrastructures can become a global common good and universal health access a human right. Once subnational/national systems become more compatible, international coordination may be tackled. Multiple capacities put together trigger confidence building, enhancing cumulative efforts. The coordinates of such coexistence may involve a key role for international institutions. Otherwise, persisting epidemics may push us further into a parochial, de-globalizing world of clusters, dully connected through reinforced borders, thick anxiety, discretionary measures taken upon reluctant publics. Prolonged disillusions are costly. There is still time to change.

Notes

[1] Haas, E. (1990). When Knowledge is Power. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[2] Ruggie, J. G. (1992). "Multilateralism: the anatomy of an institution". International Organization, Vol. 46, No. 3, p. 561-598.

[3] Fukuyama, F. (1992). The End of History and the Last Man. Los Angeles: Avon Books.

[4] Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000). Empire. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[5] Wendt, A. (2003). "Why a World State is Inevitable". European Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9(4), p. 491–542

[6] Kupchan, C.A. (2012). No One's World – The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[7] Acharya, A. (2014). The End of American World Order. Cambridge: Polity.

[8] Keohane, R.O. & Nye Jr., J. (1977). Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition. Boston: Little, Brown.

[9] Zimmern, A. (1918). Nationality and Government, with other War-time Essays. New York: Robert M. McBride and Company.

[10] Rosenau, J.N. (1990). Turbulence in World Politics: a Theory of Change and Continuity. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[11] Bauman, Z. (2001). "The Great War of Recognition". Theory, Culture & Society, vol.18, n. 2-3, p.137-150.

About the author:

Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama is Professor of International Relations at Universidade Federal do Tocantins (UFT, Brazil). He was Vice Coordinator of the BRICS Policy Center (2010-11), Director of International Affairs at UFT (2016-18) and a visiting scholar at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (2019-20).