

NONE GAINS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM WHO

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

On July 6, when the number of novel coronavirus cases and deaths in the U.S. reached over 2.8 million and nearly 0.13 million, respectively, the U.S. officially notified the United Nations of its intention to [withdraw membership from the World Health Organization](#). This comes after President Donald Trump announced on May 29 his [decision to halt funding](#) and pull out of the global health body. After accusing [WHO of being "China-centric"](#) on multiple occasions, this unfortunate development is one more attempt by Mr. Trump to deflect blame for gross mismanagement of the crisis. In a May 18 letter, he officially [demanded that the WHO make "major substantive improvements"](#) in 30 days while charging that the global body lacked "independence" from China, was slow to respond to the threat, and had "repeatedly made inaccurate or misleading claims" about the virus. Since the decision has apparently been taken without the approval of Congress, and as the withdrawal will become effective only on July 6 next year, there is a possibility that Congress or courts might reverse the withdrawal. Already, Democratic challenger Joe Biden has promised to revoke it if elected President. There is much at stake and unsurprisingly Congress is already under pressure from academia and medical associations to reject the withdrawal. The capricious decision to withdraw from WHO will have dire consequences for global public health. The departure of the U.S. will be a significant blow to the WHO in terms of loss of technical expertise and, according to Mr. Trump, an annual funding of about \$450 million.

The pandemic has clearly brought to the fore several shortcomings and weaknesses in the global health body. For instance, the 2005 revision of the International Health Regulations made it mandatory for countries to notify the WHO of all events that may constitute an international public health emergency and to "respond to requests for verification of information regarding such events". Yet, the WHO has limited power to ensure compliance by member States, including limitations in independently verifying member states' official reports. If the U.S. was majorly involved in the 2005 IHR revision, it will now have no role to play in strengthening the WHO. It will lose a seat at the table to determine the virus strain to be used for developing influenza vaccines (flu killed over 34,000 people in the U.S. in 2018-19), and have no access to new influenza virus samples for research. With no more U.S. scientists embedded in the WHO in key roles, including outbreak response teams like the one that visited Wuhan, it will lose out on health intelligence that will compromise the country's response to international disease outbreaks. In the end, none gains from a further weakened WHO.

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