

REMAKING THE FUTURE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The global economy is beginning to reel under the unexpected effects of [COVID-19](#), the [coronavirus](#) that has left scarcely any part of the world unscathed. The steep cut announced in the US federal interest rate, down a full percentage point to a range of 0-0.25 per cent, is a desperate bid to shore up liquidity in the world's largest economy at a time when stocks have tanked and the bond market is in disarray. Goldman Sachs has predicted that the US economy's growth rate will be flat for the first three months and in the next three months, it would contract by 5 per cent. With unemployment rates set to double even faster than they did during the financial and economic crisis of 2008, the stage appears set for a recession that will not be limited to the US. It will compound the economic slowdown in the world's second-largest economy, China, which is the largest trading nation, and possibly set off a chain reaction.

The hardest hit, globally, are the services sectors and inter-dependent supply chains in the manufacturing sector. Business in travel, tourism, hospitality and public entertainment including restaurants, malls and theatres is at a complete standstill, destroying the means of livelihood of millions. Global manufacturing took a hit with the appearance of the coronavirus in Wuhan, and China's lockdown. Now, with the [pandemic](#) spreading its tentacles around the world, it resembles a knockout punch. One wonders if the current situation will strengthen the trend towards protectionism and emphasis on domestic manufacturing even if it is against the principles of market forces. A febrile and debilitated globalisation featuring closed borders and disrupted trade and supply chains, ironically, coincides with a pressing need to evolve a fresh outlook on global interdependence and cooperation in dealing with pandemics and a host of other issues.

The unprecedented challenge from COVID-19 is also creating new inflection points for the global economy. E-commerce, including online start-ups and delivery apps for groceries and merchandise, are likely to see a spurt in business, provided supply chains hold out. Online entertainment platforms, TV serials and home entertainment will see a surge in scope and stock value, but new productions will be difficult to create on account of restrictions, unavailability of locations and a depleted workforce.

The shuttering of schools and universities obviously means a huge boost for online education, distance learning and self-employment opportunities. Home learning with one-on-one lessons could spawn a new industry for those with adequate access to computers, broadband and wifi connectivity, with the advantage going to nations that enjoy greater internet penetration. This will also mean huge stress on existing bandwidth capacities for network and telecom service providers. Network capacities and related infrastructure, whether national or international, are not easily mutable, being capital intensive and time-consuming to develop. Throttling back on high definition (HD) services to free up bandwidth congestion in Europe is already being mulled by big operators such as YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime and [Apple](#) TV.

These circumstances no doubt place a fresh premium on getting ahead in the race to develop 5G capabilities to mitigate existing limitations, and this is true of the healthcare sector in particular. Global resilience in dealing with pandemics would be greatly enhanced by 5G technology, especially in large and populous countries like India.

The next generation of telecom infrastructure will have to be dovetailed, in terms of cost and spread, with the needs of mass healthcare schemes such as the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana, especially to cater to the most vulnerable segments in far-flung rural

societies. They are the mainstay of the labour force for food production, agro-based industries and manufacturing activity in smaller towns and villages. On their health and vitality will depend the lifeline of an entire nation. Arguably, there is a compelling need to look beyond urban-centric approaches in devising the response to pandemics.

In densely populated slums and even overcrowded prisons, [social distancing](#) is not an easy option. The challenges faced by India notwithstanding, there is widespread praise and popular support for the strong personal appeal by Prime Minister Modi to the people of India for their cooperation. The success of the “[Janata Curfew](#)” on March 22 and the tribute paid by the masses from their doorsteps and balconies to the silent workers who provide essential services have raised the nation’s morale.

The pandemic can be expected to goad overwhelmed healthcare systems around the world to do better, point them in new directions and provide investment opportunities in preventive and palliative care. Robotics and unmanned ground vehicles will play as much a role in patient access and care during contagions as they will in an era of informatised warfare.

Budgets around the world are likely to see a spike in allocations to the healthcare sector, and it can only be hoped that the higher standards of hygiene being implemented everywhere will create a new normal for the future. Above all, it is in the interest of all nations, rich or poor, to ensure that testing kits, drugs and vaccines are available at affordable prices, given that security against pandemics is indivisible.

If one were to go by the experience of China and others like Singapore, there is a big role that artificial intelligence (AI), facial recognition and similar other technologies can play in contact tracing. Singapore’s Government Technology Agency (GovTech) and its health ministry have developed a smartphone app called TraceTogether, which works by exchanging short distance Bluetooth signals between phones to detect other participating users within close proximity of two meters.

Clearly, the notion of national security, or global security, is being reshaped by COVID-19. Armed forces everywhere, often deployed in confined spaces ranging from bunkers to tanks and armoured personnel carriers to naval ships and submarines will also face tough choices in stemming the spread of the coronavirus without compromising national security.

Beyond hard power and the threats of hybrid warfare, nations will have to rethink possible future scenarios and create numerically adequate forces of well-equipped pandemic experts, doctors and healthcare workers, to be the new footsoldiers in this battle.

A vaccine for COVID-19 will eventually emerge, but the world can avoid paying a heavy price by not treating pandemics as one-off events. Given the incidence of SARS, MERS and similar outbreaks in the past, COVID-19 is hardly an unexpected “black swan” event. The human race may have to contend with many more of nature’s calamitous challenges. PM Modi has done well to grasp the nettle and take the lead within SAARC and the G-20 framework to forge a new global compact.

The writer, a former ambassador, is currently the director-general of the [Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses](#), New Delhi. Views are personal

The Indian Express is now on Telegram. Click [here to join our channel \(@indianexpress\)](#) and stay updated with the latest headlines

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com