

# THE DEEP VOID IN GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: G20

The [coronavirus's flight across the world](#) at lightning speed, has exposed the total void in collective leadership at the global level. Three months into the catastrophic war declared by an invisible, almost invincible virus, that is rapidly gobbling up human lives, regardless of citizenship and race, and contemptuously ravaging economies across continents, there is as yet no comprehensive, concerted plan of action, orchestrated by global leaders, to combat this terror.

The G20 has just had a virtual meeting, we understand, at the prodding of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It is encouraging to learn that the [G20 leaders have agreed to inject \\$5-trillion](#) into the world economy to partially counter the devastating economic impact of the pandemic. This is indeed good news. But taking collective ownership to fight a global war against the virus will require a lot more than writing cheques.

World leaders are obviously overwhelmed with their own national challenges and do not appear inclined to view the pandemic as a common enemy against mankind, which it is. China delayed reporting the virus to the World Health Organisation (WHO), and perhaps, in the process, contributed to the exacerbation of the spread of the virus across the globe. It was reported that the Trump administration did not even inform the European Union before it shut off flights from Europe. It must be acknowledged that the initiative taken by Mr. Modi in the early days to [convene a meeting of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries](#) stands out in contrast to the pusillanimous leadership around the world.

There is no evidence that, at the global level, the pandemic has abated yet and would be brought under control soon. To imagine that nations would be able to tame the virus soon with massive shutdowns might be just wishful thinking. National shutdowns and physical distancing have been a challenge not only in the United States and some European countries, it would be more so in populous countries such as India. At any rate, such lockouts come at enormous economic and social costs. As long as the virus is alive in some corner of the world, it would resume its travel across the world the moment international travel restrictions are relaxed. Is it realistic to imagine that international travel will remain suspended until the last virus alive on this planet is extinguished? Epidemiologists point out that unless herd immunity develops — which will take long and come at the cost of at least half the population being infected — the virus will remain alive and strike whenever there is a lowering of guard.

This millennium has already suffered three pandemics and COVID-19 will certainly not be the last.

This is a war. A good war against a bad enemy, and a common enemy, that respects no borders. If this global challenge is not a battle to be fought by a collective global leadership, nothing else is. And yet, the typical response by all affected nations, has been to impose 'National distancing' by closing borders. While this is no doubt, a most appropriate response, there is a much bigger and emergent need for leaders of nations to come together for collective global action.

Two developments in the global polity in the last few years have contributed to the indifference towards collective global action.

One, the swing towards right-wing nationalism, as a guiding political ideology, in large swathes of the world, particularly in the U.S. This ideology posits 'global good' being in conflict with and

inimical to national interests. The dramatic announcement by U.S. President Trump, in June 2017, that the U.S. will cease involvement from the Paris Accord on climate change, preparatory to full withdrawal after the mandatory period, on the ground that the accord will 'undermine U.S. economic interest' is a classic demonstration of narrow nationalism trumping global interests. There is no issue more global than climate change, and yet the U.S. Administration chose to look at it from the prism of national, short-term economic interest.

Two, the atrophy of multilateral institutions. The United Nations was the outcome of the shared vision of the world leaders after World War II, that collective action is the only way forward to prevent the occurrence of another war. That institution has notoriously failed to live up to its expectations to maintain peace among nations in the nearly 80 years since its formation. Its affiliate organisations have, in several ways, failed to deliver on their lofty missions. In particular, WHO, which has as its objective 'to be the directing and coordinating authority among member countries in health emergencies', has proven to be too lethargic in reacting to pandemics in the past. Its responses to COVID-19, has come under the scanner, not merely for incompetence, but also for lack of intellectual integrity.

If the world leaders realise the relevance and critical importance of collective global action in the context of the present pandemic, it is not difficult to contrive an appropriate mechanism quickly to get into war. A nimble outfit, not burdened with bureaucracy, is required to manage a global crisis of the nature that we are confronted with, today. The G20, with co-option of other affected countries, itself might serve the purpose for the present. What is important is for the global leaders to acknowledge what every foot soldier knows: winning a war would require the right strategy, rapid mobilisation of relevant resources and, most importantly, timely action.

In facing the present challenge, the following actions should come out of such a collective.

First, the collective should ensure that shortages of drugs, medical equipment and protective gear do not come in the way of any nation's capacity to contain or fight the pandemic. It is very likely that some nations that have succeeded in bringing the pandemic under control, such as China, Japan or South Korea, might have the capability to step up production at short notice to meet the increasing demand from other countries which are behind the curve. This would typically involve urgent development of an information exchange on global production capacity, present and potential, demand and supply. This is not to mean that there should be centralised management, which is not only infeasible, but counterproductive, as the attendant bureaucracy will impede quick action. A common information exchange could restrain the richer countries from predatory contracting of global capacities.

Second, protocols might need to be put in place among participating countries to ensure seamless logistics for the supply chain for essential goods and services to function efficiently. This might be particularly necessary in the context of controls on international traffic and national shutdowns. There would need to be concomitant accord to eliminate all kinds of tariff and non tariff barriers.

Third, there needs to be instantaneous exchange of authenticated information on what clinical solutions have succeeded and what has not. A classic example is the issue relating to hydroxychloroquine, which is being used experimentally, bypassing the rigours of randomised clinical trials. While there is no substitute to classic clinical proof, the more field-level information is shared within the medical community, the better will be the success rates of such experimentation.

Fourth, this is a time to have cross-country collaboration on laboratory trials and clinical validation for vaccines and anti-viral drugs. It must be acknowledged that WHO has already

moved on this issue, although, perhaps, belatedly. The world can ill-afford delays, as the pandemic is predicted to stage a comeback once the shutdowns are gradually relaxed. The best way to ensure speedy research is to pool global resources. Any effort at reinventing the wheel will only delay the outcomes. This attempt to collaborate might also bring in its wake an acceptable commercial solution that adequately incentivises private research, while ensuring benefits being available to the entire world at affordable costs. Such a framework might be necessary for sustained collaborations for future challenges.

Fifth, there is a need to facilitate easy movement of trained health professionals across the world to train others and augment resources wherever there are shortages. In other words, nations should come together to organise a global army to fight the pandemic, equipped with the best weapons and tools.

Sixth, we must anticipate food shortages occurring sooner or later, in some part of the world, consequent to the national shutdowns. Ironically, while we might have saved lives from the assault of the novel coronavirus, we might run the risk of losing lives to starvation and malnutrition, somewhere in the world if we do not take adequate precautions. This requires not only coordinated global action; it would also turn out to be the test of global concern for mankind in general.

Eventually, there is no doubt that human talent will triumph over the microscopic virus. It may be some months before we declare our win. But the economic devastation, that would have been caused as a result will be no less than the aftermath of a world war. Economies of the world are inexorably intertwined. An orderly reconstruction of the global economy, which is equitable and inclusive, will eventually involve renegotiating terms of trade among key trading blocs, concerted action among central bankers to stabilise currencies, and a responsible way to regulate and manage global commodity markets.

Does India have the power to awaken the conscience of the Superpowers and catalyse collective global action? Remember, historically, it is always the weakling or the oppressed, who have caused transformational changes in the world order.

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