



Covid-19 and international cooperation: IR paradigms at odds

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global challenge calling for a global response. But the actual responses of states, while exhibiting considerable international cooperation, are predominantly competitive and self-centered. This raises important questions about the utility of our basic intellectual tools—in the form of International Relations Theory (IRT)—for understanding the pattern of these responses. IRT analyzes inter-state dynamics and explains the extent to which states and institutions do or do not cooperate. This critique focuses on theories that stress competition (realism), those that focus on cooperation (liberalism) and those emphasising ideational constructions that could go either way (constructivism and normative theory). It seeks to elucidate the relative strengths of these theories—what they can tell us and what they cannot—in understanding responses to the current pandemic. It concludes that, while all the identified approaches have something to offer, realist theory, which highlights the prioritization of national interests over collective action, provides the most optimal approach for a full understanding of global responses to Covid-19. The analysis helps draw lessons for policy responses to this and other global crises, such as climate change.

Keywords Covid-19 · International relations theory · Realism · Liberalism · Constructivism · Normative theory

Covid-19 has proven to be one of the greatest global challenges of this generation. A pandemic is not confined by national boundaries and Covid-19 has tested the international resolve to cooperate. The globalized, interconnected world, with its integrated supply-chains, constant trans-border flows of goods, services and money and seamless people-to-people connectivity, is exceptionally vulnerable to pandemics. In

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once the crisis had broken out? While both are normative questions, they also have strong practical implications. The attribution of responsibility relates to the consequences of the policymaker's actions and to whether the individual held responsible was fittingly sanctioned or punished for it, whether legally or politically. This has important implications. If the person or persons responsible is/are not in some way punished, he/she/they may tend to repeat this or similar errors and cause a recurrence of societal harm. Here, China would certainly be one center of analysis, as questions mount as to whether Beijing took the necessary steps to share information once the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus was first confirmed by Chinese medical doctors in late December (The Guardian 2020b). As mentioned above, the WHO too is open to the charge of prioritizing political expediency by not including Taiwan in its assessments and recommendations.

The problem, however, of explaining why states behave as they do remains. The attribution of responsibility for a crisis is normally only a *post facto* phenomenon and does little to inform the analyst as to why international cooperation as a pattern of behavior does or does not occur. Even more, the scope for anticipating future behavior remains uncertain at best. Like constructivism, normative theory is valuable in understanding critical aspects of international cooperation or the lack of it, but it misses some of the most important facets of international reality: it fails to explain why states tend to let competition override cooperation when individual and collective interests collide.

Conclusion: realism redux

Much post-Cold War academic thinking gave the appearance of a “transition” in the way intellectuals view global politics: a “decline” of realism and the rise of alternative approaches in apex-level scholarly research (Maliniak et al 2011). However, this analysis shows that alternative paradigms in IRT have much less grasp over the current crisis than realism. The continued dominance of the state and of individual national interests over collective interests in the absence of effective international authority is evident in global responses to the pandemic. Realism tells us that, because of the systemic trust deficit in international affairs, especially in times of crises, states will turn to self-help and zero-sum calculations rather than to cooperative collective action. It is evident that precisely such behavior dominates the global management of the Covid-19 crisis. To be sure, cooperation does occur, but only when it does not clash with national interest.

Going forward, a realist would expect further restrictions on international exchange in order to minimize the threat and at least a temporary but nonetheless significant scale-down of globalization, as it were. The economic effects of the crisis are likely to be severe and unpredictable, and likely to include recession, flight of capital, widespread impoverishment, fall in agricultural output, and increased deaths from other diseases such as malaria and HIV (Congressional Research Service 2020; Economist 2020; Shiller 2020). These will be subject to the same dynamics of cooperation and conflict as described here, in particular in the context of Sino-US competition.