

Feeling the Heat

International organizations will struggle to function amid growing tensions between China and the US



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RICHARD GOWAN
UN Director, International Crisis Group, New York

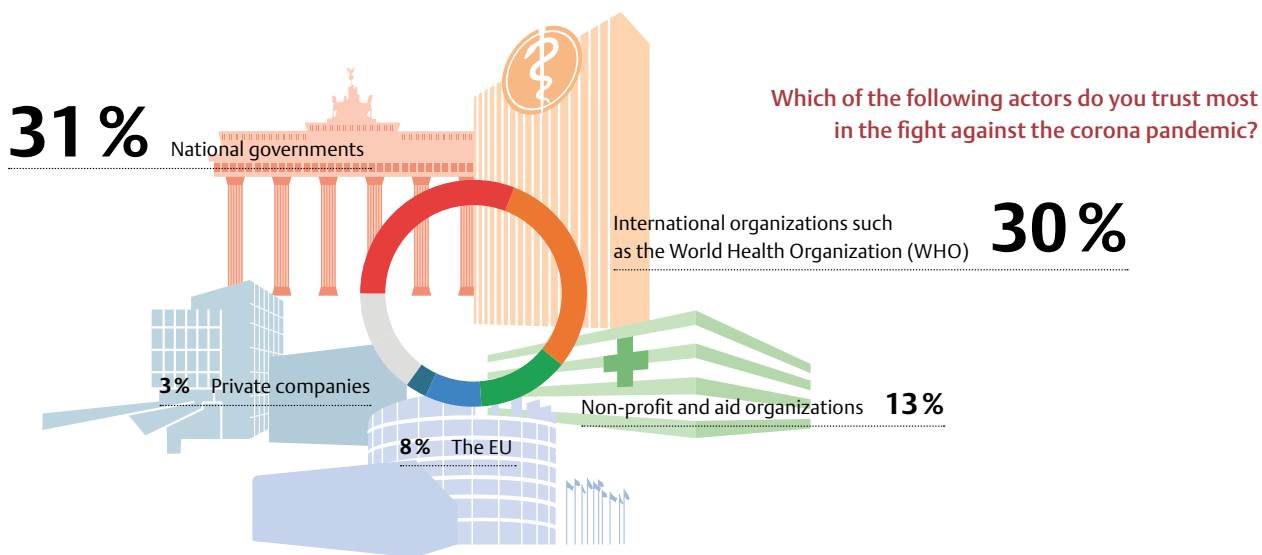
The COVID-19 crisis has made the weaknesses of the current multilateral system painfully clear. Rather than respond to the pandemic in a coordinated fashion, the United States, China and other major powers have reacted in a confused, fragmented and ineffectual manner.

The Trump administration has failed to show leadership in the United Nations, freezing its funding for the World Health Organization over its alleged deference to China and arguing that the Security Council should refer to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus”. Yet Beijing has also been unable to offer a compelling plan to handle the outbreak through the WHO or UN.

It has fallen to traditional defenders of multilateralism – such as European powers – and UN officials to make the case for a global answer to this global crisis. French President Emmanuel Macron led efforts in March and April to get all five permanent members of the Security Council to back a symbolic resolution highlighting the dangers of the disease. Secretary-General António Guterres has spoken eloquently of the socio-economic impact of the disease.

Germany has emphasized similar themes, using its temporary seat on the UN Security Council to back Guterres’ call for a global ceasefire during the pandemic. The Alliance for Multilateralism, a loose group of states initiated by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, called for “a co-operative, transparent, science-based and coordinated global response” to COVID-19.

There are nonetheless signs that even states that generally support the UN will be tight with funding for multilateral initiatives in a period of economic and political uncertainty. Although Guterres called for \$2 billion of funds to help poor states address COVID-19 in late March, by mid-April the UN had received pledges for only a quarter of that sum. European diplomats fear that this funding gap is a harbinger of long-term tensions at the UN, as poor countries struggle to recover from COVID-19 while big donors are likely to cut development budgets.



2020: don't know 8 %, no answer 7 %

The main challenge to the future of multilateral cooperation after COVID-19 will, however, be the worsening of Sino-American tensions in international organizations. This trend was clear before the pandemic began. China has been pushing for greater influence in multilateral forums for some years – securing more top jobs in UN agencies for its nationals – to increasing alarm of US officials. European officials share US concerns, and even representatives of non-Western countries with close economic ties to China fret about Beijing's rapid increase in authority. But US allies grumble that the Trump administration, having rejected mechanisms like the Paris climate deal and quit bodies like the Human Rights Council and UNESCO, is poorly placed to prevent China from gaining more power in international bodies.

The COVID-19 crisis has brought all these concerns into stark relief. The WHO appears to have avoided antagonizing China in its initial reporting on COVID-19, fueling US suspicions about UN officials accommodating Beijing's positions. Yet the initial US response was crude, focused more on pinning blame on China than utilizing the WHO and the rest of the UN system as effectively as possible to manage the disease and its economic and political consequences.

There is still a chance that Washington and Beijing will find a way to cooperate in multilateral

fora to manage what is, in the end, a common threat. They have joined the rest of the G20 in offering debt relief to low-income countries as part of a pandemic response plan. Perhaps the two powers will eventually follow the lead of UN officials like Secretary-General Guterres, who may well prove to have more solid ideas about how to direct a global recovery than those who have focused on nationalistic policies. European governments can both give the multilateral system a boost and make the best use of the reduced resources at their disposal by coordinating what they can give through the UN and international financial institutions.

Yet if the COVID-19 crisis foreshadows how the multilateral system will function in an era of Sino-American strategic competition, there is much to worry about. It is depressing but not surprising that great power politics is an obstacle to diplomacy in bodies like the Security Council. Even specialized agencies such as the WHO – which one might have hoped would enjoy some insulation from big power tiffs – will struggle to function if politicized in an age of geopolitical competition. In an era of global mistrust, it is hard to see how the UN can act as an effective conduit for effective cooperation on global challenges such as climate change.

The best that can be said for COVID-19 is that it has made what is at stake in the decline of multilateralism – a popular but vague topic in think-tank discussions prior to 2020 – feel real and immediate. That may inspire the UN's remaining friends to fight harder for it in future.

