

Coronavirus: The Great Disruption

# Can humanity make U-turns?

The coronavirus pandemic has underlined the importance of supporting multilateral organisations like the World Health Organisation, rather than progressively weakening them

**Kishore Mahbubani**

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Humanity is supposed to be the most intelligent species on planet Earth. This species has just received, through Covid-19, one of its biggest shocks since World War II.

Thousands are dying daily, not through war or famine (the usual causes) but through a new disease caused by a novel coronavirus that has effectively left humanity defenceless. No cure or vaccine is immediately available.

The rapid spread of Covid-19 also confirms that all of humanity now live in the same boat, a boat akin to the ill-fated *Diamond Princess* stuck off Japan.

The big question that humanity now faces is a simple one: Is it intelligent enough to learn the big lessons from Covid-19 and, if necessary, make massive U-turns from current policies? In theory, we can. In practice, I fear that we will fail.

This essay will discuss one concrete example: multilateralism. Multilateralism sounds boring. To explain it simply, let's return to the boat analogy. If we 7.5 billion people are now stuck together on a virus-infected cruise ship, does it make sense to clean and scrub only our personal cabins while ignoring the corridors and air wells outside, through which the virus travels?

The answer is clearly no. Yet, this is what we have been doing. In the developed world, we have been protecting our own countries while neglecting the global routes through which the virus travels. Since we are now in the same boat, humanity has to take care of the global boat as a whole.

Fortunately, after 1945, the West took the lead in setting up a family of global governance institutions, centred on the United Nations, like the World Health Organisation

(WHO), to improve global governance. However, in recent decades, the West has been systematically weakening global multilateral institutions, including the WHO.

The essay will discuss the WHO, to illustrate the folly of undermining multilateral institutions. Its primary objective "is the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health". A noble goal.

Yet, the real value of the WHO kicks in when health crises break out. It provides the only effective forum for states to cooperate against global health challenges. Hence, it played a leading role in the eradication of smallpox, the near-eradication of polio and the development of an Ebola vaccine. For the most intelligent species on planet Earth, it's a no-brainer to strengthen, not weaken, the WHO.

Sadly, the Western countries contrive to deny that they have been weakening multilateral institutions, including the WHO. This denial is very dangerous for the West. If it continues denying that it has weakened institutions like the WHO, it cannot make a U-turn and begin rejuvenating and strengthening them. Hence, the first step that the West needs to take is to engage in deep self-reflection on what it has done to organisations like the WHO.

The West has weakened the WHO in three ways; I have documented them in great detail in *The Great Convergence*, a book I wrote that was published in 2013.

First, the West starved the WHO of reliable long-term mandatory funding. This used to account for 62 per cent of its budget in 1970-1971. In 2017, it collapsed to 18 per cent. Why is this significant? The WHO can recruit long-term health inspectors and scientists only from mandatory funding, not voluntary contributions that vary from year to year.

The second way was to focus on



Medical assistants conducting tests for Covid-19 at a drive-up testing station in Las Vegas, Nevada, on Monday. The writer says that in recent decades, the West has been systematically weakening the World Health Organisation, even though it provides the only effective forum for states to cooperate against global health challenges. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

biomedicine, with its focus on individual behaviour, instead of social medicine. But understanding individual behaviour is not enough to counter epidemics like Covid-19 that spread faster if we don't take care of social conditions.

The third way was to dilute the role of the WHO and favour institutions like the World Bank, which is controlled by the West. The World Bank's lending on health went from roughly half of the WHO budget in 1984 to more than 2½ times bigger by 1996.

Giving more money to the World Bank should appear unobjectionable. However, as Professor Kelley Lee, professor of global health governance at Simon Fraser University, has documented

in her book on the WHO, "for the WHO, it has meant a bypassing of its role as the lead UN health agency".

In a health emergency, like Covid-19, the WHO can help us. The World Bank cannot. As Prof Lee says, during the severe acute respiratory syndrome crisis of 2002-2003, the "WHO's worldwide mobilisation of scientists to identify and genetically sequence the infectious agent was especially impressive".

So, given the critical importance of the WHO in fighting pandemics, why did the West starve it of mandatory long-term funding?

The ironic truth is that this was not even the result of a careful and comprehensive evaluation of the

long-term strategic interests of the West. Instead, the policy was driven by "bean counters" who only wanted to save money.

They were also driven by short-term selfish interest - by making the WHO dependent on voluntary contributions from the West, the Western countries could get the WHO to focus on areas of interest to the West, which makes up only 12 per cent of the world's population.

Yet, in undermining the ability of the WHO to improve conditions in the remaining 88 per cent, the West was essentially shooting itself in the foot as its own destiny, especially in health, is tied directly to the well-being of the rest, as demonstrated by Covid-19.

We are all in the same boat.

Can the West make a U-turn?

Yes it can. In some ways it has.

One of the most eloquent spokesmen in favour of multilateralism is President Emmanuel Macron of France.

He has said: "In the current state of the world, there is nothing more effective than multilateralism.

Why? Because all our challenges are global, such as terrorism, migration, global warming and regulation of the digital sector. All these issues can only be addressed globally, and multilaterally. Each time we consent to circumvent multilateralism, we hand victory to the law of the strongest."

If he gave the same speech today,

he would have mentioned Covid-19 first.

Words matter. Deeds matter more. To demonstrate its commitment to strengthening multilateralism, the West can reverse the ratio of mandatory versus voluntary funding of the WHO. Mandatory funding must go back to 70 per cent or more because voluntary funding goes up and down and the WHO cannot rely on that to build long-term scientific capabilities.

When I served as Singapore's Ambassador to the UN, I saw how ferociously some ambassadors of Western countries fought to contribute less (on the basis of a UN formula where rich countries pay more in absolute terms and poor countries pay less). They would fight to save one or two million dollars. How much has the global economy lost as a result of Covid-19? We have lost trillions of dollars.

Trillions versus millions! Very little money is needed to strengthen the WHO. For example, the European Union countries contributed US\$150 million (\$214 million) to the WHO in fiscal year 2018. This amount is just 0.09 per cent of the budget of the European Commission, or one-tenth of 1 per cent.

This makes the tragedy of Covid-19 even sadder. It would literally take "peanuts" to save and strengthen the WHO.

So where does all this leave us on the issue of multilateralism?

In the short run, we can only despair. Turning around entrenched habits in the West cannot be done overnight.

In the long run, we can be confident that a new global consensus will emerge that all of us now live together in a small interdependent boat, like the passengers of the ill-fated *Diamond Princess* cruise ship did.

On such a global boat, it makes no sense to clean only our cabins when the boat is infected. The only way we can protect our own cabin is by coming together to take care of the boat as a whole.

Over time, we can only hope that the wiser voices of the West will be heeded and a more enlightened policy of supporting multilateral institutions, like the WHO, will prevail. After all, enlightened self-interest, if nothing else, dictates that it must adopt a multilateral stance towards global challenges.

As friends of the West, we should work with and encourage them to speak out more. We should tell them that the fate of the human species depends on our ability to make essential U-turns and work together to strengthen, not weaken, institutions of good governance, like the WHO.

This will be a key litmus test to assess whether humanity is truly the most intelligent species on planet Earth.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Kishore Mahbubani is a former diplomat who has served as Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations. He is Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and author of *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge To American Primacy*.