

Coronavirus: The Great Disruption

WHO and the war over global institutions

Trump's move to suspend funding for the UN health agency is part of a shift towards competitive multilateralism as Washington and Beijing fight to redefine global institutions

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For *The Straits Times*

Last week, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) heard Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sound the alarm about the threats from the coronavirus pandemic but failed to come up with anything concrete in response. The paralysis in the world's most important collective forum for international peace and security was followed by United States President Donald Trump's decision this week to suspend funding for the World Health Organisation (WHO).

There are good reasons to be anxious about the breakdown of multilateral institutions at a time when challenges like climate change and pandemics demand that we act together and in the interest of the collective. But pursuing collective effort in a world of sovereign states has never been easy.

The idea that there ought to be a single architecture for multilateral cooperation has been humanity's goal through the 20th century. It remains elusive.

Rather than bemoan the failure of the UNSC and the US decision to choke the WHO, the world must start preparing for the deconstruction of some current multilateral institutions, reorientation of others and the construction of new multilateral mechanisms.

Taking President Trump on his word is a good place to start. If he has channelled deep resentments within the US political system against multilateralism, it would be reasonable to expect that those resentments are getting stronger as the US death toll in the Covid-19 crisis approaches 30,000.

But first, to a brief history of multilateralism that will put the current crisis in perspective.

REMEMBER COMINTERN?
The horrors of World War I led to the creation of the League of Nations in 1919 as the anchor of multilateralism. It has been forgotten that there was another institution that was also created in the same year – the Comintern or the Communist International.

Soviet Russia, which was denied entry into the League of Nations, established the Comintern to promote world communism and global cooperation on a very different political basis.

Both the League and the Comintern were built on pre-existing movements and institutions for cooperation among states. Both also sought to transcend the state system. The "bourgeois liberals" of the League hoped to build a "collective security system" into "one for all and all for one".

The communist and socialist "revolutionaries" believed that the working classes from across the world could get together to eliminate war and promote prosperity for all.

Both the League and the Comintern failed spectacularly. Both crashed into the rocks of nationalism and sovereignty that led to World War II and dashed the hopes for a "world government" of one kind or another. The United Nations, arising from the ashes of World War II, consciously sought to avoid the illusion of collective security.

DISCORDANT NOTES FROM POWER CONCERT

It turned instead to the idea of a "concert" of major powers. "Four Policemen" that later became "five" would ensure peace and security in the world. The concert would stand up for victims of aggression and punish those who violate the established rules.

A concert, by definition, plays from the same sheet. Agreement and coordination between the great powers – the five permanent members of the UNSC – was to be the key to its success. That, in turn, underlines its major weakness – that the concert will not act against one of its own members, each of whom has a veto over any decision. The veto power did not matter



World Health Organisation (WHO) officials at a community testing for the coronavirus in Abuja, Nigeria. Washington believes it still has the power to rearrange the terms of the older institutions, such as the WHO, but success across the board is certainly not assured, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

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The coronavirus pandemic raging across the world is taking a huge toll on lives and economies.

Already touted as the biggest global crisis since World War II, it has forced countries to take unprecedented measures – slamming borders shut, quarantining millions, shutting down workplaces and schools, and giving out massive stimulus and job rescue packages.

As the crisis unfolds, expect orthodoxies and established rela-

tionships to be challenged, with some upended and others reshaped.

How will global institutions, nations, economies and societies respond? To make sense of the impact and fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading opinion leaders share their views of this global upheaval with *The Straits Times* in *Coronavirus: The Great Disruption*, a special series that runs this month in the Opinion section.

most of the time; but it did when the major security interests of its members clashed.

What made the concert impossible to sustain in the UN was the fact that the victorious allies that defeated Germany and Japan became adversaries by the end of the war. They rarely agreed on anything during the Cold War years. Did that mean an end to multilateralism and international cooperation? Certainly not.

Instead of one security organisation for the world, we had many. In Europe, the US set up the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) and the Soviets set up the Warsaw Pact; in the Middle East and Asia, the US set up a host of military alliances and Moscow sought to undo them with its own bilateral partnerships.

On the economic front, too, there were rival organisations. The US set up the Bretton Woods Institutions and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. The Soviets had a now-forgotten version of their own, called the "Comecon" – the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.

The UN then became a theatre for the confrontation between the two blocs; it was a place for propaganda and winning the court of global public opinion. It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the UN was in a position to redeem the promise of its founders.

Eager to integrate with the West, Russia took a cooperative approach in the UN. China was putting its house in order after putting down the Tiananmen movement for democracy; Beijing's strategy was to keep a low profile and find its way around the multilateral forums that it had only recently joined.

WESTERN OVERREACH
That empowered the West to develop a new agenda for the UN

The unfolding battle at the WHO is plausibly the first in a prolonged war between Washington and Beijing to redefine global institutions. To be sure, there will be some functional cooperation between US and China on multilateral issues – like there was between the Washington and Moscow during the Cold War on arms control. But unlike Russia, China today poses a far more sweeping challenge to the US, and more broadly, the prolonged Western domination of the institutions of multilateralism and the discourse shaping them.

system in the 1990s. Liberal internationalists across the Atlantic dream of turning the UN from a concert of major powers into a supra-national organisation that would fix any problem anywhere, including the internal affairs of the so-called failing states.

On the economic front, the drift to capitalism in Russia and China meant there was no more challenge to the Western model of development. America and Europe focused on expanding into the markets of China and Russia and integrate them into the Western economic order.

The end of great power rivalry and the harmonisation of their economic interests did not, however, last beyond the 1990s. Political dissonance began to emerge in the 2000s, as the US acted unilaterally in the Middle East, and other powers, especially Russia and China, began to demur.

The differences between the US on the one hand and Russia and China on the other turned into full-blown tensions in the 2010s, making it harder for the UNSC to act either as a concert or as a collective security system.

On the economic front, the rise of China and its growing trade surpluses with the US began to produce an American political backlash against free trade and globalisation. The argument that China has gamed the global trading system to its own advantage gained ground in the US. This perception fused with the emerging fears in Washington that Beijing was undermining American primacy in Asia and more broadly, in the international arena.

THE NEW RIVAL INSTITUTIONS
To cut a long story short, the circumstances for cooperative multilateralism that emerged in the 1990s are no longer present. Instead, we have strong conditions for competitive multilateralism. Russia and China promoted the Brics forum to blunt America's unipolar temptation.

Together, they also constructed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to prevent the extension of American hegemony over Eurasia. Russia has set up its own Collective Security Treaty Organisation to bring the former Soviet republics under one ambit.

The US, too, is developing new mechanisms like the "Quad" that brings four major democracies (US, India, Japan and Australia) together. As Mr Trump quarrels with his Nato partners over the unequal burden of the military alliance, the Europeans are trying

to develop and enhance security cooperation under the European Union umbrella.

But it is China that has had more success in building new multilateral mechanisms. If the Russian focus was on the political, the Chinese have concentrated on the economic that is yielding considerable strategic benefit to Beijing today. The New Development Bank of the Brics is based in Shanghai. The Asian Infrastructure Development Bank is in Beijing. China's massive Belt and Road Initiative is probably the single biggest economic framework outside the Bretton Woods Institutions and the UN system.

The US establishment, which was arguing with itself over the balance between unilateralism and multilateralism, has now figured that China has rapidly advanced its position in the existing international institutions and building its own outside of them.

As some in Washington talk of building an alternative to the WHO, Beijing is flaunting its significant influence in this UN agency and developing a new initiative "Global Health Silk Road".

Having woken up belatedly, the US is now pushing back.

Washington believes it still has the power to rearrange the terms of the older institutions – from the WTO to WHO and Nafta to Nato. But success across the board is certainly not assured, given the deep divisions in Washington on how to deal with the security threats posed by Beijing and the merits of economic decoupling from China.

But there should be no doubt that America's conflictual dynamic with China will only increase in the years ahead. The unfolding battle at the WHO is plausibly the first in a prolonged war between Washington and Beijing to redefine global institutions.

To be sure, there will be some functional cooperation between the US and China on multilateral issues – like there was between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War on arms control.

But unlike Russia, China today poses a far more sweeping challenge to the US, and more broadly, the prolonged Western domination of the institutions of multilateralism and the discourse shaping them.

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