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Covid-19 Pandemic – Our Response, Our Future

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(Image source: Pixabay)

We are facing an unprecedented challenge of containing the coronavirus, and the fear and uncertainty that it is spreading. How we respond to this challenge will shape the future not only of our individual societies and nations but also the wider regional and global order.

The cost of initial mis-steps

From the time the coronavirus first appeared in Wuhan China in November 2019 to WHO's declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March, there were a series of mis-steps and missed opportunities. From China's initial cover-up of the extent of the human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus, to the lack of preparedness by many countries in responding to the pandemic; and the lack of concerted regional or global effort to address the threat – all these have added to the quandary the global community now faces – rising death toll, draconian measures to curb movement and catastrophic economic consequences.

When the outbreak happened in Wuhan, many countries thought that it was enough to shut the borders from people arriving from Wuhan or China. Italy was the very first country in Europe to do this. Many countries in the West seemed to think that the virus can be stopped this way, and

that it would be largely contained within East Asia as was SARS in 2003. They probably forgot that the world in 2019 / 2020 is very much different from 2003. In 2003 the Chinese economy was then the 6th largest economy and only 4% of global GDP. Chinese tourists made only 20.2 million overseas trips. By 2020, China is the 2nd largest economy accounting for 17% of global GDP and in the year 2018, Chinese tourists accounted for 149.7 million trips.

Let's examine some of the initial responses and the lessons that can be learnt from the mis-steps.

Racist and Xenophobic Response:

Throughout history, infectious diseases have been associated with othering. The fact that the virus seemingly originated from China, and the spread of the virus to several countries were brought about by Chinese tourists had led to this “othering” of the disease. Hence the first instinct was to close the border against the Chinese, followed by racialized insults against the Chinese community within many of these countries. Anecdotal evidence of discrimination towards Chinese people in Europe and the US were recorded. This included individual acts of insults and aggression against Chinese people to collective forms of discrimination like boycotting Chinese restaurants and barring Chinese people from entering some establishments.

Worse of all, some political leaders have used the spread of the disease to reinforce racial discrimination and xenophobic response. For example, right wing leader Matteo Salvini (former deputy prime minister of Italy) linked Covid-19 to asylum seekers. Similarly, Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Prime Minister told the media that “We are fighting a two-front war: one front is called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus”. In the US, Donald Trump repeatedly referred Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus”.

Such racial and xenophobic discourse blinded the Western leaders towards preparation for the pandemic. Instead smug in their prognosis that this is a Chinese or Asian problem, and will only affect “backward” countries, many were caught unprepared when the virus spread like wildfire within their own communities.

Economic Protectionism and Nationalistic Response:

When the coronavirus spread to Europe and America, the nationalistic response to shut borders and ban exports of medical equipment were painfully in full display. Particularly in the European Union, where the free flow of goods, services, capital and people were held up as cardinal principles, unilateral shut down of borders and export bans was unprecedented to say the least. The principles underlying the functioning of the Single Market collapsed as EU member states rushed to hoard medical supplies and imposed stringent lockdowns, closing borders and even airspaces. Nationalistic instincts kicked in and triumph all the talks about solidarity. Aggressive economic nationalism that undermine the Single market was the initial response leading the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen to lament that “a crisis without borders cannot be solved by putting barriers between us”.

Across the Atlantic, US behavior was just as shameful. News that US government tried to acquire a pharmaceutical company in Germany for the exclusive use of .., sand the alleged US ‘hijacking’

of masks and ventilators Overall, cooperation have given way to competition, pitting states against states, nations against nations.

On a War footing: The narrative of war and its consequences:

When the coronavirus spread across Asia, the West took it with great stride, without fear and favour. However, the moment Covid-19 spread uncontrollably through Europe and America, the war narrative became prevalent.

French president Emmanuel Macron in his speech defined the struggle against Covid-19 as a national war, invoking all the historical sacrifices of his nation. Using the war narrative to describe efforts to fight the virus may raise the urgency to take action, and justify the draconian measures, yet, it risked the truth that the war may never be won. The war narrative provides the false hope that there can be a clear victory at the end of all the sacrifices by the citizens. The reality is of course not so clear. The virus can be contained but may never be eradicated. It will mutate and may become of the one of the “flu” strains that we will get every year, with some years worse than others. It may also become like the herpes simplex virus that stays in the body of those infected and can be triggered when the person is under stress and exposed to certain conditions. Hence the war narrative is unhelpful.

We are not at war with the virus. Instead the virus serves as a useful reminder of our common vulnerability. One does not wage war on viruses and infections and we cannot protect ourselves against the virus by building walls, closing borders and shooting at each other. Instead we may need to tell the truth to the population that the virus may be here to stay if it becomes endemic. Patriotic stirrings against the virus will not defeat it. Only sensible measures that address the real issue of a robust public health system and pandemic preparedness. The sweeping measures and overly broad restrictions on movement and personal liberty may seem absolutely necessary in the face of fear and anxiety, but one needs to be aware that this war footing may send societies down darker paths.

Lessons Learnt?

The Covid-19 crisis is the greatest crisis that the international community has faced since World War II. When it hit, our initial responses have not been great. Complacency, blame-game, nationalistic war cry and lack of regional and international cooperation and coordination - are words I could think of to describe what has happened so far.

What lessons can be learnt from our inchoate responses and what changes, for better or for worse, can be expected from the pandemic? History has revealed that crises often set the stage for change. Whether we changed for better or for worse will depend on the lessons we draw from this crisis. What actions we then take to address the consequences and mitigate the impact of Covid-19 would shape our future. Would we continue on the path of blame-game with nationalistic rhetoric or would we come together and make concerted efforts to coordinate our responses and find an exit strategy from the draconian lockdowns imposed in many places and measures to reboot the economy.

First, lessons learnt.

One of the most important lesson from the time the virus was first discovered in Wuhan to its worldwide spread is the need for transparency and for nations to realise our close interdependence and hence behave responsibly to the global community. The initial cover-up in Wuhan leading to the widespread transmission reflects the problems of a political model that lacks transparency when local officials sought to suppress information and cover up the extent of the transmissibility of the virus. The decisive action later by the Central government to lockdown Wuhan and restrict movements in all of China, and for the Chinese scientific community to quickly share the genome of the virus while laudable could not contain the damage already done in terms of the hardships millions of people have to endure due to the flaws in the system.

The initial responses by governments around the world thinking they could protect their citizens by simply shutting their borders towards arrivals from China was short-sighted. Instead of understanding that viruses do not recognize national borders and that in a highly inter-connected world, the best way to deal with the virus is to press China to be open with information and findings about the virus to prepare its own population and health care system, time was wasted casting aspersions on how the Chinese government deal with the health challenge. From condemnation of China's draconian lockdown measures to thinking that this could only happen in "backward" countries with unusual cultural practices, precious time was lost. When the virus arrived and spread like wildfire in Europe and then America, the scramble to contain it led to the same draconian measures that they once condemned.

Covid-19 also provides a stress test for governance and institutional capacity. Countries that have strong institutions, and a higher degree of trust towards the state or in its own community would probably emerge more resilient than ever. This invisible virus truly tested the capacity of the governments to respond responsibly and flexibly. Challenged by the evolving situation, different expert opinions and incomplete information, leaders ultimately need to make choices that carried different degree of risks. Convincing the people to follow your policy choices and to come out of this with societies and institutions intact requires trust. If not, people may comply now out of fear, which would then evolve to anger and desperation leading to more dire consequences of societal breakdown and chaos.

The lack of trust is also impeding cooperation between states. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, unfortunately populist politicians and nationalistic leaders have challenged and undermined regional and international institutions, foment distrust and sought to polarize the world order. The breakdown of trust and consensus between states hampered efforts to address the global pandemic. As a reflection of how bad the situation has grown to be, it was reported that the G7 meeting in late March could not even agree on a joint communique on how to deal with Covid-19 because the US insisted on using the term Wuhan virus to describe the outbreak.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), the very organization that has been tasked with global coordination of such public health issues has been accused of being "China-centric". Funds to WHO have been progressively cut in the years preceding this undermining its capacity to organize a global response when crisis hit.

Covid-19 pandemic has also revealed the flaws in our current economic model and the fragility of the global trading system. Our current economic orthodoxy has encouraged a dispersed trading

system that is built on an excess of opportunism at the expense of attention to risk. For decades, nations have been encouraged to specialize and establish comparative advantages and corporations undermine risks in the pursuit of profits (Donald Low).

The current way globalized trade and supply chains actually work are being challenged. Even before Covid-19, global supply chains are being reshaped because of the trade war between the US and China. This process will accelerate now as emphasis shift from optimizing efficiency to optimizing resilience.

An unpleasant discovery during the pandemic is how the European Union (EU) known for its Single Market with the cardinal principles of free movement of goods, services, capital and people could not prevent its member states from unilaterally closing borders and imposing export bans of masks and medical equipment.

What Next?

Rebuilding Trust and Transparency

We have learnt the price to be paid when there the lack of transparency led to the rapid spread of the coronavirus in Wuhan and China. And we learnt that without trust, we will not be able to overcome the hardships imposed by Covid-19 as revealed in the way the Trump administration tussled with public health experts over when to reopen the US economy. Issues over trust and transparency had also hampered any meaningful cooperation between the US and China.

How do we go about rebuilding trust and transparency in our own societies and between states? Judging from how some states seem to weather the crisis better (at least from the public health perspective) by taking a whole of nation approach and having a multi-agency task force working cooperatively to stem the spread of the virus, a few things is obvious. Transparency and trust go hand in hand. Transparency in sharing the facts, data and information that guide government's decisions and actions, and regular communication with citizens done with humility and empathy, will go a long way to building trust. Public access to information, and conscientious efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation are also an important part of trust building. The best way to combat Covid-19 is to be scrupulously honest with the public- conveying the uncertainties and what is still not known about the virus, and at the same time injecting a certain degree of optimism to rally people to work together.

Internationally, the rivalry between the major powers, especially between the US and China, has not been helpful in fashioning a climate for cooperation. The spat between the two over whether WHO is too China-centric further erodes trust needed for WHO to get on with its job of dealing with the pandemic. It will be incumbent on other international, state and non-state actors – from UN, IMF to global NGOs and corporations and countries working to ensure that supply chains for food to other essential resources continue to flow to where they are needed.

Rethinking Governance, Role of States and our Socioeconomic Model

The neoliberal economic model which has pervaded even how society functions, when we allow market principles also to dictate societies – when we not only rely on market to regulate our economies, but we move towards market societies as seen in the increasing inequality and how the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 has been dealt with. This neoliberal economic model is no longer fit for purpose.

The response to Covid-19 may further consolidated the power of the state. Governments may feel emboldened to take more active role in shaping economic activity. As the crunch in supply of masks, personal protective equipment and ventilators show, many countries may seek to become self-sufficient in the production of “strategic” commodities and rethink their supply chains thus reshaping global trade. How would states ensure strategic reserves of key supplies? Would there be re-nationalization of “strategic industries and services” and would state capitalism become the norm? Would a new balance be struck between the role of states and the role of markets?

At the individual and societal level, how would the experience with Covid-19 change the expectations and demands of citizens towards its governments and corporations? Would the citizenry accept the broader surveillance and continued restrictions on movement? What would be the new social contract between government and citizens?

Revitalising Multilateral Institutions and International Cooperation

Covid-19 pandemic is proof of the world’s interdependence and that globalization is a reality. It laid bare problems that no single nation can solve on its own. No countries can go on an indefinite lockdown until a vaccine is found perhaps in a year or two. How to ensure that trade and essential supplies can continue to flow to serve the needs of the people? We need more cooperation not less if we are all to climb out of this shithole. We need to rethink the speed and the coordination we need to react to another public health pandemic. Virus respect no border and in an interconnected and highly mobile world, we are all at the mercy of the weakest link.

Before Covid-19, we have seen international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) being undermined. While the European Union (EU) and its like-minded partners such as Japan and Canada tried to muster continued support for multilateralism, Trump’s approach and US trade war with China does not help.

The EU handling of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe has also been lack-lustre. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) likewise have left the response to the pandemic very much to each member state. If we are to avoid a death knell to multilateralism, the EU and ASEAN and other regional organisations need to step up efforts to exchange information, coordinate efforts and build partnerships with multilateral institutions such as WHO and WTO to strengthen cooperation amongst nations and regions.

International cooperation amongst scientists is also necessary if we are to find a cure or vaccine soon. It is possible that in the search for a vaccine or cure, there can be the other tendency to be predatory with companies or nations seeking to monopolise and benefit from it as witnessed in the rumours that the Trump administration tried to acquire control of a vaccine being developed

by a German biotech compare. However, the fact that this was exposed, and that various groups of scientists are working together supported by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI) pointed once and again that international cooperation is the way to go.

Conclusion

The world is going through a major crisis now, and there are many predictions as to where we are heading after Covid-19. The truth is we do not really know. The only certainty is that how we respond individually, collectively as a nation or region, and what actions we take now will determine the shape and essence of our future. Would we descend into super-charged nationalism or protectionism with a death knell for internationalism and integration? Would we see the breakdown of social order, rampant racism and discrimination or the rise of authoritarian surveillance states? Or would the Covid-19 pandemic remind us of our global connectedness and shared responsibility, and the need for global cooperation to avoid another pandemic with catastrophic consequences? Some analysts think we are at a turning point to something new and radically different and others think this would simply accelerate history and “revel and reinforces the fundamental characteristics of geopolitics today” (Haass, 2020).

Whatever it is, I believe that the lessons we learnt, and the actions we take now will determine the course of history.

About the EU Centre

After 11 years as a joint NUS-NTU entity, the European Union Centre (EU Centre) in Singapore is now a Research Centre under the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The EU Centre is located at 48 Nanyang Avenue, Level 5, Singapore 639818.

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