

## COVID-19 Pandemic: A Lost Opportunity for International Cooperation?

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### Abstract

*The unsolved riddle of interstate cooperation lies at the core of subject matter of international relations theory. Many believe that shocks e.g. wars, natural disasters and pandemics serve as the triggers of international cooperation. Basing on these assumptions, after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, many advocates of liberal internationalism were optimistic about seeing enhanced cooperation among states in order to respond to this unique threat. This paper, however, argues that contrary to such assumptions, COVID-19 failed to serve as a catalyst for international cooperation. Despite being hit by a common enemy, states not only failed to mute their conflicts rather in many regions conflicts were intensified and fault lines became more visible than before. The paper digs into the questions that why the neoliberalism fails to seize the opportunity and what factors led to the dominance of state behaviour dictated by neoclassical realist assumptions. It also investigates that how the future can be foreseen in the context of this scenario. The paper justifies the central proposition using the framework of neoclassical realist theory of international relations.*

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## Introduction

It was in December 2019 that the first cluster of novel COVID-19 was reported in China and within 10 weeks the virus had spread to 113 states and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The new virus named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) later renamed as Coronavirus Disease-19 (COVID-19) became the biggest news flash of year 2020. The virus gave a tremendous blow to health care systems of a majority of the states and caused worldwide economic meltdown because of various measures taken by the states to stop the spread of the virus. As the pandemic erupted states quickly enforced strict preventive measures that included closure of educational institutions, public places, community centers, tourist spots, non-essential services & factories, observing strict social distancing rules, and shutting down transportation etc. However, despite all the efforts the virus led to over 259 million infections and over 5.1 million deaths worldwide by the end of November 2021.<sup>2</sup> This put immense pressure on public health system in many states including the USA, Germany, France, Italy, India, and Spain; incurring losses worth several trillion dollars.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Celina Tabor, "Troubling COVID Variant on the Rise in South Africa; millions of Americans return to holiday travel: Latest update," *USATODAY.com*, November 25, 2021, Available at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/11/25/covid-thanksgiving-travel-vaccinations-tests-travel/8755086002/> (accessed on 27 November 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Tom Inglesby, "Make Pandemics Lose Their Power," in *Covid-19 and World Order: The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, eds. Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2021), 132.

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As the virus spread, it became evident that the whole world was facing a common enemy for the first time in modern human history threatening socio-economic and political fabric of states. From powerful to weak, from rich to poor, from developed to undeveloped, every state was threatened alike by the devastation caused by the virus. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates, global economy shrunk by 4.4% in year 2020.<sup>4</sup> The level of economic destruction caused by lockdowns can be gauged from the fact that 2009 global economic crisis impacted the world economy by mere 0.1%.<sup>5</sup> Aviation industry, oil sector, hospitality and tourism industry, retail sector, cruises and shipping industry, and industries depending on transnational supply-chain have been worst affected by the pandemic in the first 100 days of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

Currently states are presented with an arduous task of containing the spread of COVID-19. Public health care system in many states is under immense stress and hospitals flooded with patients have reached to the maximum capacity. Economic conditions have been aggravated as a consequence of strict lockdown imposed to stop the spread of virus. This has also put a stringent barrier against global forces of economic integration and cooperation thus triggering the debates on de-globalisation and retreat of economic interdependence etc. Furthermore, development sector has faced a serious blow globally. The new mutated strains of virus are more lethal, infectious,

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<sup>4</sup>“COVID-19 Pandemic Hamstrung Global Economy In 2020; IMF Estimates 4.4% Contraction,” *Business Today.In*, December 31, 2020, Available at: <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/world/covid-19-pandemic-hamstrung-global-economy-in-2020-imf-estimates-44-contraction/story/426598.html> (accessed on 4 June 2021).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Matthew C. Klein, “These Industries Were Hardest Hit in the First 100 Days of The Pandemic. Where They Are Headed Next,” *BARRON’S*, June 21, 2020, Available at: <https://www.barrons.com/articles/covids-first-100-days-hit-these-industries-hardest-heres-how-they-could-recover-51592643600> (accessed on 14 May 2021).

and resistant against vaccines, thus making its containment even more difficult. This, if keeps going, can result in decline in life expectancy thus creating more challenges for states in meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs). Moreover, some states under the pressure of economic slowdown lifted lockdowns resulting in more disastrous outcomes for public health and economy as the subsequent waves of the virus were more lethal which required equally stringent preventive measures and controls. So far, the vaccine has created the 'haves' and the 'have nots,' where most of the people will have to wait till long in order to get the required dosages. Many scholars claim that the pandemic has started reversing the economic growth and interstate cooperation that kick-started after the Cold War under liberal trade regimes. The corporate sector has globally responded to the pandemic by laying off work force and imposing salary cuts to minimise their losses. The unemployment crossed an unprecedented level accelerating internal migration, and increasing pressure on job markets, healthcare systems. Aid packages announced by most of the governments benefited the corporate elite more than the real deserving people belonging to the lowest strata of societies. The pandemic also impacted food security of states by threatening the supply chains globally and pushing people towards bulk buying. The trust deficit was widened between states and masses creating political and security fault lines and threatening democratic structures.

In this backdrop, international cooperation seemed a likely way out for states. The situation demanded states to join hands and lay down a framework for cooperation and respond collectively to the common enemy. However, the unfolding events made it clear that international cooperation was not possible. States instead got on to the path defined by the pursuit of self-interest and narrowly defined version of security. The following passages first describe the causes of neoliberal optimism and then analyze the empirical evidence that led

to the death of neoliberal hope. The discussion helps comprehend the reasons behind the demise of neoliberal hope by analysing the scenario through the lens of neoclassical realism.

### **Methodological and Theoretical Approach**

This study is based on the deductive reasoning where the assumptions of neoliberal and neoclassical realism theories are applied on the case of COVID-19 pandemic to assess the validity of both the theories. Keeping in view the emerging and continuously developing nature of the subject, mainly secondary data has been used. Multiple recent developments have been made part of the reasoning process to substantiate the argument. The paper uses the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism to criticise the neoliberal assumptions about the likelihood of cooperation between states amid COVID-19 pandemic. A brief analysis of the theoretical framework for the paper is given below.

Neoliberalism criticises political realism for its undue emphasis on power politics-based nature of international relations. It refuses to accept 'the tunnel view' of international politics presented by realists where egoism, survival and power dominate the political arena. Neoliberals agree with one central preposition of neorealists where they see international structure as anarchic lacking an overarching authority to impose the rules of business. According to neorealists and realists, the absence of functional differentiation and varying capabilities of states push them towards power politics eliminating all the chances of international cooperation and lasting peace. Cooperation, if takes place between states, is temporary mainly aimed at gaining time for own capacity building and done under the constant aim of cheating at the availability of opportunity. Neoclassical realists

take into consideration the domestic political factors too along with the assumption of anarchic international structure.

Four imperatives of international cooperation, as highlighted by neoliberals are: increased interdependence,<sup>7</sup> increased transnational interactions,<sup>8</sup> spread of democracy,<sup>9</sup> and establishment of international institutions.<sup>10</sup> These four conditions not only counterbalance the condition of anarchy but also maximize the incentive for international cooperation by reducing the chances of cheating by the states and by enhancing the profits of cooperation. If states are made a part of international cooperation, they adapt to the new mode of working by seeing the real benefits of international cooperation under the principle of reciprocity.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, increased cost of war had made states realize the negative consequences of power-based policies thus pushing them towards cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, neoliberals cite several issues of transnational nature such as trade, human rights, environment, and disease etc. that cannot be dealt by a single state and international cooperation becomes prerequisite to solving them.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Longman, 2012), 265.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *Cooperation under Anarchy*, Vol. 38, no. 1 (1986), 248.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization: Processes and Prospects in a Changing World* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2007), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *Cooperation under Anarchy*, Vol. 38, no. 1 (1986), 253.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Lipson, "International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs," *World Politics*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (1984), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur A. Stein, "Coordination and Collaboration: Regimes in an Anarchic World," *International Organization*, Vol. 36, no. 2 (1982), 311.

### **Neoliberal's Optimism**

It became evident shortly after the outbreak of pandemic that for the first time in recent history, human beings were facing a common enemy. Thus, there was an immediate rise in the hopes for global cooperation. The pandemic being a shared threat for all seemed like breaking security dilemma that results out of traditional security matrix. Every state's health system was under maximum pressure and hospitals were being filled with patients. World-wide lockdowns triggered an economic crisis where millions of people started losing their jobs while billions faced salary cuts. Across the globe, states were facing a challenge of saving people from premature deaths, provision of essential medical equipment and personal protective equipment (PPEs), and essential medicines to the populations. Availability of face masks, doctors' scrubs, hand sanitizers, and ventilators became the pressing issues that could have only been resolved by increased international cooperation at regional and global level. Hence, the looming economic disaster rekindled the liberal dream of international cooperation as a response to the pandemic by the world community. Before going into further discussion, it is important to theoretically understand the basis of neoliberal optimism for international cooperation.

Neoliberals were quick to assume that outbreak of a COVID-19 like pandemic will serve as a catalyst for international cooperation. It was expected that states will unite to help each other in order to control the spread of the pandemic that will serve as a win-win situation. Similarly, modern complex network of global supply-chain will put a premium on interstate cooperation. States were expected to lower trade barriers to compensate for losses inflicted by the lockdown globally. Furthermore, functionalists were hoping to aid agencies and scientific community to come to the forefront in the battle with

governments at their back. Knowledge, material, and medicine sharing being the immediate need gave rise to the hopes that states will coordinate their policies under different regimes like the EU, ASEAN, SAARC, and G-7 etc.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, high expectations were attached to the role of international organisations particularly the UN and its subsidiary body WHO. Furthermore, neoliberals also expected the conflict to be muted globally in response to the pandemic expecting the states to act rationally. Therefore, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a public appeal for a global ceasefire in March 2020 and repeated the call in September 2020 during 75<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly Session.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the whole liberal hope can be summed up in a sentence, “When the fates of states are bound together, they must cooperate or pay a very high price.” Basing this assumption, the overall hopes for enhanced international cooperation were skyrocketing in the early phase of the pandemic.

### **The Death of Hope**

In the initial phase of the pandemic, a ray of hope was witnessed, as discussed earlier. In this phase, scientific community seemed eager to cooperate transnationally and to share knowledge and experiences. WHO played the anchoring role before being politicised and undermined. Research communities initially appeared to be determined to soften the secrecy protocols and enable maximum

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<sup>13</sup>“Covid-19: Transnational Cooperation and the Epistemic Community,” *The Takshashila Institution*, February 12, 2021, Available at: <https://takshashila.org.in/covid-19-transnational-cooperation-and-the-epistemic-community/> (accessed on 15 June 2021).

<sup>14</sup>António Guterres, “Now Is the Time for a Collective New Push for Peace and Reconciliation,” *United Nations: Global Ceasefire* Video, 1:54, March 23, 2020, Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/globalceasefire> (accessed on 4 June 2021).

knowledge sharing.<sup>15</sup> But as soon as the first wave of pandemic hit different states with full force, it swept away all the liberal hopes for international cooperation. The following part of the paper analyses the collapse of hopes citing different events.

**a. Virus and the Role of Media**

The first shock to the hopes of cooperation came in the very early phase of the pandemic when the virus was used by some western media outlets and political leaders to defame China. Initial coverage of the virus spread in Wuhan directly targeted the Chinese regime. In addition, coverage by several western media outlets was criticised by social media users for being racist in content.<sup>16</sup> This kind of response was in sheer contrast to the role expected by liberal media. Thus, at the very beginning of the crisis, the whole issue was turned into a political battle and instead of humanitarian outlook; it became an issue of national image and defamation of others. Resultantly, when the virus further spread, it faced a lack of unity in the world community that was imperative for posing a solid response. It also affected the attempts to convince the masses for respecting the lockdown and wearing masks. Anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests in the US were a definite outcome of such coverage by the white-dominated media. Hence, the liberal dream of international cooperation was shattered at the very beginning. The negative role of the media still remains persistent mostly with targeting the vaccines of one state or another by negative framing. Mostly, the efficacy of the Chinese Vaccines is being questioned by the media in western states.

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<sup>15</sup>Matt Apuzzo and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Racing for Cure, Scientists Unite in Global Effort," *New York Times*, April 2 April 2020.

<sup>16</sup>"Global Media Accused of Bias in Coverage of Coronavirus," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 7, 2020.

## b. Role of the Political Leadership

In addition to the media, political leadership in the western world also played its role in crushing the dream of cooperation. The US President Donald Trump also became part of the politicisation of the pandemic by calling the virus as 'China Virus'<sup>17</sup> and 'Kung Flu.'<sup>18</sup> He also called on the world to hold China responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic. He used the platform of the UNGA to bash and blame China for the outbreak of the virus and went a step ahead by withdrawing the US funding for the WHO. Similar remarks continued to pour in from the US administration as well as from other western leaders.<sup>19</sup> The virus outbreak also resulted in criticism of Chinese regime by the UK parliament members attracting condemnation from the Chinese ambassador in London.<sup>20</sup> In addition, response of the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was also sluggish and casual until he himself got affected by the virus and was moved to Intense Care Unit.<sup>21</sup> As the virus reached to western states, the anti-China sentiments converted into pandemic politics creating 'us vs. them' divide that translated into divergent response. This resulted in a lack of cooperation and poorly coordinated policies by the major powers. This onslaught by some western leaders was responded by the Chinese leadership too. Chinese president Xi Jinping denounced such narrative and called for enhanced

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<sup>17</sup>Allyson Chiu, "Trump has no qualms about calling Coronavirus as 'Chinese Virus.' That's a dangerous attitude, experts say," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2020.

<sup>18</sup>"President Trump calls coronavirus 'kung flu,'" *BBC News*, June 24, 2020.

<sup>19</sup>"China's UK Ambassador Prefers Collaboration to 'political Virus' of Scapegoating," *CGTN*, May 6, 2020.

<sup>20</sup>Frank Langfitt, "How the Coronavirus Has Strained U.K.-China Ties," *NPR*, May 22, 2020.

<sup>21</sup>Sam Knight, "Boris Johnson may be a victim of his slow response to the coronavirus," *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2020.

cooperation over COVID-19.<sup>22</sup> President Xi also declared that China had no intention of fighting either a cold war or a hot war with any country.<sup>23</sup> He reiterated the stance that China was following a peaceful policy and had no malignant designs either overt or covert against any state.<sup>24</sup> Later on, the UN Secretary General António Guterres in a message to the members of the UN stated that everything must be done to avoid a new cold war and warned that the world was moving in a very dangerous direction.<sup>25</sup> Here, the use of term cold war indicated that the states failed to respond to the crisis in a cooperative manner. Contrary to the increased international cooperation, conflicts were further intensified, and states used COVID-19 crisis to settle political scores with their competitors.

### **c. Role of the Western Powers**

Another argument that explains the failure of the liberal hopes of cooperation is the absence of leadership role by any of the world powers. The US President Donald Trump remained stuck in his 'America First' policy refusing to play the leadership role.<sup>26</sup> Despite being able to provide many states with the much-needed help in the early phase, the US was more concerned about stigmatizing China. There was a hope of change in the US policy outlook vis-à-vis COVID after inauguration of President Joe Biden as Trump's successor. This change of power in the US significantly transformed domestic response

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<sup>22</sup>"Xi denounces stigmatization of COVID-19 virus, politicization of origin tracing," *XinhuaNet.com*, October 30, 2021, Available at: [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-10/30/c\\_1310280215.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-10/30/c_1310280215.htm) (accessed on 2 November 2021).

<sup>23</sup>"At U.N., China's Xi says no intention to fight 'a Cold War or hot one' with any country," *REUTERS*, September 22, 2020.

<sup>24</sup>"China: Trump 'Spreading Political Virus' at United Nations," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2020.

<sup>25</sup>"UN General Assembly: Guterres warns against 'new cold war'," *DW*, September 22, 2020.

<sup>26</sup>"China: Trump 'Spreading Political Virus' at United Nations," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2020.

of the US in the fight against the virus. However, the external outlook did not witness any formidable change. Biden administration continued the imposition of ban on the export of COVID-19 vaccine related raw material.<sup>27</sup> In April 2021, a temporary ban was imposed on the export of other medical equipment.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the EU also suffered from lack of coordination and its member states did not stand united. Rather, every state immediately adopted the egoistic outlook. The travel restrictions within the EU were a nightmare for the architects of free movement of goods, labour, services, and capital. Italy criticized the EU for not coming to its aid in the need of hour as Germany, France and other states, imposed restrictions on the export of medical equipment.<sup>29</sup> When Italy called for extra supplies of medical equipment, including masks, Germany and France, alongside other EU members, imposed limits on the export of PPEs. This was not only a shock to those who see interstate cooperation oozing out of economic interdependence but also to those who see democratic states and societies cooperating with each other because of shared identity, norms, and ideology. During the pandemic, the democracies were, instead, fighting over necessary supplies. The most significant of these events was G-7 Summit 2021. It was expected that members of G-7 will be able to announce a substantial aid and relief package for the developing world in the context of pandemic. Though the members agreed to provide 870 million dosages of vaccine to COVAX

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<sup>27</sup>Simrin Sirur et al., "US Embargo on Exporting Covid Vaccine Raw Materials and How It Could Impact India," *The Print*, April 21, 2021.

<sup>28</sup>"U.S.A. Temporarily Bans Export of Medical Equipment," *Bansard International*, April 20, 2020, Available at: <https://www.bansard.com/en/news/usa-temporarily-bans-export-medical-equipment> (accessed on 5 June 2021).

<sup>29</sup>Edy Cohen, "Coronavirus Reveals the Lack of Unity at the EU and the UN," *BESA*, April 14, 2020, Available at: <https://besacenter.org/coronavirus-reveals-the-lack-of-unity-at-the-eu-and-the-un/> (accessed on 13 May 2021).

programme<sup>30</sup> but keeping in view the magnitude of the issue and hoarding of vaccine by rich states, this seems a trivial contribution. Particularly, with ‘the return of the US’ on the centre stage of G-7 and world politics, much more was expected than the contribution promised. Ms. Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, commented on this contribution by acknowledging the announcement. However, it was further added, “Much work remains to continue to ramp up both the amount and the pace of supply to the rest of the world, because when it comes to ending the COVID-19 pandemic, our best interests and our best natures align. This crisis will not be over until it is over for everyone.”<sup>31</sup> This statement shows how the onus of responsibility still remains on the major powers.

#### **d. The false Hope of Muted Conflicts**

In addition to this, the hopes of seeing interstate conflicts being muted also died down during the pandemic. Any rational analysis will advocate for states muting their existing conflicts to coordinate a solid response to COVID-19 like pandemic. The same was probably assumed by the UN Secretary General who repeatedly appealed for a global ceasefire. However, his appeals like the hopes for international cooperation were all wasted as conflicts were rather intensified. Some of the major examples of this include India-China conflict in Ladakh region, Armenia-Azerbaijan war in Nagorno-Karabakh region, and India-Pakistan conflict on the Line of Control (LoC) in disputed territory of Kashmir. In May 2020, when the world was busy fighting the pandemic, the Galwan Valley in Ladakh started boiling. The conflict

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<sup>30</sup>“Landmark G7 agreement pledges 870 million COVID-19 vaccine doses,” *UN News*, June 13, 2021, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1093932> (accessed on 23 July 2021).

<sup>31</sup>“G7 Announces Pledges of 870 Million COVID-19 Vaccine DOSES, of Which at Least Half to Be Delivered by the End of 2021,” *UNICEF*, June 13, 2021, Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/g7-announces-pledges-870-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-which-least-half-be> (accessed on 5 July 2021).

escalated when over 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a border clash though both sides claimed no use of firearms.<sup>32</sup> The presence of extremist populist government further intensified the conflict where nationalist sentiments were used by the BJP regime to divert the masses' attention from its then failing response to the COVID-19 spread. As the pandemic got out of Indian government's control when over 100,000 cases and near 1000 deaths were daily reported, the government's stance against China became harder. The same sentiments were used against Pakistan as well and violations of LoC ceasefire by Indian forces reached to an unprecedented level.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the delivery of French made fighter jets Rafale was used by the Indian government and media to create new hype and to flame the fire of jingoism against Pakistan and China. Furthermore, Armenia and Azerbaijan went into a war in September 2020 that continued for almost six weeks.<sup>34</sup> The conflict left thousands of soldiers and civilians killed and injured from both sides. Over a 130,000 Armenians were resettled after a peace deal brokered by Russia.<sup>35</sup> Even though warring nations and their supporters were all suffering from the pandemic, the hopes for international cooperation could not materialise. The states continued fighting and did not lose the opportunity to use force when it was deemed appropriate and profitable by their decision makers.

#### **e. Vaccine Diplomacy**

Diplomacy, as conventionally understood, is the art of negotiations. After the discovery of COVID-19 vaccine, it was used as a tool of

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<sup>32</sup>DH Web Desk, "India-China Conflict: A Timeline of Key Events," *Deccan Herald*, July 18, 2020.

<sup>33</sup>Islamuddin Sajid, "India violated ceasefire 1,595 times in 2020: Pakistan," *Anadolu Agency*, July 7, 2020.

<sup>34</sup>"Fighting erupts between Armenia, Azerbaijan over disputed region," *Al Jazeera*, September 27, 2020.

<sup>35</sup>"UNICEF says over 130,000 displaced in Karabakh Conflict," *Anadolu Agency*, October 28, 2020.

diplomacy. On diplomatic as well as media forums, vaccine was used to project self-image and undermine that of the competitors. India was initially more vibrant than others to use vaccine diplomacy for the projection of its image as a new power on the stage of world politics. Therefore, an overambitious program of vaccine export was started without a rational assessment of the domestic needs. This greed led to the later chaos during the second wave of pandemic in India where the vaccine export program had to be downgraded to a greater extent. This attempt for self-projection contributed to the global worsening of the pandemic and emergence of the most lethal Delta Variant. Similarly, when it came to the approval of vaccine, a clear divide was witnessed. Chinese and Russian vaccines faced the most resistance from the western world unveiling the true faces hidden behind the veil of international cooperation. In addition, non-western US allies are still reluctant to accept vaccines developed in China and Russia despite their approval by the WHO.

### **a. Vaccine Nationalism**

Vaccine Nationalism is another major development that has undermined the hopes of international cooperation. The news of successful test of vaccine took the world with a pleasant shock as it was earlier expected that it will take 2 to 3 years to develop an effective vaccine. Vaccine politics emerged since the very beginning contrary to the hopes of cooperation. The US, and Germany blamed Russian<sup>36</sup> and Chinese<sup>37</sup> hackers for launching cyber-attacks on their research laboratories to steal vaccine secrets.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the level of knowledge sharing that was being expected by the scientific

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<sup>36</sup> Chris Fox and Leo Kelion, "Coronavirus: Russian SPIES Target COVID-19 Vaccine Research," *BBC News*, July 16, 2020.

<sup>37</sup>"Hackers 'Try to Steal COVID Vaccine Secrets in Intellectual Property War'," *The Guardian*, November 22, 2020.

<sup>38</sup>"COVID: Cyber attacks Target Vaccine Developers," *DW*, December 5, 2020.

community was also not offered as the state-led politics overshadowed this domain too. The politics and blame game did not stop even after the claims of invention of vaccine by the US, the UK, Russia and China separately. As soon as the vaccine came out, rich states were quick to stock it e.g. Canada was blamed for stocking five times more vaccine than what was needed for its whole population.<sup>39</sup> As the rich states have already started immunisation campaigns, the fear of creation of haves and have nots of vaccine is looming.<sup>40</sup> The COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) programme, directed by Global Alliance for Vaccine Immunisation (GAVI) and WHO, was designed to ensure equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccine. However, the program was not very effective. States have been repeatedly criticising the programme for delay in supply of the vaccine. The programme was able to distribute meager 31 million doses to 57 countries by the end of March 2021.<sup>41</sup> The accelerating second wave of pandemic in India created further problems for COVAX as the Serum Institute of India shifted all the focus on provision of vaccine for domestic consumption. Another example of vaccine nationalism was witnessed when EU-AstraZeneca conflict arose on the issue of vaccine distribution.<sup>42</sup> EU states blamed Anglo-Swedish firm for preferring UK and not fulfilling its commitments towards the EU. Keeping in view these trends, one has to look at the pessimistic estimate made by the People's Vaccine Alliance. It was stated in one of their reports that by the end of year 2022 only 10% population of the poor states will be vaccinated.<sup>43</sup> The WHO also

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<sup>39</sup>“The Haves and Have Nots of the COVID-19 Vaccine,” *Al Jazeera*, August 9, 2021.

<sup>40</sup>David Pratt, “How the Covid-19 Roll-out Is Leading to Haves and Have-Nots,” *The National*, January 03, 2021.

<sup>41</sup>Emma Farge, “COVAX to set aside 5% of vaccine doses for emergency stockpile,” *REUTERS*, March 23, 2021.

<sup>42</sup>“EU Lawsuit against AstraZeneca Begins in Brussels Court,” *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2021.

<sup>43</sup>“Campaigners Warn That 9 out of 10 People in Poor Countries Are Set to Miss out on COVID-19 Vaccine next Year,” *Oxfam International*, July 12, 2021.

warned that such a trend will render all the efforts of curtailing the pandemic spread as futile and economic restrictions will have to continue. The emergence of vaccine nationalism is worrisome seeing the state behaviour since the onset of the pandemic where despite rational demand for cooperation, there has been inclination towards competition and suffering more losses. If same behaviour persists in case of vaccine, the world may face even more difficult times.

### **b. The Role of International Organisations**

Lastly, the role of international organisations shrunk as they failed to play the role that is expected from them through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism. The WHO was enjoying relatively higher degree of respect before the pandemic outbreak. However, it was soon surrounded by controversies and was blamed by the western media and some politicians for hiding Chinese negligence in reporting the pandemic.<sup>44</sup> The WHO also came under fire for not including Taiwan in its reports that discussed pandemic response strategies by states.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the worst time for WHO came when it was directly criticized by the US President Donald Trump on the following points:

- First, it was blamed for the lack of efficiency in collecting and vetting data about the pandemic.
- Second, the organisation was criticised for the tweet in January 2020 where it quoted Chinese authorities' claim that the virus transmission through human contact was not taking place.
- Third, the organisation came under fire for opposing travel restrictions.

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<sup>44</sup>"Coronavirus: Trump accuses WHO of being a 'puppet of China'," *BBC News*, May 19, 2020.

<sup>45</sup>"Taiwan says WHO not sharing coronavirus information it provides, pressing complaints," *REUTERS*, March 30, 2020.

- Fourth, it was blamed for being too much under Chinese influence.
- Fifth, it faced criticism for late declaration on COVID-19 as pandemic when it had already spread to 130 states.
- Lastly, the COVAX programme, that was aimed at ensuring equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccine proved inefficient as it failed to stop the major states from hoarding the vaccine.<sup>46</sup>

Though the investigation of each of these claims will require a separate study to explain but regardless of the veracity of these claims what came out as reality was undermining of the prestige and value of the UN in general and WHO in particular. The US withdrew its funding for WHO and declared to divert it for other causes.<sup>47</sup> In addition to WHO, SAARC can also be quoted as an example of institutional failure where India-Pakistan conflict overshadowed the proceedings of SAARC Corona Virus Conference in March 2020. Pakistan used the platform to criticize Indian government for lockdown in Kashmir that had been continuing since August 2019. Pakistan raised serious concerns about the wellbeing of Kashmiris confined to their homes since the unlawful abrogation special status of Kashmir. India, in response sabotaged the conference completely.<sup>48</sup> Further, Pakistan also boycotted the meeting of SAARC Trade Officials that was held in April 2020.<sup>49</sup> Apart from WHO and SAARC, EU also found itself in hot waters due to the pandemic. As explained earlier, Italy's complaints against EU significantly

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<sup>46</sup>Jenny Lei Ravelo, "Is COVAX Part of the Problem or the Solution?," *DEVEX News*, March 11, 2021, Available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/is-covax-part-of-the-problem-or-the-solution-99334> (accessed on 26 June 2021).

<sup>47</sup>"Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization," *BBC News*, July 7, 2020.

<sup>48</sup>Syed Baqir Sajjad, "Pakistan Rejects Indian Charge of Politicising SAARC Video Moot," *DAWN*, March 21, 2020.

<sup>49</sup>Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan Boycotts India-Sponsored Meeting of SAARC Trade Officials," *The Express Tribune*, April 8, 2020.

undermined the prestige of the Union and strict lockdowns brought trade in EU to the lowest level in decades. The lack of coordination was also visible and EU regulations were conveniently ignored by the member states. EU failed to timely announce aid package for its worst affected members thus pushing many states towards announcing budgetary stimulus programs of their own. Even EU leaders were found in reluctance regarding issuance of euro bonds for provision of timely assistance to EU members in need.<sup>50</sup> This led to the widening of trust deficit among EU members bringing bad news for the economic union after the Brexit shock.

### **Explaining the Lack of Cooperation**

Neoclassical realism theory of international relations provides an explanation of the failure of states in displaying a cooperative behaviour during the pandemic. According to realist assumptions, the basic principles of international politics remain unchanged no matter what the circumstances. For neoclassical realists, international relations always present an arena of competition where self-interest and survival guide policies of the states. This anarchic international structure coupled with domestic power struggle leaves the states with the only option of self-help and the same was reflected throughout the pandemic. Neoclassical realism being pessimistic about the prospects of interstate cooperation are not surprised by what happened during the pandemic. They consider international organisation virtually ineffective, and their success is completely dependent on the sweet-will of the member states. Therefore, EU, WHO and SAARC, as discussed earlier in this paper, failed to play the role that was anticipated by the liberals. In addition, the distinction between high

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<sup>50</sup>Edy Cohen, "Coronavirus Reveals the Lack of Unity at the EU and the UN," *BESA*, April 14, 2020, Available at: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/coronavirus-reveals-the-lack-of-unity-at-the-eu-and-the-un/> (accessed on 13 May 2021).

politics and low politics also became evident when conflicts were intensified in many regions instead of being muted. Furthermore, neoclassical variant of realism also explains the impact of domestic politics on foreign policies in anarchic structure. Thus, the policies of US president Donald Trump in the election years are better explained. As the whole efforts of countering the pandemic were state led, it justifies neoclassical realist emphasis on the primacy of states in international relations. The realist explanation of egoism also justifies the imposition of ban by EU members on medical equipment export even though Italy and Spain were in dire need of such equipment. This behaviour along with the emergence of vaccine nationalism also undermines liberal's emphasis on normative aspect of international relations. Lastly, neoclassical realist argument about deglobalisation and resurgence of state control also justifies the imposition of strict lockdown by states. Across the globe, movement of goods, capitals, services, and labour was restricted and even within the cities; states were confining the citizens to their homes. This is all what realists will call a spectacular display of state power reminding the globalists of the fact that states and international borders are still relevant.

### **Conclusion & Way Forward**

Though COVID-19 pandemic serves as an ideal model for implementation of neoliberal assumptions that necessitate international cooperation in the time of such crises, yet the actual behaviours of states were in sheer contrast to this. In actuality, the COVID pandemic not only failed to trigger international cooperation, but the conflicts were rather intensified and even militarized during this time. Furthermore, the politics of pandemic revolved around self-centrism by states. Therefore, the neoclassical realists' understanding of international politics can help in finding a way out in this situation. As this theory explains the causes of non-cooperation among states

during COVID-19 pandemic, the same theory can be used to explain a likely way forward. Domestic politics have been at play during COVID-19 pandemic as right-wing populist governments in states like the US, India and Britain tried to downplay the domestic factors behind the devastation caused by the coronavirus and highlighted the international factors as the major causes and reasons. However, all this could not save these states from the enormous losses in terms of lives and economy. Now when the pandemic is here for over a year with the fourth wave wreaking havoc in many states, the complete vaccination continues to be a difficult task to accomplish, as many states have become aware of the failures of their governments' approaches. This became more evident in the US where Donald Trump had to leave the presidency after the elections. Similarly, egoistic policies of these states have come under heavy criticism with potential to undermine the soft power of these states. In this situation, the demands from domestic politics appear to be changing. Thus, the change of demands will necessitate a more cooperative policy outlook from the states. India, particularly after falling victim to the ruthless third wave of the pandemic has received sympathy and support from different states including Pakistan and China who are seen by India as adversaries. Similarly, owing to its failure in managing the pandemic, right wing Indian government will seek something to sell to the domestic voters. Thus, the impression of increasing soft power in the shape of cooperation can serve as an immediate remedy to boost the ego of ultra nationalist voters. However, in the midst of the new wave of the pandemic, even such a move seems an unlikely scenario in the future. The US and European states are also being criticised domestically for their self-centred approach in responding to the pandemic. As the immunisation programme in these states will spread and vaccine production capability will increase, more benefit sharing can be witnessed. So, the window for international cooperation in the future is better explained by the neoclassical realists' assumptions. As per

estimates, COVID-19 is likely to continue in year 2023<sup>51</sup> till the immunisation of a majority of world population. Thus, one can expect the world coming back to normal. However, it will leave the states with the re-endorsement of the lesson of self-help.

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<sup>51</sup>Emily Goddard, "Coronavirus may be with us until 2023, expert warns," *INDEPENDENT*, September 6, 2020.