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Piyush Mathur

**Understanding post-Covid-19 global politics:
A tentative theoretical framework**



NECMETTİN ERBAKAN
UNIVERSITY
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Understanding post-Covid-19 global politics: A tentative theoretical framework

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Area studies in the social sciences—particularly in the discipline of international relations—are very important to fostering an understanding of global change; and to forming responses to the same. Therefore, TIGA promotes area research studies vis-a-vis global developments; and, to that end, it organizes scientific international events such as conferences, workshops, panels, and seminars on relevant themes. TIGA also provides fellowships and internships; publishes reports and books; and conducts lectures for undergraduate and graduate students.

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Piyush Mathur

Understanding post-Covid-19 global politics: A tentative theoretical framework

Understanding post-Covid-19 global politics: A tentative theoretical framework¹

Piyush Mathur

Abstract

Noting the lack of a prior theoretical framework for the global-political study of a COVID-19-afflicted world, I try to articulate such a framework in this paper. This articulation stresses the uniqueness of the COVID-19 phenomenon, the element of uncertainty that has been associated with it, and the methodological innovations that might be necessary to study it from a global-political viewpoint. As part of this endeavour, I clarify the scope of the term 'global politics'—before identifying two basic factor clusters as the fundamental shapers of a post-pandemic global politics. I also suggest that analysts heed the inherent mass scale and character of this politics across the sovereign territories—a worldwide politics to which domestic choices, especially those made inside well-known democracies, would nevertheless be decisive.

In the main course of the paper, I unpack the two basic factor clusters into the following five individual factors: 1. information flows; 2. demographic flows; 3. history; 4. domestic politics; and, 5. access to relevant vaccination (and repercussions thereof for overall medicare across the world). Most of the paper is devoted to explaining the above factors—the specific ways in which they have shaped, and would continue to shape, the post-COVID-19 global politics. I conclude by suggesting that focusing on the above factors and their interactions must comprise the core normative methodology and theoretical framework for studying our planet's political future in reference to the pandemic.

A webinar on post-coronavirus global politics held under the aegis of the Turkish Center for Global and Area Studies (TIGA) at the end of April this year prompted me to write this paper—almost entirely in retrospect. While putting together my country segment for that webinar—which was itself a bit of an emergency, part-speculative response to the pandemic from the disciplinary quarters of 'area studies

¹THIS PAPER WAS SUBMITTED ON AUGUST 30, 2020; IT WAS RESUBMITTED AFTER SOME REVISIONS ON OCTOBER 7, 2020.

/comparative politics'—it occurred to me that no prior academic training had prepared any of us to fully appreciate the peculiarity of the entire affair. This personal feeling of a collective academic inadequacy vis-a-vis our topic (and even the webinar format) of our discussion continued to grow in me after the fact—and I concluded that one of our basic challenges had been our lack of clarity about the sheer terms and scope of the topic.

To put it more precisely, I felt that we did not really have a theoretical framework—and certainly not any that we had agreed upon—for a global-political understanding of this pandemic (leave aside of a scenario that might follow it). Worse, it would have been difficult for us at the time of the webinar to pinpoint that lack as an underlying challenge. While personally unsettling, this sort of a situation was understandable given the speed with which the pandemic had engulfed us all. It seemed to me that somehow lessons from prior pandemics had not been integrated widely into the humanistic disciplines—excepting for some narrow bands of history (especially of the epidemiological kind) and risk studies.

In follow-up interactions with Dr. Gökhan Bozbaş, the institute's director, I shared with him the above thoughts—and expressed my desire to theorize a framework of interpretation sensitive to the uniqueness of the challenge that our current pandemic had embodied for us as political observers. He appreciated my concern and my offer, and the result is this paper. As to what I mean by theorizing here, let me say that it is a selection and sublimated systematization of factors that arguably constitute the deep global-political context for the pandemic's emergence and its future. Integral to this factor selection and systematization are my attempts at terminological clarifications, analytical and interdisciplinary explanations, and speculative reasoning.

Introduction

Let me start out by suggesting that—this pandemic or not—global politics itself is a vague collocation. While the meaning of politics is clear enough—say, activities pertaining to the governance (and sometimes even management) of some identifiable zone of human influence—it slips into vagueness when it is qualified by global. Would global politics mean international relations? Or would it exclusively mean (a consideration of) the domestic politics of all sovereign territories across the globe (and, for that matter, beyond—such as spacecrafts)? Or would it mean some sort of a non-exclusive consideration of each of the above components? And if it is the latter, then why should we leave out non-sovereign territories and institutions?

The point is that there is not always a prior agreement on what is involved when researchers go forward and begin to discuss something under the rubric of global politics. Meanwhile, there might also be an assortment of under-acknowledged disciplinary preconceptions related to the study of anything presumed to fall under that rubric. Disciplinary experts—say country specialists, area studies researchers, international relations/geo-strategy analysts, international organizations specialists, and historians, to name most of the usual suspects—tend to have their own, equally valid, predilections regarding 'global politics'. Nevertheless, in a given instance of their congregation presumptively about that topic, these observers are not always conscious of—or alert to—their disciplinary differences regarding its sheer scope.

As different from these discipline-driven approaches, an attempt at articulating a theoretical framework for profiling post-pandemic 'global politics' must start out with the foregoing awareness itself regarding the outstanding conduct of the general discourse involving that collocation. Doing so allows us presently the following two things: to keep under consideration, from the get-go, all of the above legitimate facets of global politics (without embracing an oft-repeated yet nonsensical postmodern claim that 'everything is political'); and to challenge the tacit assumption that any conventional disciplinary priorities and methods would suffice in our attempt at grasping this unprecedented pandemic's unfolding political scope.

Regarding this latter point, my insistence is on the following principle: While disciplinary backgrounds are always important to even apprehending an object of study, we must always strive to respect the particularity—even the uniqueness—of the object that we undertake to study. This principle should be given an even greater significance whenever the object of study is known to be unprecedented—which happens to be the case with the SARS-CoV-2 (and, by extension, its impact on the humanity, and thus on the globe). Indeed, all disciplines stand to learn from this new phenomenon; and instead of overshadowing it with our predilections entirely, we must attempt to truly come to terms with it—and refashion and reformat aspects of our discipline-bound approaches to reflect our efforts.

With all the above riders and conceptual qualifications in place, I am yet reduced to making a patently underwhelming declaration first and foremost, as follows: Nobody could predict with certainty what sort of a global politics would emerge from the ashes of this pandemic; in fact, as of today, relevant expert communities cannot accurately predict the full scope and timescale of the human-health effects of the virus itself. All that the experts can offer—at their best—are predictions based upon statistically robust, constantly updated models whose ultimate measure of accuracy would yet be hindsight! In the meantime, public policies

would unfold partially based upon those predictions—whereby rendering even a hindsight into something less than a definitive or truly independent measure of their accuracy anyway.

That having been said, it is difficult—indeed impossible—for just about all of us to remain entirely aloof from the question of our common future in the wake of a conspicuously homogenized present into which we have all been coerced qua humankind. Ergo, there are hardly any professional sectors that have not invested their resources into developing a sense of their own post-pandemic future. And while organized collectives feel compelled by their occupational and economic urgencies to make such projections regarding their own viability, their leaders make them (partly) out of a sense of individual responsibility they feel toward their sectoral followers.

Underlying these occupational and idealistic compulsions, however, is also an existential uneasiness that humans feel quite generally—and ambitious humans (say leaders and wannabe leaders) feel somewhat specifically. This uneasiness has to do with our dread of having to sit idle inside our homes—under the pandemic-induced lockdowns and curfews—as time passes on. For we are not only not used to sitting idle, but we also have negative attitudes toward it—as it is a byword for being unemployed (indeed for being unemployable), inactive, unproductive, and/or lacking a drive. But a person's lack of ease with being idle itself has different shades and colourations—depending upon how secure, powerful, and/or responsible the person is (or is expected to be) economically, socially, and politically within his or her own living context.

For vast swaths of global populations, being idle means starvation; for many, it means having to live more modestly than before while struggling with their inner demons and general uncertainties. For still others, being more or less idle (and domestically confined) may mean any of the above as well as abuse; and for the remainder, it may just mean boredom, a lack of creative work, a lack of socialization, and/or a gnawing feeling that one is losing touch with the public or one's followers—unlike one's fierce rivals—and thus losing one's grip on power. Against the above layered backdrop, post-COVID-19 global politics would both be decided by—and reflected in—various types of interplays between the following two fundamental factor clusters:

- how different shapes and sizes of human crowds around the world—and their representatives, whenever available—respond to and exhibit the uneasiness of being idle caused by the pandemic
- how the pandemic and its effects are represented or misrepresented across all available platforms of mass communication—and whether and how they are suppressed within contexts.

In other words, both a gamut of organized as well as unorganized actions associated with the pandemic—and a gamut of related representations—would shape, often constitute, the global politics in the foreseeable future.

Lest the above paragraph is viewed as an artful—if not an arduous—way of saying something that we all already know, let me point out below what I believe distinguishes it:

1. The foregoing iteration rejects the notion that post-COVID-19 global politics could be marked out purely in terms of geo-strategic/diplomatic international relations; instead, it implicates a multilayered, massified view of global politics as an authentic capture of our post-pandemic political situation worldwide.

2. The iteration also retains an oft-neglected psychological-cum-existential dimension to how post-COVID-19 global politics needs to be rendered by authoritative observers—say, political philosophers and analytical journalists—to any type of formal, public audience. What I mean is that a theoretical framework for apprehending post-COVID-19 global politics must retain the disciplinary sensibility of political psychology—especially as applied on a mass scale (rather than, say, just on the level of individual entities). So, for instance, while the themes of (governing) power, finance, and control—coupled with occasional foray into individual leaders' popularity, appeal, charisma and personality—might have served adequately for exploring conventional political scenarios, they most certainly would not in our near future in the wake of this pandemic. Rather, we would also have to engage consistently with themes in global mass psychology—with enough attention paid to the very basic, underlying existential human impulses if we wish to make realistic interpretations of our post-pandemic global politics.

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic—given its multidimensional, comprehensive impact already—obliges us to re-approach global politics not merely from the conventional angle of (international) realpolitik but also from a far wider range of angles from where we could see the shifting interests and power equations across a diversity of human populations worldwide. This scale of analysis would have to be not just international or intra-national, but also—and insistently—transnational: sensitive to the causes and their sprawling constituencies across the territories rather than to just those that can be easily compartmentalized into geopolitical, geo-strategic borders and behaviours. That would be yet another way to say this: Post-COVID-19 global politics would be global politics writ extra-large.

The five key shapers of the post-COVID-19 global politics

Inasmuch as the post-COVID-19 global politics would be global politics writ extra-large, its topography and relief would evolve in response to the following five main factors and their interactions: information flows; demographic flows; history; domestic politics; and access to relevant vaccination (and repercussions thereof for overall medicare across the world). While a proper framing and description of the above

factors could claim a long chapter each in some book to be, for our present purpose I would have to discuss all of them in a little over 15 thousand words! And even as I move forward, I realize that each of the above factors has effectively no natural limits: One would have to move more or less in an assumptive, heuristic fashion while discussing these factors—and no such discussion would be definitive or without loopholes.

I further realize that none of these factors is either entirely new or unique to the COVID-19 situation; only that each of them has turned out to be prominent in some sort of a combination with the others through the pandemic's coming into its own—and I suggest that all of them together would play a critical role in our post-pandemic global politics. Uncertainty underpins all my claims—just as it underpins the very topic of our discussion; indeed, uncertainty continues to characterize the COVID-19 scenario quite generally, including strictly medically. For once, the political philosopher is not terribly worse off than the medical researcher in making predictive knowledge claims about an issue—even though plenty of journalists and medical researchers would hate to hear that! At any rate, let me briefly get inside each of these factors in the following pages.

1. Information flows

Given that this pandemic is authentically the first global pandemic to have erupted in the Age of Information (specifically inside its sub-period of the Age of the Internet), it doubles up as an unprecedented mass-communication challenge to the humanity: a challenge that is only queered by the planet's dominant political undercurrents. Despite seeing a relatively recent upswing in authoritarian-populist-nationalistic regimes, our Internet-based world remains a difficult place for governments to restrict their citizens to state-preferred international or internal communications. All in all, what we have is a whole bunch of authoritarian regimes—which are both domestically repressive and internationally incongruent—thriving against the backdrop of a heavily virtualized, digitalized, and communicatively porous world. These regimes have set the tone for a non-transparent, unpredictable, and confusing landscape of international relations.

The foundational example for the above would be the tension between the US and China—a dynamic that prepared the mood early on for the post-pandemic global politics; but in relation to the above,

²For further illumination on this point, check out the following article: Nicholds, Alyson (April 8, 2020) "Coronavirus: why experts disagree so strongly over how to tackle the disease" The Conversation (Downloaded from the following URL on August 10, 2020: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-why-experts-disagree-so-strongly-over-how-to-tackle-the-disease-135825>).

we also cannot ignore the near-future prospects for international organizations, just the same. One may consider in this regard the damaged image of the World Health Organization (WHO) through this pandemic as one sign of things to come. Trump's abandonment of the WHO aside, there has been an under-acknowledged displacement of it as the most authoritative global agency on health issues³—and this whole theme is unhelped by the fact that this organization had been struggling with challenges to its reputation since its handling of the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.⁴ As it stands, key Western powers cannot agree on how to reform this organization—even though, fearing China's illicit influence on it, they do agree that it needs reform.⁵

The WHO's own shortfalls in addressing this fast-evolving pandemic aside, it has been unable to project to the world an unimpeachable command of that challenge: partly because of a wired globe's information saturation via an endless list of other outlets. These other outlets are not just virtual rumour mongers;⁶ they are also various research groups, public health institutions, governments operating on several levels, independent experts, and media commentators. This international plurality of medical authorities—comprising individuals as well as institutions—has been there since the inception of the WHO on April 7, 1948 (and surely before); however, the extent of this plurality is far greater now than previously.⁷

³See, for instance, the following reports: Bort, Ryan (March 31, 2020) 'Why the World Health Organization's Response to COVID-19 is crucial to the future of public health', Rolling Stone (Downloaded from the following URL on August 10, 2020: <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/world-health-organization-coronavirus-response-975543/>); Gilsinan, Kathy (April 12, 2020) 'How Chi-na deceived the WHO', The Atlantic (Downloaded from the following URL on August 10, 2020: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/world-health-organization-blame-pandemic-corona-virus/609820/>); Chan, Lai-Ha & Pak K. Lee (May, 21, 2020) 'The World Health Organization must answer these hard questions in its coronavirus inquiry', The Conversation (Downloaded from the following URL on August 10, 2020: <https://theconversation.com/the-world-health-organization-must-answer-these-hard-questions-in-its-coronavirus-inquiry-138959>).

⁴See, for instance, the following two reports: Nebehay, Stephanie (January 26, 2017) 'WHO seeks new leader to rebuild damaged reputation' (ed. Richard Lough) Reuters (Downloaded from the following URL on August 10, 2020: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-who-director/who-seeks-new-leader-to-rebuild-damaged-reputation-idUSKBN1592IK>); Wenham, Clare (May 26, 2017) 'What we have learnt about the World Health Organization from the Ebola outbreak', Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences 372 (1721): 20160307 (doi:10.1098/rstb.2016.0307).

⁵Bostock, Bill (August 8, 2020) 'France and Germany pulled out of talks to reform the WHO because the US was trying to take control, according to a report', Business Insider (Downloaded from the following URL on August 11, 2020: <https://www.businessinsider.in/politics/world/news/france-and-germany-pulled-out-of-talks-to-reform-the-who-because-the-us-was-trying-to-take-control-according-to-a-report/articleshow/77432897.cms>).

⁶The extent of rumour mongering even regarding COVID-19 specifically can be gauged by the fact that a research article published on August 10, 2020 identified '2,311 reports of rumors, stigma, and conspiracy theories in 25 languages from 87 countries'. See Md Saiful Islam et al. (August 10, 2020) 'COVID-19-related infodemic and its impact on public health: A global social media analysis' The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, pp. 1-9 (Downloaded from the following URL on August 30, 2020: <https://www.ajtmh.org/content/journals/10.4269/ajtmh.20-0812>).

⁷Both national-level medical institutions and global-scale institutions and agencies within the health sector have proliferated through the past 7 decades or so. Check out, for instance, the following statement from Charles Cliff's report published in 2013:

That has to do with the widening of the global research and educational base following the European imperialism's quick contraction after the end of the Second World War, and the proliferation of sovereign governments worldwide along the way. Just to give one example: Madagascar, which got its independence from France in 1960, forced the WHO to promise to conduct a study to verify the efficacy of 'its herbal drink Covid Organics (CVO)' for the prevention and cure of COVID-19 infection; the CVO has been developed by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research.⁸ But on top of this actual postcolonial proliferation of authorities—medical and political—there has also been a proliferation of mass-communication outlets available to all levels and types of authorities (institutional or individual), thanks (relatively recently) to the Internet. In this relatively new mass-communication environment, quick public airing of one's findings as much as opinion qua experts has become normal. As it happens, the pandemic itself has led to a specific intensification of the foregoing trend; as Alice Park reported for the New York-based Time magazine in June 2020, 'Digital sites that posted manuscripts of scientific papers before peer review have flourished since January, and editors of prestigious medical journals have asked their peer reviewers to complete their analyses, traditionally done over weeks, in just days.'⁹

Inasmuch as the global communication sphere fills out with daily updates on all sorts of findings and claims, the SARS-CoV-2 itself has

Since 1948 many things have changed in the world of global health, in particular the large number of new initiatives and institutions created that challenge WHO's role as a directing and coordinating authority. Examples include the entry of the World Bank into health sector lending on a large scale in the 1980s; the creation of new organizations such as UNAIDS, the GAVI Alliance (formerly the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation), the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (The Global Fund) and UN/TAID, developed to tackle specific disease problems; and new public-private partnerships for product development such as the Medicines for Malaria Venture or Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative.

Meanwhile WHO's secure funding from governments has stagnated and it has become reliant on voluntary contributions from governments and other actors usually earmarked for particular activities favoured by the donor. In recent years, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has become one of the biggest voluntary contributors to WHO. [...]

There are many questions about how WHO should locate itself in relation to this new and crowded institutional environment.

Clift, Charles (February 2013) The role of the World Health Organization in the international system (Centre on Global Health Security Working Group Papers) (Chatham House: Lon-don), p. 6.

⁸Tih, Felix (May 14, 2020) 'WHO to study Madagascar's drug to treat COVID-19' Anadolu Agency (Downloaded from the following URL on August 10, 2020: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/who-to-study-madagascars-drug-to-treat-covid-19-/1840971>).

⁹Park, Alice (June 11, 2020) 'Pressure on good science during a pandemic is leading to confusing, and conflicting advice on COVID-19' Time (Downloaded from the following URL on August 13, 2020: <https://time.com/5851849/coronavirus-science-advice/>).

proven to be a remarkably complex phenomenon. And so, partly depending on what dimension of it (and its infection) observers might have focused on—using what type of evidence (biological or socio-environmental, to mention just two broad categories)—they have, off and on, put out statements that have run parallel to, and even contradicted, the WHO's official line on the subject.¹⁰ The WHO and its public statements remain important still of course, only that they no longer command the yesteryear's broadly visible centrality or presumption of unassailable or final authority.

Before moving further, though, I must highlight the fact that the WHO is not the only United Nations (UN) organization that has recently had its global prestige and authority diluted. For other reasons, other UN organizations had not necessarily been doing any the better anyway within their own realms of specialization. For that matter, the world has become a worse place for multilateral global organizations quite generally through the past 4 years—even though this type of deterioration appears to have started 20 years ago. To be precise, the erosion of multilateralism in global governance (including via the UN platform) ironically followed the end of the Cold War (which is otherwise a byword for a polarized world) and the rise of the Bretton Woods institutions-led neoliberal capitalist globalization. A counter-proof for this could be located in the gradual weakening of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), which was pushed into near-complete irrelevance by Narendra Modi when he chose to skip its summit a second time in October 2019.¹¹

With the previously growing reliance on multilateralism gone, our contemporary global politics is characterized by mutual distrust, a lack of global coordination, and both international and domestic acts of repression directed against politically inconvenient journalists. The result is that the wired globe of today has a vast virtual space for personally, ideologically, and commercially motivated misinformation and rumour. A regime, a strongman, a commercial tycoon, or a business house finds it more convenient than ever to promote misinformation that it believes would

¹⁰See, for instance, the following: McGeorge, Frank (June 10, 2020) 'WHO walks back statement on asymptomatic spread of coronavirus: statement contradicts CDC guidance' ClickOnDetroit (Downloaded from the following URL on August 13, 2020: <https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/local/2020/06/10/who-walks-back-statement-on-asymptomatic-spread-of-coronavirus/>); Meredith, Sam (July 6, 2020) 'Hundreds of scientists claim WHO is downplaying risk of airborne spread of coronavirus' CNBC (Downloaded from the following URL on August 13, 2020: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/06/coronavirus-scientists-claim-who-downplaying-risk-of-airborne-spread.html>).

¹¹Haidar, Suhasini (October 23, 2019) 'Narendra Modi skips NAM summit again' The Hindu (Downloaded from the following URL on August 15, 2020: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/narendra-modi-skips-nam-summit-again/article29779894.ece>).

help it retain its political or commercial clout and one-upmanship. It is this type of a mass-communication situation that Joel Simon—the executive director of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists—had in mind when he referred to ‘a global press freedom crackdown’ that he claimed had emerged specifically in the wake of this pandemic; the ‘visa war’ between the US and China regarding the reporters of either country might well have been this crackdown’s international high point.¹²

There is, without doubt, an even broader (and deeper) history behind this general atmosphere of misinformation and distrust—with some relatively ‘recent’ flashpoints to be recognized through those breadths and depths. While it is highlighted in some specific ways as of now, this inherited mass-communication atmosphere of misinformation and distrust underpins the global politics itself that has been unfolding alongside the pandemic—and would continue to unfold in the aftermath of COVID-19. The historical flashpoints are at least five:

- the long phase of European imperialism (flashpoint 1)
- the Cold War, 1947-1991 (flashpoint 2)
- the Gulf War, 1991-1992 (flashpoint 3)
- the 2003 Invasion of Iraq (flashpoint 4); and
- the emergence of Da’esh, 2006-present (flashpoint 5).

What I am about to state regarding the above flashpoints are rather encompassing statements—but I feel that I can’t do without making them, if only to keep this write-up succinct overall (as paradoxical as that may sound to those unused to reading political theory articulations). Consider the following: If European imperialism—with the conceptual fabrication of race¹³ toward asserting White supremacy—was one long chapter in the book of global propaganda shaping our contemporary world’s political contours, then the Cold War was the chapter that would follow it. Lasting, let’s say, from the Truman Doctrine of 1947 to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War’s end would coincide with the first tele-war—called the Gulf War (1990–1991)—that much of the world would see from the drawing room. The Gulf War showed us how emergent mass communication infrastructures might twine into—and co-construct with global ruling powers—an unfolding international crisis; it also bequeathed to us the Taliban and, subsequently, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Da’esh.

¹²Simon, Joel (March 25, 2020) ‘COVID-19 is spawning a global press freedom crackdown’ *Columbia Journalism Review* (Downloaded from the following URL on August 13, 2020: <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/coronavirus-press-freedom-crackdown.php>).

¹³See Hannaford, Ivan (1996) *Race: the history of an idea in the West* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore).

Following the Gulf War (and preceding the emergence of Da'esh), the next flashpoint in global-scale propaganda won't arrive until the early 2000s. That's when the US and UK governments would prepare a very public case for invading Iraq on the false premise that Saddam Hussein had the weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ Iraq was invaded in 2003; inside the US, however, this invasion consolidated—via George W. Bush—a brand of brashly frivolous politics that would simmer below the surface across the US during the Obama years and erupt into the ascent of Donald Trump (a reality TV host) to the US Presidency on January 20, 2017.

Paralleling the above developments, the Internet would entrench itself into the mass communication sphere—with the establishment of Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006—eventually saturating it. Meanwhile, inasmuch as the US would officially withdraw from Iraq in 2011—a withdrawal that was anyway anything but—it would get directly involved again in the region on the orders of President Barack Obama on June 15, 2014. Since then, the US has been heading up the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR)—comprising personnel from over 30 countries—against Da'esh.

With Da'esh, we enter the 5th flashpoint in the evolvement of a globally ambitious, globally pitched campaign of misinformation and distrust. While one instantly thinks of the video uploads of the beheadings, shootings, mutilations, and tortures with the mention of Da'esh in relation to the Internet, what we must remember is the vast backdrop of their online recruitment propaganda and ideological warfare—which was far from unsuccessful so long as the organization had lasted on the battlefield. Now, even though Da'esh is a brutally violent, theocratically inspired, and technologically primitive terrorist organization that has no parallel, it in fact serves as a type of a propagandist flashpoint: This is the type that is radically anti-establishment and subversive—and which falls inside a broad countercurrent of guerrilla cyber warfare.

This politically charged cyber-countercurrent would come to include a range of attempts, individuals, and coalitions that won't see one another eye to eye—such as Anonymous (founded 2003); the WikiLeaks (founded 2006) and its founder, Julian Assange; Edward Snowden (major act, 2013); AnonCoders (founded 2015); the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which spearheaded the Russian interference in the 2016 US elections; and Cambridge Analytica Ltd., responsible for the so-called Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal of 2018. We exclude from this open-

¹⁴For further reference, check this out: Mathur, Piyush (2006) 'More whitewash' Third World Quarterly (UK), 27: 8, pp. 1495-1507.

ended list the vast underbelly of hackers and harassers whose motives behind their cyberattacks and communication are either purely pecuniary or inter-personal.

Through the 2016 US presidential electoral campaign, this mass-communication backdrop to the unfolding politics in that country would come to be called post-truth, post-fact, or post-reality politics: terms that would be quickly applied to (and within) many polities worldwide. Indeed, post-truth would end up being the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016.¹⁵ But with Kellyanne Conway's public usage of the term 'alternative facts' on January 22, 2017—as a defence of the then White House Press Secretary's false claims about the size of the crowd at the presidential inauguration—the US political establishment's internalization of misleading propaganda would come under full media glare.

Since then, the US' liberal/leftist media has been resisting the White House's misleading domestic propaganda—and other falsehoods that float around on the Internet—through a variety of ways; and of course, the best of the global press has also been doing the same in its own capacity. This resistance itself, however, is not without flaws—and they include the following: It unwittingly promotes veneration toward experts; reinforces epistemological authoritarianism; remains opportunistic about issues of certainty and uncertainty in knowledge claims qua 'science'; fetishizes the word science under inconsistent, unsupportable assumptions about its meaning—and thus regarding what it exclusively refers to; and is not always as self-critical as it should be.

Speaking of being self-critical, for instance, it took the political scientist Robert Stoker—a professor at George Washington University—to call out the media in the wake of the Conway controversy by making the following argument via an article in *The Washington Post*: 'There are indeed such things as alternative facts. What matters in a democratic society is the ability to distinguish alternative facts from falsehoods'. Given when it was published—when Conway was being widely ridiculed in the US liberal media and elsewhere for so much as using the term 'alternative facts'—Stoker's piece was courageous; and the examples that he supplies in support of his argument are very clear, convincing. And as far as the so-called humanistic disciplines are concerned, the idea that alternative facts exist—and they are not the same as lies or falsities—would have been a starting point anyway.

¹⁵Oxford Languages (2016) 'Word of the Year 2016' (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK) (Downloaded from the following URL on August 22, 2020: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/#:~:text=After%20much%20discus-sion%2C%20debate%2C%20and,to%20emotion%20and%20personal%20belief>).

Nevertheless, the US/UK journalistic class refused to learn any lessons from Stoker's piece (or from the long tradition—which could be traced back to Ashis Nandy¹⁶—of stressing the availability of alternatives in how and what we know about the world). Instead, a relatively uncritical, monological notion of fact and truth has come to be tightly embraced—alongside an overwhelming glorification of an unsupportably exclusive, flawed notion of science (that, unbeknown to its users, is theologically sub-structured via Christianity).¹⁷ For all we know, those using the word science with that false assumptive exclusivity would not consider journalism or journalistic writing itself as science; and if that is the case, then how could we trust their usage of that word—given that they otherwise want us all to trust only that which is scientific? Needless to say, they also do not have something like 'political science' in their minds when they use the word science!

The foregoing stress on a misleadingly exclusive usage of that word—and the equally muddled assumptions that underpin it—has become increasingly global. Journalists are not the only ones that have been engaging in its peculiar overuse; those considered 'scientists' also use it with no greater precision (which it truly does not command, as they assume it does). What this practice contributes to, though, is a generalized deficit in critical thinking and critical self-reflection in the minds of those that are already sold on that flawed notion; as for the rest, they feel bitterly excluded from the conversation itself. The latter types would be more easily persuaded to slip into conspiracy theories, rumour, and fake news: and being labelled unscientific won't get them to engage with those that consider themselves scientific or have come to be called scientists following William Whewell's coining of the term scientist at the height of British colonialism in AD 1833.

All in all, the post-pandemic global politics would unfold as an unfortunate continuation of the foregoing mass-communication environment and associated angst about knowledge claims. Needless to say, policy, governance, law, and administration would both contribute to that environment and suffer because of it. There is every reason to anticipate all sorts of socio-political unrest that would indirectly or directly result from well-intentioned but flawed frames concerning fact and truth, authoritarian measures resting upon them, and journalistic as much as academic blindspots concerning issues in epistemological certainty and uncertainty. This factor of information flows would necessarily intertwine

¹⁶Nandy, Ashis (1987) *Traditions, tyranny and utopia: essays on the politics of awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press).

¹⁷For an extensive treatment of this theme, please take a look at the relevant chapters of the following book: Mathur, Piyush (2017) *Technological forms and eco-logical communication: a theoretical heuristic* (Lexington Books: Maryland, USA).

with the flows of the people—and even of the peoples of the world. We get to that factor in the next section.

2. Demographic flows

When we think of the COVID-19 pandemic, we think of the lockdowns; quarantines; other types of responsive restrictions; and myriad ways of discipline as well as punishment that various types of authorities around the world have had to resort to in order to contain it. And of course there is virtually limitless suffering—mainly of the economic and domestic varieties (the latter involving domestic abuse situations)—that has resulted from the above measures and from the direct health effects of the epidemic itself. Underneath these activities comprising control and release—confinement and allowance—there is a planet-wide reckoning of the humanity as a flow—or, rather, as clusters of flows. This reckoning is integral to the COVID-19 experience—and it would be one of the key factors that would shape the post-pandemic world.

The flows of the humanity themselves are of course not new; nor is there anything new even in recognizing them, per se. What is new are the following three traits related to this theme:

1. Owing to the pandemic, the humanity has had to reckon all at once with the global masses of populations as flows sensitive to various distances and durations (and other factors). While worldwide transportation systems have of course evolved to facilitate humans as flows—and while apparatuses (such as traffic rules, forms of confinement) dedicated to controlling and tracking these flows have only served to cross-identify, sustain these flows—none of these developments had required us to view ourselves within an express timeframe as a planet-wide flow.
2. The pandemic forced the humanity into counter-recognizing itself as a planet-wide flow. What I mean is that while historically humans have given most of their attention to recognizing and facilitating themselves as a flow, through this pandemic they have had to revisit themselves as a flow for the sake of qualifying and checking themselves in endless different ways, depending on the context. This situation renders all polities into a full-time surveillance-cum-police state—and it renders all moving civilians into suspects or potential suspects: say of an epidemiological crime, including that of self-infliction.
3. This pandemic-induced counter-recognition of the humanity as a flow necessarily blurs the boundaries between perpetrators and victims—let's say, of the new crime of getting spilled over the sanctioned frameworks (always in a given juridical context); and it does so with an unprecedented vehemence and comprehensively. It is this third trait of the pandemic's

effect on human flows that deserves an extended explanation—and theoretical extrapolation—which I provide below.

Consider the following: A human carrier of the virus is already a sufferer—and potentially a victim of either his own or somebody else's inability to stick to the rules involving movement and personal hygiene; but he is also a medical threat and thus a potential perpetrator of crimes involving breach of relevant public-health protocols. Unlike a conventional suspect, accused, or criminal, somebody suspected, accused, or convicted of being an intentional or negligent spreader of COVID-19 cannot merely be disciplined or imprisoned: He has to be medically monitored and treated (and it would have to be assumed that those additional costs might have to be borne by the state). Indeed, a counter proof of sorts of the above situation can be seen in COVID-19-related prison releases from many countries around the world.¹⁸

One could hypothesize a sovereign state that rounds up and imprisons COVID-19 carriers without offering them any treatment—essentially sentencing them to a near-certain death; however, such a state also renders itself into an openly criminal state, liable to be ostracized by other sovereign states for its cruelty. This scenario would only get worse for the state if it decides to do away with confinement entirely—and employs some long-distance tactics to eliminate the imprisoned virus carriers. However, neither confinement-without-treatment nor any type of long-distance culling would eliminate the threat represented by carriers of COVID-19—simply because their detection as such would have ensured a line of contact with them anyway (and thus it would have kept open the possibility of the virus' transmission). And yet, one can hypothesize a rare state that would aim to minimize, not eliminate, that sort of a threat—precisely through that criminal route; such a state may also view this criminal route as a cost-cutting tactics.

While retaining the above dreadful prospect as a theoretical possibility, I would stay closer to the reality by excluding that sort of a rare criminal state from my purview. But even within the normal course of the political management of this pandemic, the afflicted can inflict: indeed, they are the only ones that could inflict. Inside the regimes of pandemic-related controls, the COVID-19 afflicted are thus both victims and potential perpetrators: of the infection—with its varying degrees and shades of severity—as much as the crime of spreading this infection. The COVID-19 afflicted cannot thus be left to their own fate: once identified as such, they have to be attended to somehow—if only to ensure the health and well-

¹⁸A list prepared by the Human Rights Watch of COVID-19-related prison releases that unfolded through March 15-May 22, 2020 could be accessed on this URL (as of September 5, 2020): https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/05/announced_releases_detainees_covid19_1.pdf

being of those that are neither presently helpless in relation to the virus nor even necessarily in any immediate danger of catching the infection from it.

To the extent that those infected by COVID-19 constitute a need that has to be met by the rest of the society via a political system, they wield a type of power vis-a-vis the state. Stating the above is no more pleasurable than reading it—and what has been stated is indeed difficult to accept, for anybody (perhaps most of all by those afflicted and thus in the most immediate, gravest of all dangers). But the discomfort (should there be any) in accepting the proposition that COVID-19 infection could also empower the infected in any given sense merely reflects the peculiarity of this situation—and the impossible peculiarity of the power that comes to those infected.

The wretched power that comes to a human through a COVID-19 infection becomes noticeable only when it is clear to others that this person would not have otherwise been either closely cared for or feared by the state. For a person who has no regular access to a welfare system and who has also lost all economic upkeep of himself to pandemic-induced lockdowns—or for a person who is anyway an alien proletariat on the run toward basic survival—a COVID-19 infection might constitute both an affliction and the only chance at receiving any type of caring attention from the world (realistically represented locally by the state). Effectively victimized by another person—who would not have been careful enough to prevent himself from infecting others—the newly infected proletariat (be he a pandemic-induced proletariat or a pre-pandemic proletariat) is better positioned than before the infection to get public welfare. Contrariwise, if somebody has happened to lose more power than what he may have gained—vis-a-vis the state—owing to this infection, then this gained power would not be discernible because the person would be a net loser in political, economic, and psychological terms.

But that still leaves us with uninfected proletariats lacking a regular access to a welfare system. Well, in point of fact, this cluster of people, too, stands to wield a specific power because of this pandemic. The infectious nature of this pandemic leaves governments with no choice but to view uninfected proletariats as potential carriers of the disease given that they cannot just sit at home and depend upon their savings, fixed assets, or delayed salaries; by the same token, governments are forced to view them as socio-political threats writ large. In sum, COVID-19 weaponizes the physical beings of the utter have-nots—whose movements, as much as containment, interest the authorities and even the local rich.

But we should not get ahead of ourselves in making a point about the wretched power that a proletariat comes to have because of an awful COVID-19 infection. Under circumstances, a state can nullify this

pandemic-induced wretched weaponization of the individual proletariat's physical being by abdicating all responsibility to rule a local area where this person resides—perhaps where the infection is rife precisely among a lot of such proletariats. Indeed, ruling authorities of a political territory could retreat into their own highly sheltered zones, leaving impoverished regions of this very territory to their own fates—even as the handful of elites from these regions would have already fled the scene to cushier pockets elsewhere.

In this type of a situation, the infected proletariat is not so much as restrained or confined as (s)he is abandoned alongside her or his fellow proletariats—altogether comprising some sort of a languishing, moribund local collectivity. Those left behind would have been too poor to be able to transport themselves away from the place (which would itself be in a state of economic collapse)—unless they would have (also) been physically challenged or committed to take care of their sick relatives. With the handful of their elites having already fled, the vast majority of such a locality's inhabitants would have thus been left to fend for themselves. Many of these proletariats would have tried to go across the locality's general periphery without meeting any official resistance; only those seeking to infiltrate any elite pockets beyond the limits of their locality would be checked and appropriately handled by state agents and private employees guarding the ruling elites.

The above discussion allows me to make further observations—based upon an understanding of our recent and current situation worldwide. Having already pre-occupied—and thus defined—the global political management of the pandemic, human flows have themselves tended to revolve around the following key axes that are otherwise conventional and have nothing to do with the pandemic per se: citizenship; class; region, economic sector; religion; and gender. Let me briefly outline these axes below:

- The axis of citizenship marks out (wannabe) international migrants and refugees from citizens and valid residents.
- The axis of class marks out, chiefly, haves from have-nots—no matter the territorial borders. In the context of poorer sovereign territories, the class axis may also mark out a difference in the quality and level of state's preparedness managing its pandemic-forced international returnees versus internal migrants.
- The axis of region marks out any type of region or regional cluster from another (reflected, for instance, in the large-scale pandemic-induced urban-to-rural migration in India).
- The axis of economic sector marks out human flows toward those geographical spaces that have happened to have a chance through the unfolding pandemic at the expense of spaces emptying out owing to job

loss; this axis also marks out the migration of ideational and communication workforces around the world from physical to virtual spaces.

- The axis of religion marks out not only an outflow from religious spaces into non-religious ones—but it also underlines, in one specific dimension of global politics, prior issues of prejudice against those viewed to be adherents of Islam, specifically.¹⁹
- The axis of gender marks out the difference between how the majority of males versus their female counterparts may have experienced (and might experience) the curbs on their movements through this pandemic. While this axis has received some pandemic-related attention in certain media circles, it remains by and large under-attended: not unlike gender issues within conventional politics itself.

3. The hidden significance of history

While this pandemic has an unprecedented character—caused as it is by a hitherto unknown, novel virus—it is condemned to play out on both national and international historical turfs. The foregoing is one of those mundane observations that need to be made out of the fear that they may yet be ignored or forgotten on crucial occasions. It may be like one of those annoying things that parents would insist upon reminding their child before the latter's leaving for an interview, exam, or some journey! Well, history's significance is always more or less hidden—if in part because history remains contingent upon what groups of people or individuals may have happened to remember the past, in what mix of forms, for what reasons, and through what processes.

And yet history's hiddenness would appear to have a specific relevance to this pandemic, to our global-political understanding of it anyway. That is because while most other types of crises tend to be explicit culminations of half-understood historical facts and themes—duly or unduly highlighted and interpreted by journalists and researchers as these crises erupt—this pandemic turned up as a quick result of something new that fundamentally belongs to the world of biology. As such, the historical factors—including those related to virology, environment, or human-animal relations—would not have been immediately or specifically germane to it from the viewpoint of the public generally. It is just that the pandemic has had to take shape in—and shape—the human world with a history all its own.

¹⁹See, for instance, the following reports: Chib, Eeshita (May 29, 2020) 'Islamophobia and the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK' Observer Research Foundation (Downloaded from the following URL on August 30, 2020: <https://www.orfonline.org/ex-pert-speak/islamophobia-covid-19-pandemic-uk-67037/>); Kapur, Roshni (July 7, 2020) 'Covid-19 in India and Sri Lanka: new forms of Islamophobia' Middle East Institute (Downloaded from the following URL on August 30, 2020: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/covid-19-india-and-sri-lanka-new-forms-islamophobia>).

A worthy consideration of the post-pandemic global politics would thus have to be historically aware (and not merely historically informed); use history as part of its methodology itself, and not just as content; and, it would have picked out relevant historical strands as critically and objectively as possible (rather than, say, based upon conventional ideological strands or subjective preferences, per se). This last bit is of course always difficult to do, and no less difficult to claim in regard to one's own considerations: Many commentators (academic as well as journalistic) would not even feel—let alone recognise—the need to distinguish between ideological choices and their issue-based counterparts from the past. Nevertheless, for making projections about post-pandemic global politics, it seems particularly important to me that commentators heed the unprecedented nature—and transformative power—of this pandemic: something they won't be able to do so long as they remain tightly beholden to their inherited or adopted ideological frameworks and categories.

A researcher who refuses to see beyond the inherited doors of perception while considering the impact of this pandemic on the humanity is not any the better than the average person who refuses to let go of his or her set, insular ways of dealing with the world through the catastrophic unfolding of this pandemic and its multi-angular, frequently shifting yet unique, effects. A sincere portrayal of our times requires that researchers adopt a truly Janus-faced posture on the scale of time—rather than conveniently project the past onto the future, as backward-looking riders of hobby horses love to do. The one question that, wherefore, must guide the researcher while trying to make projections about a post-pandemic scenario in global politics would have to be this: What historical aspects and categories are relevant to a global-political interpretation of this pandemic and its aftermath—and which ones are not?

4. The decisive factor of domestic political choices across the democracies

There have been some direct international political repercussions of the pandemic already—say, against China; in regard to the WHO; concerning cross-border demographic movements; and in reference to medical diplomacy and prospects for a vaccine. However, the longer term post-pandemic global politics—including international relations, per se—would be decided by the evolving collection of domestic political choices that various sovereign territories make here on out. I have had to make the foregoing point out of my concern that a focus on future global politics in reference to the pandemic could lead analysts to overlay the pandemic's outstanding inter-national impact (at the expense of domestic political responses to it and their international repercussions). To put the above in other words, some of us might unwittingly rush to peer directly into the realm of international relations while short-shrifting domestic politics and politics.

To overcome that type of an analytical and representational deficit, we would have to adopt a methodology that fuses together International Relations and Area Studies even as we remain alert to the existentially

transformative novelty of the pandemic. Let me briefly substantiate the concluding bit of the foregoing statement. Geopolitical rivalries and frictions are a recognized phenomenon—sort of like a standard in, or unit of—political analysis, never mind the ever-unfolding changes in their specifics; power tussles and their results inside sovereign territories are also nothing new. So, both geopolitics and domestic politics—in and of themselves—are old news, theoretically speaking; indeed, they constitute the two foundational constants for any study of global politics. What is new is the pervasive presence of our peculiar pandemic—which would whereby serve, through the foreseeable future, as a new constant within the vast matrix of global politics and its study.

This new theoretical constant of the pandemic would influence each of the two outstanding theoretical constants of international and internal politics; the question now is, what would be the structural character and trajectory of that influence in reality? To respond to that question, we would have to backtrack just a little bit historically—to the pandemic's sheer origins, followed by its quick spread. Let me start out by stating this: It would have been all but preordained (statistically speaking) that if a human pandemic had to emerge, it would do so from within a sovereign political territory—and so it did from the People's Republic of China. This unfortunate and accidental domestic creation, allegedly kept a secret initially by the Chinese authorities, would quickly turn into an unwanted import for every other sovereign territory on the planet. I suggest that the foregoing flow of events and their underlying character (as expressed above) comprises the basic circuitry for the global politics that has since unfolded.

To this circuitry the three previously described factors—of information flows, demographic flows, and history—have been important; but what would additionally and most decisively matter in their collective regard from now on are the types of political choices that the world's sovereign territories end up making domestically. Among the sovereign territories, the democratic sovereign territories—especially the United States, the United Kingdom, and the EU members—have a higher chance of making domestic political choices with the potential to alter the course of post-COVID-19 global politics from its existing pattern.²⁰ As to why that should be so, I suggest the following two factors: their relatively valid electoral mechanisms, which offer their citizens a clear right to change their governments (pandemic or not); their being currently in a state of political flux, in the wake of significant recent upheavals (either individually or as part of one international alliance or another).

Regarding this latter point, we must keep in mind that the human world got visited by this particular pandemic just when authoritarianism, majoritarianism, cultural/ethnic chauvinism, ethnocentrism, racism, self-

²⁰I do not include India in this tentative list because its weak, fractured opposition is unlikely to be able to effect a change in the foreseeable future; besides, India's current coalition was re-elected for five years only in May 2019.

isolationism and/or nationalism were seeing a rise in global politics.²¹ According to the Freedom House's empirical findings contained in its Year 2020 report, for the past 14 years more countries have seen 'net declines in their aggregate Freedom in the World score' than those that have seen net gains.²² This unfolding wave of change has been the most visible across the liberal democracies (or their approximate versions) because it runs counter to their stated, cherished ideals (and even conventional practices, to a great extent). Of course, the other side of this rising trend has been a downward trend in global cooperation and multilateral collaboration (even though, of course, not all democracies have displayed all the same political trends at the same time).

Meanwhile, the conventionally autocratic or non-democratic systems have remained, by and large, economically open; and they did not generally develop any new form of ethnocentrism or cultural chauvinism. Whatever majoritarian traits they had been previously entertaining, they would remain fundamentally content with them—except, in some cases, to reinforce them. The autocratic or non-democratic polities have not been very dynamic lately—in the sense that they have not witnessed much counter-current domestically (say, in favour of democratic or liberalist trends). For instance, Arab polities have kept their internal politics under control at least since the end of the Arab Spring (December 2012); some of the most powerful of autocratic or non-democratic polities—say Russia, China, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia—have even reinforced a posture in favour of political continuation as opposed to transformation.

In Russia, there were no signs of any upcoming change in the government before the pandemic; and on July 1, 2020, President Putin managed to pass a referendum that allows him to retain his seat until 2036. This referendum, incidentally, 'had originally been scheduled for April 22 but was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic'.²³ And even before the pandemic started, we knew who would be leading China indefinitely—given that Xi Jinping had managed, via the National People's Congress, to remove the two-term limit on the presidency that the country had had since 1982.²⁴ Nobody expected any change in North Korea anyway;

²¹Economist Intelligence Unit (2019) Democracy Index 2019: A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest (The Economist) (Downloaded from the following URL on August 29, 2020: <https://www.in.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Democracy-Index-2019.pdf>).

²²Repucci, Sarah (2020) 'A leaderless struggle for democracy' Freedom in the World 2020 (Freedom House: Washington, D. C.), p. 1. (Downloaded from the following URL on August 6, 2020: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/FINAL_FIW_2020_Abridged.pdf).

²³Neuman, Scott (July 1, 2020) National Public Radio 'Referendum in Russia passes, allowing Putin to remain president until 2036' (Downloaded from the following URL on August 26, 2020: <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/886440694/referendum-in-russia-passes-allowing-putin-to-remain-president-until-2036>).

²⁴Doubek, James (March 11, 2018) 'China removes presidential term limits, enabling Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely' National Public Radio (Downloaded from the following URL on August 26, 2020: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/11/592694991/china-removes-presidential-term-limits-enabling-xi-jinping-to-rule-indefinitely>).

and if a perception has lately begun to grow that Kim Jong Un has been shifting some powers over to his sister, then that bespeaks both a familial and political continuity rather than change. That leaves us with Saudi Arabia—where, too, there had been no signs of change in the core p.

There are two notable exceptions to the above open-ended lineup of non-democratic or authoritarian regimes lacking (any prospects for) political dynamism. One is Egypt; another is Iran. In Egypt repression has been growing so much that it could lead to a rebellion and thus a change in the leadership.²⁵ But it is far from clear whether that change would have any depth of a political transformation, leave aside whether it would have a wider impact regionally outside Egypt; if the country's recent history of turmoil is any indication, then we may simply see one autocratic regime getting replaced by another. Iran does have a chance of a drastic change—but that is a chance that this country has always appeared to have since the Iranian Revolution.

Naser Ghobadzadeh, for instance, concludes his quick summary (2019) of unrest in Iran since the Revolution with the following observation: 'A military confrontation with Israel or the US, the departure of 79-year-old Ayatollah Khamenei, or a spontaneous mass uprising could prove a game changer'. That is fair enough. But Iran has always had the threat of a confrontation with Israel as much as the US since the Revolution; and while Khamenei, at 81 now, is probabilistically closer to his natural departure than at any moment prior, there would have always been a chance of his natural or accidental demise—but that event, in and of itself, could not be relied upon (in reference to any leader) at any time as a trigger for systemic transformation.

So if you look a bit closer into Egypt and Iran—whose recent and ongoing political dynamism apparently makes them promising cases for a near-term transformation—then you are liable to come away with the discouraging feeling that they are both quite used to episodes of significant political turmoil and repressed public sentiments. In the recent history of Egypt, this habituation to significant turmoil can be dated back to the Arab Spring. In short, we might still be chasing a mirage if we expect a deep political change in either of these countries based upon the fact they have both been politically dynamic lately—at one level or another.

All in all, the global political sphere should not expect to see a general change being introduced into it in the near future from its currently stable, in-control, recently rigidified non-democratic quarters (which normally depend on a full-scale rebellion amounting to a revolution to see a change within, without which they would carry on with their prior external agendas). In contrast, key entities within the democratic quarters—especially those belonging to the recently hobbled Western bloc—remain

²⁵Bajec, Alessandra (October 3, 2019) 'A revolution is brewing in Egypt – and this time it will spread far beyond Tahrir Square' The Independent (UK) (Downloaded from the following URL on August 27, 2020: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/egypt-revolution-tahrir-square-president-sisi-a9139686.html>).

socially and politically unstable within; and even a single shift—say, from Donald Trump to Joe Biden in the US—would generate a ripple of profound short-run changes across that bloc and beyond.

The point is that the democratic polities still show us a chance, in the near future, for a directional shift in their politics—a shift whose potential to alter the global political course itself cannot be underestimated. No such potential at all can be currently sensed in any major conventionally autocratic or non-democratic polity—and certainly not in most of the minor ones. Let us now consider two contrasting what-if scenarios pertaining to the prospect of change—in reference to the pandemic—in the politically dynamic democracies.

If the politically dynamic major democracies—predominantly Western as they are—end up resetting their directions in favour of openness, liberalism, and reason, then they are likely to inspire similar trends in other democracies, and also make the global strongman syndrome less glamorous. This type of a shift would most certainly better prepare the world in managing (the effects of) the pandemic—given that strongman leaders have generally been inapt at doing just that.²⁶ In any case, any democratic net gain—be it inside bona fide democracies or elsewhere—would better prepare the world in addressing this pandemic because democratisation generally translates into easier access to accurate information, more honest public feedback, and greater administrative accountability.

Should these politically dynamic major democracies end up opting for the above types of liberal resets, then it won't be incorrect to suggest that the interim bounce²⁷ in (economic) nationalism, racism, and ethnocentrism would have guarded them against their own internal pitfalls—whereby they might also be better prepared to re-ally with one another (albeit on a new regional, global, and technological turf). In the meantime, some of their core political substance and organizational fabric would have also witnessed some change—thanks to the lasting effects of movements like Me Too and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) in the US, UK, and parts of the EU; Bernie Sanders' inspired socialism in the US; and the rise of women in the political leadership of EU countries and organizations.²⁸

²⁶Lewis, Helen (May 6, 2020) 'The pandemic has revealed the weakness of strongmen' The Atlantic (Downloaded from the following URL on August 29, 2020: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/05/new-zealand-germany-women-leadership-strongmen-coronavirus/611161/>).

²⁷For a journalistic snapshot of the recent rise in mass support for right-wing nationalism in post-Brexit EU countries, please take a look at this report: British Broadcasting Corporation (November 13, 2020) 'Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide' (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006>).

²⁸For quick reference, check out the following online publication: Leaders League (February 19, 2020) '2019: The year of female political leadership in the European Union' (Downloaded from the following URL on August 27, 2020: [leadersleague.com/en/news/2019-the-year-for-female-political-leadership-in-the-european-union](https://www.leadersleague.com/en/news/2019-the-year-for-female-political-leadership-in-the-european-union)).

In this admittedly rosy scenario underpinned by deep internal transformation, these re-allied Western democracies would be able to better negotiate with the non-democratic forces or any increasingly authoritarian democracies (such as Hungary, Turkey, and India) toward a relatively transparent and efficient management of the pandemic's aftermath. Here let me take a brief detour—and seek to depart profoundly from Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky's recent, muddled argument²⁹ that frames Joe Biden's post-election goal of re-articulating a US-led global alliance of democracies as both unrealistic and unhelpful in addressing the contemporary world's problems—just because, they assert, (1) the world is no longer unipolar (as in US-led), (2) democracies are all different, and (3) non-democratic countries crucial to solving various global problems abound and have only gained in global sway lately.

In point of fact, any alliance in a non-unipolar world would still need an acting head; and if Biden wishes to make his bid for that type of a job within a democratic alliance (which he aspires to forge), then he would have more going for him as US President than any other global leader even today. And if such an alliance so much as comes to pass, then it already means that the countries involved would have already agreed to a common minimum programme reflecting their core democratic values. Under those circumstances, such an alliance could most certainly act as a political, economic, and ideational—if not as a militaristic or juridical—force to contend with across the global platforms; there is nothing to suggest that its members won't be able to work with non-member polities. Meanwhile, such an alliance would serve to check the rising tide of strongman politics and racist/ethnocentric/obscurantist nationalisms around the world.

Contra Miller and Sokolsky, the question here is not whether Biden could/should put together and lead such an alliance given that the world is no longer a US-led unipolarity. The question, rather, is whether Biden would be willing to compromise with American exceptionalism that pre-dates Trump in order to have and lead a global democratic alliance—and whether he could visualize it outside the conventional Western fold (say by including in it non-Western democracies or wannabe democracies). Indeed, it should seem that a genuinely global democratic alliance is not only a viable option but also the only constructive way out of the morass in which the world finds itself. The process of forging such an alliance itself should encourage democratic tendencies among its wannabe partners; and if it does come to pass, then it may in fact also serve as a healthy competitor to that regional alliance of democracies called the EU!

To the extent that Biden happens to be the one to have made public the general contours of his intentions to have an alliance of democracies,

²⁹Miller, Aaron David & Richard Sokolsky (August 13, 2020) The Washington Post 'An "alliance of democracies" sounds good. It won't solve the world's problems.' (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/13/biden-pompeo-trump-democracy/>).

we can be sure that a lot is riding on the upcoming US election in November. But no matter what the outcome of this election process—or the fate of a global democratic alliance—all polities would have to contend, in the near future, with the factor of access to a COVID-19 vaccine (and its general systemic repercussions for their domestic politics). It is to this factor—of our post-pandemic global politics—that I turn in the next section.

But before we get there, let me not forget the second, not-so-rosy scenario regarding a change in the domestic political choices of the politically dynamic major democracies. Well, if these democracies—such as the US and UK—reinforce their tendencies of self-isolation, illiberalism, and majoritarianism (something along the lines of Poland³⁰ recently), then they would end up encouraging varying combinations of similar tendencies in them as well as in all those quasi-democracies where ruling parties face no short-run threat of an electoral upset. Needless to say, this second scenario would intensify the rise of the strongman syndrome in global politics as a whole—and that won't bode well for how the world adjusts to our new constant of the pandemic.³¹

5. Access to relevant vaccination and its effects on global medical care

There is every indication that a foolproof, one-size-fits-all vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 may never come to fruition. Cautioning against journalistic and corporate optimism regarding the prospects for a vaccine against this virus, S. Swaminathan—a former professor of biology—plainly stated the following in an article that came out in June in *The Economic Times*: 'The best one may expect could be a vaccine that works for some, but not all, segments of the population'.³² Subsequent developments also indicate that we are unlikely to have a 'long-lasting' immunity—and annual immunity boosters might be needed 'even for people who had previously caught the virus'; and on top of the above, we would also have to continue with the existing behavioural measures meant to protect us from the infection.³⁵

In other words, the world would continue to see significant and newer layers of socio-economic and psychological impact of this

³⁰Strzelecki, Marek (August 3, 2020) 'Polish top court rules President Duda's re-election was valid' *Bloomberg* (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-03/polish-top-court-rules-president-duda-s-re-election-was-valid>).

³¹Tyler, Sally (April 3, 2020) 'Strongman politics in a global crisis' *Asia and the Pacific Policy Society* (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.policyforum.net/strongman-politics-in-a-global-crisis/>).

³²Swaminathan, S. (June 11, 2020) 'COVID-19 vaccines: a realistic look' *The Economic Times* (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://health.economictimes.in-diatimes.com/news/industry/covid-19-vaccines-a-realistic-look/76313351>).

³³John, Tara (August 25, 2020) 'What you need to know about coronavirus on Tuesday, August 25' *CNN* (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/25/world/coronavirus-newsletter-08-25-20-intl/index.html>).

pandemic for an indefinite period of time even if a vaccine does come into being and is made accessible to all! In relatively fatalistic cultures that also happen to have a deficient medical infrastructure, governments may not be so harshly judged—except by their professional political opponents—for their imperfect management of COVID-19, per se (especially if they have other epidemiological and survival challenges that are equally as or more pronounced). But in cultures that fundamentally believe in rationalistic control of otherwise unpredictable natural phenomena, governments would be judged harshly if they do not sharply focus on controlling COVID-19 itself; and if such a country lacks universal health care, which is currently the case with the United States, then the public sentiment could turn stridently negative against the government.

But we must keep in mind that, as far as the global politics is concerned, the factor of vaccine—which draws from the new constant of COVID-19—comes pre-located within the matrix of all the prior factors of information flows, demographic flows, history, and domestic politics (especially domestic political choices in the politically dynamic democracies). A lingering distrust in vaccination would thus continue to be encouraged from (and within) certain quarters—especially in the Christian Western world (but not only): Distrust specifically in a COVID-19 vaccine may also come to play, depending partly on the actual performance of such a product. On a different level, there is already a distrust in the Russian claim to having developed a vaccine—even as Russia has further claimed to have developed another vaccine that “avoids the side effects of the first one”.³⁴

While this distrust in Russian claims is expressly coming from worldwide members of the medical research community based upon their experience with relevant experimental and testing protocols,³⁵ political observers can't clinically dissociate that distrust from the global geopolitical history—in which claims to innovation from the former Communist bloc are not easily entertained anyway in the Western and Western-influenced world. But nor could we realistically dissociate it from prior allegations that Russian spies had been specifically targeting vaccine-related research endeavours being undertaken in the US, UK, and Canada;³⁶ or from the relatively recent history of Russia's Internet-based interference into the

³⁴Stewart, Will (August 22, 2020) 'Russia launches a SECOND Covid vaccine: new jab developed at top-secret biological weapons plant "avoids side-effects of first one" that Putin announced to widespread scepticism' The Daily Mail (UK) (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8654223/Russia-launches-SECOND-Covid-vaccine-developed-for-mer-biological-weapons-plant.html>).

³⁵Biswas, Atanu (August 24, 2020) 'Russia is jumping the gun with its vaccine' The Hindu (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/russia-is-jumping-the-gun-with-its-vaccine/article32423561.ece>).

³⁶Fox, Chris & Leo Kelion (July 16, 2020) 'Coronavirus: Russian spies target Covid-19 vaccine research' British Broadcasting Corporation (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53429506>).

2016 US election campaign; or from the chequered information flows of the Age of the Internet (whereby 'both autocracies and democracies are targets for foreign governments spreading false information' and 'a new threat to democracy lies in disinformation affecting citizens' attitudes and beliefs.')

³⁷

In other words, a long prelude to a doubtful post-pandemic global politics is currently being authored by the planet's major polities—and it is no less contentious than the pandemic's sheer origins in (and spread out of) China. The effects of this prelude would linger on even after the humanity settles upon the best vaccine candidate(s). These effects would chiefly be felt in the medical/biological research sector as (national/bloc) academic reputation-cum-funding-cum-award issues; in the pharmaceutical sector in terms of intellectual property rights and profits; and in diplomatic and global organizational circles as trust and prestige issues.

As to access to the COVID-19 vaccine(s), no polity, of course, would want to deny it even to its sworn foreign enemies—as that would make no sense whatsoever regarding its global standing or a check on the pandemic's cross-border spread—but nor would any allow it to fellow polities entirely without qualification, riders, or preconditions (As for these preconditions specifically, they could be a polity's explicit strategic priorities, or tacit cultural/commercial/political assumptions underpinning its vaccine-related contracts and agreements with fellow polities.) To the extent that there is so much heartburn over the assessment that Russia has tried to steal ongoing 'Western' research dedicated to inventing a vaccine, we know that this entire process of vaccine development has been, from the very outset, neither truly charitable nor a universally collaborative/transparent research endeavour—and that proprietary, commercial, geopolitical, and personal ego issues have underpinned it through and through. These issues would extend in one form or another to the vaccine's global distribution.

The global politics pertaining to the early manufacturing stage of COVID-19 vaccines would thus come couched in the bureaucratic register and legalese of licenses, patents, contracts, policies, and treaties—and disputes about them. Indeed, this ideational wrangling is already in full swing; and while the globe's democratic polities, especially of the West, would remain acutely suspicious of, and hostile toward, Russia and China, disagreements and disputes would unfold at every level conceivable (including corporate) irrespective of these two or any other autocratic or non-democratic polities. So, for instance, questions are already being raised within the Western bloc

³⁷V-Dem Institute (2019) Democracy facing global challenges: V-Dem annual global democracy report 2019, p. 37 (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/99/de/99dedd73-f8bc-484c-8b91-44ba601b6e6b/v-dem_democracy_report_2019.pdf).

itself regarding the Oxford University's 'exclusive worldwide licensing deal with AstraZeneca'—a deal that is being considered pro-corporate and pro-profit rather than an insurer of universal 'accessibility and affordability.'³⁸

Here it may be little consolation to the objectors of that deal that AstraZeneca would subsequently sign a deal with the Russian drugmaker R-Pharm 'to produce and distribute doses of its University of Oxford-partnered adenovirus-based COVID-19 shot, AZD1222.'³⁹ Or that AstraZeneca's deal with Russia would be followed, over a month later, by its deal with the European Commission (EC)—for which the EC would 'put up a €336 million... down payment to secure its first 300 million doses' of that same drug.⁴⁰ The point of the matter is that inasmuch as international, transnational, and inter-organizational conflicts would continue to play out regarding COVID-19 vaccine's development, the threat of the pandemic (and associated considerations) would force all polities to come to one sort of agreement or another to ensure their own citizens' access to the vaccine (or to be perceived to be doing that anyway).

The success of that approach would depend, first and foremost, on whether the supplier-side polities are able to overcome a penchant for what has been called 'vaccine nationalism'—whereby, as Michael Gerson has pointed out, 'a robust American 20-year-old in a town largely devoid of infection would have a higher priority than a South African doctor or a nursing mother in Ghana or an elderly person with tuberculosis in Nigeria.'⁴¹ stresses, was present in the 'global distribution of treatments for HIV/AIDS' in the early 2000s; just as it was present in 2009, when a handful of 'wealthy nations bought up all of the vaccine supply' for the swine flu pandemic 'and only later patched together small donations to developing countries.'⁴²

For a reasonable and equitable global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines—and as a way out of a feared vaccine nationalism of supplier-side countries—Gerson reposes his faith in the Geneva-based public

³⁸Bonnell, Roxana (May 12, 2020) 'A Covid-19 vaccine? Why licensing is so important' EUobserver (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148321>).

³⁹Blankenship, Kyle (July 20, 2020) 'AstraZeneca confirms Russia vaccine deal days after COVID-19 hacking accusations surface' FiercePharma (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.fiercepharma.com/pharma/astrazeneca-signs-cov-id-19-shot-deal-russia-days-after-hacking-accusations-surface>).

⁴⁰Kansteiner, Fraiser (August 28, 2020) 'AstraZeneca nets \$396M down payment from EU for 300M-plus COVID vaccines' FiercePharma (Downloaded from the following URL on August 28, 2020: <https://www.fiercepharma.com/manufacturing/az-nets-396m-downpayment-for-300m-plus-eu-vaccine-doses>).

⁴¹Gerson, Michael (August 24, 2020) 'It puts everyone in danger if rich countries hoard a vaccine' The Washington Post (Downloaded from the following URL on August 29, 2020: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/it-puts-everyone-in-danger-if-rich-countries-hoard-a-vaccine/2020/08/24/b309f012-e636-11ea-970a-64c73a1c2392_story.html).

⁴²Ibid.

-private partnership called Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Credited with preventing about 13 million deaths through the past two decades across the poorer countries by facilitating their access to vaccines, Gavi received a 16% percent raise from the Trump administration in 2019.⁴³ By the end of the next year (2021), Gavi aims to have helped the poorer countries in buying and distributing '2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines.'⁴⁴ Toward meeting that target, Gavi would implement the so-called COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) initiative, which is supported by a multilateral organization called the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT).⁴⁵ As part of that initiative, Gavi would not only raise funds for the poorer countries that partner with it, but it would also help them 'negotiate a broad portfolio of deals with pharmaceutical manufacturers'—so that these countries won't have 'to depend on one or two bilateral agreements for drugs that may not pan out.'⁴⁶

While it does appear that Gavi would penetrate deep into the domestic distributional networks to facilitate a reasonable and equitable global access to COVID-19 vaccines, can we be equally as sure about the roles that the targeted polities' governments would play? Would these governments rationally distribute the vaccine among their citizens that they would have successfully accessed from the international market—via Gavi or otherwise? Indeed, inasmuch as Gavi's actual performance remains to be seen vis-a-vis COVID-19 vaccine distribution, much of the domestic political angst, especially in non-transparent and/or poorer polities, would likely pertain to real or perceived corruption in the actual distribution of the vaccine versus any rationalistic ideals that a polity might otherwise claim to uphold in that regard.

Meanwhile, a polity's fatalistic culture won't be so fatalistic about perceptions of vaccine distribution—and if the citizens of such a polity perceive governmental deception and insensitivity in that regard specifically (presumably with the help of the media or the suspicious hand of social media), then they are likelier to judge it more negatively than any other administrative efficiencies that may yet lead to a lack of governmental check on the pandemic. Against the above backdrop, relatively richer and powerful polities—or their coalitions—could articulate and implement an international regime of medical monitoring aimed at keeping their poorer or less powerful counterparts on the right track (say, of vaccine distribution, among other associated responsibilities). In fact, there is no thing to prevent a US administration, for instance, from pulling its share of funds from Gavi if it perceives that its promise of equitable global distribution is not succeeding on the ground—for whatever reasons.

That type of political-cum-administrative monitoring mechanism could—and almost certainly would—be used by the dominant polities to score geo-strategic points over one another as well as to influence the weaker polities' international postures just as much as their domestic

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

priorities. Indeed, it is not inconceivable—say in the case of a Biden victory in the upcoming US elections—that the US bring in universal health care domestically; and that, if it does so then it could promote and even insist upon that idea in other polities that do not have it—fundamentally by leveraging its possession and distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine.

What is less clear as yet is how these dominant polities would collaborate with one another and with international organizations to ensure vaccine access to these latter polities: polities that cannot exactly afford the vaccine and/or its exacting storage and distributional infrastructure—especially given the grave realities of the pandemic-induced economic downturn. Inasmuch as the major polities remain more or less divided and distrustful of one another—besides being loosely bifurcated along the lines of West/Russia, West/Communist, democratic/autocratic (to give out the main examples)—they have a lot of work cut out for them regarding universal COVID-19 vaccine access outside their own territorial borders (and indeed globally). That the WHO is not currently completely trusted—especially by the West—would constitute one of the first hurdles for the major polities to collaborate toward a worldwide vaccination regime.

Finally, we don't appear to have a COVID-19-specific plan regarding vaccine distribution to the internationally migratory populations falling outside the formal, legally recognized transportation and travel systems. And of course, many countries have poor domestic migrants, drifters, and seasonal itinerants that are not easy to track or are not officially recognized. These types of populations may have little to no influence on the ruling powers of any particular polity; however, the highly infectious nature of COVID-19 retains the potential to weaponize them—as carriers of the virus. States worldwide should thus be interested in vaccinating these unregistered, poor, or informal migrants completely free of cost. For we should not forget that post-COVID-19 global politics would be global politics writ extra-large.

Conclusion

Each of the five factors outlined in this paper can serve as a methodological tool to observe post-COVID-19 global politics; indeed, none of these factors can be entirely ignored in any observation of the above kind. When taken together, these factors—along with their descriptions—double up as a conceptual guide map for a global-political appreciation of this pandemic and its projected aftermath. Contrariwise, it is implied throughout the paper that it would be careless—if not inconceivable—to locate the global-political aftermath of this pandemic utterly outside the scope of this conceptual guide map.

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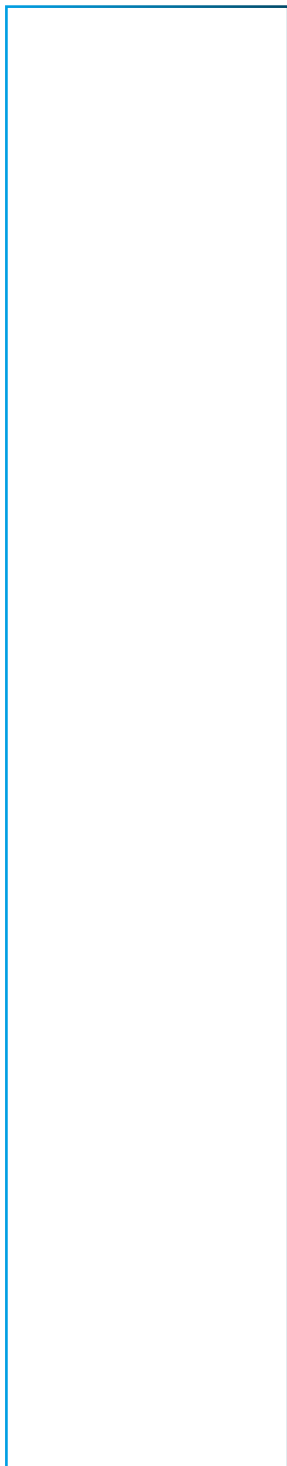
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