

## Focus Essay

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# Coronavirus pandemic and the Future of Globalization

Aamer Raza

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6420-2590>

### Abstract

Coronavirus Pandemic has generated a discussion regarding the future of globalization. This article places this new wave of pessimism regarding the future of globalization in the broader tension surrounding globalization that has existed in international relations discourse since the end of the Cold War. The article points out some of the previous challenges endured by globalization. It also points out that whereas at this point popular media and news commentary portray pessimism as the dominant feeling, the trend towards multilateralism and global cooperation is also discernable in other responses to the pandemic.

**Key words:** Coronavirus, globalization, multilateralism, populism, Security.

Coronavirus pandemic is not the first ever challenge to globalization. In fact, if the age of globalization is understood as the period of post-Cold War international integration, the coronavirus epidemic is neither the first one nor the most deadly global epidemic. There are other epidemics that have taken more lives than coronavirus, for instance HIV/AIDS. In 2018 the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reported that the

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Aamer Raza is an Assistant Professor in Political Science at the University of Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: [aameraza@uop.edu.pk](mailto:aameraza@uop.edu.pk)

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HIV/AIDS epidemic had infected almost 38 million people around the world.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, let me also emphasize that epidemics have not been the only threat to globalization. In the Western world, the current age of globalization started with a sense of triumphalism: the victory of capitalism and democracy against communist totalitarianism, evidenced by the downfall of the Soviet Union. This triumphalism demonstrated the currency of the idea of liberalism and of market openness. In that moment of Western optimism, Francis Fukuyama for example wrote that historical processes driven by economics and by human desire for dignity and recognition led human civilization to the final stage of human history – universal liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> The same sentiment was expressed by the former President George H. W. Bush when he declared, "The triumph of democratic ideas in Eastern Europe and Latin America and the continuing struggle for freedom elsewhere all around the world all confirm the wisdom of our nation's founders."<sup>3</sup>

Toward the turn of the century, the march of liberal democracy, free market capitalism, and American-led multilateralism, it seemed, was relentless. It was also thought that humans were finally moving from Thomas Hobbes' brutish 'state of nature' to the world inhabited by Fukuyama's Last Men—a world characterized by unrestricted movement of people, goods and information. This was a world built on the promise of a collective, prosperous human future. The promised 'global village' had an unmistakable egalitarian ring to it.

The view of globalization that did not gain nearly as much traction as Fukuyama's *End of History* or George HW Bush's *New World Order* was Robert Kaplan's notion of the *Coming Anarchy*. Writing in *the Atlantic* in 1994, Kaplan's view on globalization was one of heavy premonition. He noted that the fall of the Soviet Union would bring forth divisions, conflicts and challenges that were held back by the relative stability of the Cold War. Kaplan warned that our global village in fact had two parts: It was a world where Fukuyama's Last Men were not alone. Instead, they were living side by side with Hobbes' First Men.<sup>4</sup> The crises of

globalization, since then, could be understood best as the tension between the realities and the visions of these two worlds.

At the turn of the millennium, there were two central events that strengthened the views and position of the sceptics of globalization: the September 11 attacks and just a few months later, the entry of People's Republic of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO). In the dominant policy discourse in the West, the former event was not merely viewed as an indicator of a growing security threat, but also of the dangers of coming together of people with different cultures and often opposing worldviews. The events of September 11 mainstreamed ideas such as those of Benjamin R. Barber's who had written *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Shaping the World* a few years earlier. Barber contended that the so-called global village was characterized by a struggle between openness and corporate driven development (McWorld) on one side and religious radicalism and ethnic nationalism (*jihad*) on the other.<sup>5</sup>

However, the immediate Western response to the events of the September 11 was not a withdrawal from globalization. Rather the Bush administration adopted a policy of regime change. The logic that drove the policy was that it is the traditional elites in societies such as Afghanistan and Iraq that held back their march towards freedom and liberal democracy. Once these old regimes would be removed and replaced with democratic governments, these societies would naturally progress towards the same global culture and values that defined the Western civilization. In other words, it is McWorld that was supposed to be the answer to the threats of Jihad.

In real world, it is easier to initiate an action than to control its consequences, especially the action of interventionism of regime change. In the process, instead of changing the tribal cultures in these societies, the US and its allies became embroiled in the local ethnic and tribal rivalries. The Taliban and the Northern Alliance, Shias and Sunni, the Alawites and the Syrian National Coalition, in all these opposing forces America had to choose sides thus limiting the universalism of its approach. And in doing so, another crisis of globalization was unleashed – the

refugee crisis. In the West, Muslims were already seen as unwanted and dangerous bodies.

As an event, China joining the WTO is much less dramatic than September 11, but in no way less consequential. Instead of the intended consequence of integrating Chinese economy with the Western world – opening the Chinese markets to the Western companies – the Chinese membership of the WTO had the opposite effect. Taking advantage of the lower costs of production, large corporations started moving their operations to China and India. The result was the decline of manufacturing in the US. The so-called Rust Belt and the bankruptcy of the City of Detroit became symbolic of the devastation and unemployment that the flight of investment caused in the United States.

These crises of globalization and the economic and cultural anxieties it created in the West, inevitably, created a backlash against globalization. The rise of populist leaders and governments in Europe and America is not only distinguished by their rhetoric against the elite, but also by their opposition to globalization. In fact, if we see extreme rightwing publications such as the *Brietbart*, we realize that they understand globalization as a conspiracy of the ‘global elite’ that is either motivated by profits and power or just by inexplicable maliciousness.<sup>6</sup> Trump’s trade war with China, the Muslim ban, and the wall on the Eastern border are all expression of that anti-globalist view.

Coronavirus fits well into the narrative of this anti-globalist populism. It originated in China and was globalized within days by the rapid flow of people. Trump called it “the China Virus” and doubled down on his description when he was pressed for an explanation. And as the *Washington Post* reported, President Trump turned to scapegoating immigrants for the crisis. When he put in place the travel restrictions on Canada and Mexico, Trump declared that he was trying to stop a “mass global migration that would badly deplete the health-care resources needed for our people.”<sup>7</sup> The political opposition to globalization fueled by the Coronavirus is only one part of the crises of globalization. It is expected that even corporations that are largely seen as the

agents of globalization will review their dependence on a supply chain that they did not foresee breaking down so instantaneously.

Like the previous crises of globalization, the virus does show the unwelcome side effects of globalization. However, the tension between the two visions continues and will only accelerate in the aftermath of the global epidemic. Whereas at this moment, it does seem that the crisis will reinforce anti-globalization, it is equally likely that multilateral approaches such as the current standard-setting by the WHO and the bailout pledged by the G20 are adopted, which will strengthen collective responses to such global epidemics.

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<sup>1</sup> UNAIDS. "Global HIV & AIDS statistics — 2019 fact sheet. UNAIDS <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>.

<sup>2</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

<sup>3</sup> Bush, "State of the Union Address".

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan, *Coming Anarchy*.

<sup>5</sup> Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Shaping the World*.

<sup>6</sup> Rupert, *Ideologies of Globalization: Contending Visions of a New World Order*.

<sup>7</sup> White House, "Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing".

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-c-oronavirus-task-force-press-briefing/>

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