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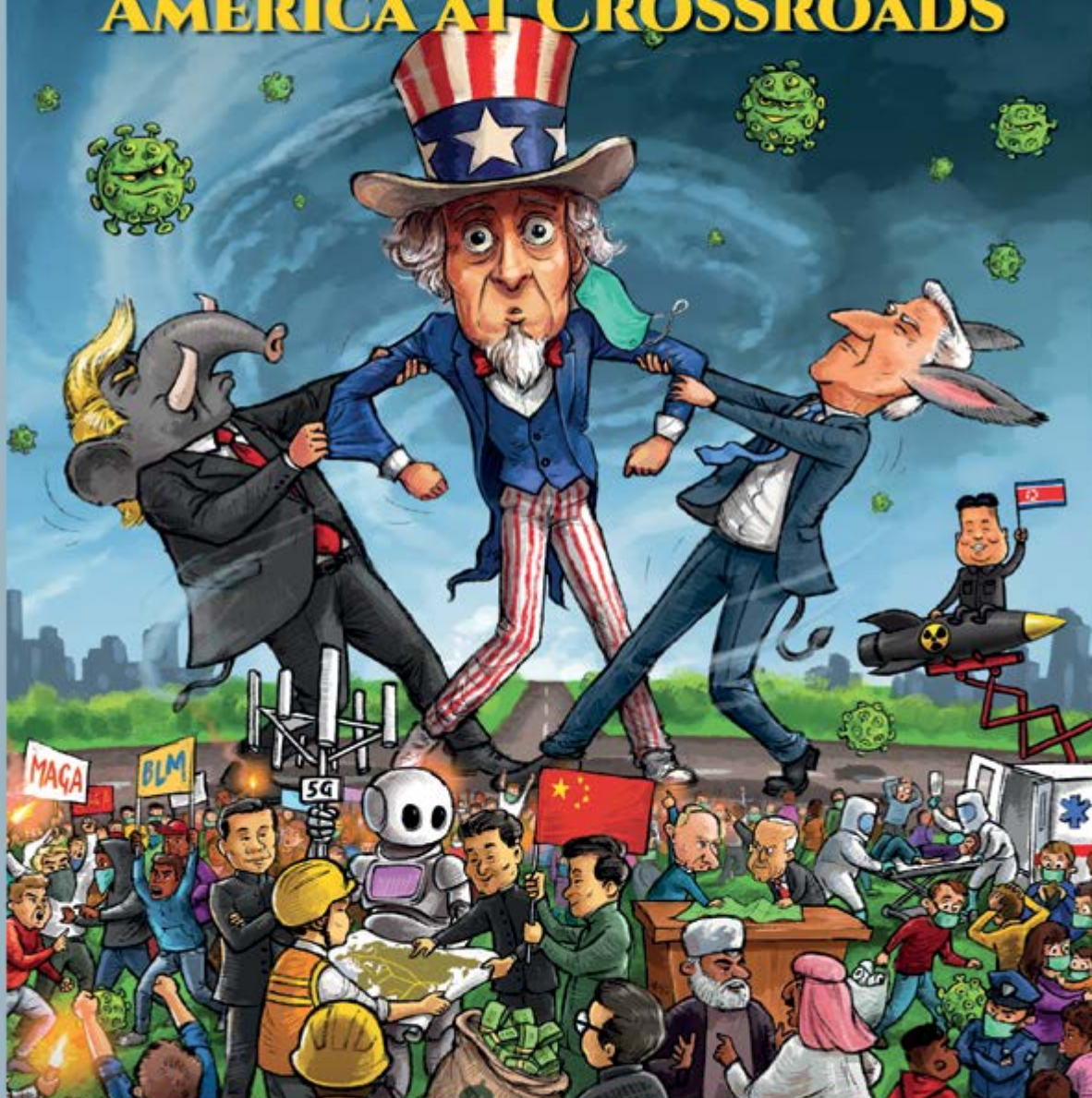
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AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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AMERICA, COVID-19, AND MULTILATERALISM

Srgjan Kerim

You may delay, but time will not, and lost time is never found again.
– Benjamin Franklin

LIVING in the digital era means that we are bound to run into viruses. Think of the most frequently used tool by people in their everyday activities: the computer. Virus attacks are a common and serious threat for this essential part of our professional and private lives. Now, think of HIV, SARS, Ebola, etc.

These examples clearly speak towards a phenomenon that has become a large part of the modern experience, fortunately coinciding with new scientific research. Still, the outbreak of COVID-19 has caught us by surprise. We were totally unprepared. Having said that, I am not referring to the collapse of the healthcare sector of nearly every country across the globe. Rather, I am referring to the wrongdoing, delayed reactions, and confusion of national

governments and international organizations with regards to COVID-19. Most of all, I am talking about the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO). I am also referring to lack of coordination at the international level between governments.

Ironically, living in the digital era of connectivity would lead one to believe quite the opposite response would occur. Innovation would have us believe we were prepared and in possession of all the strategies to confront viruses in a dramatically different way than the one we are utilizing in 2020.

There is no point in comparing this dreadful situation around the globe with the Spanish Flu that swept through much of the world one hundred years ago. That pandemic

occurred under completely different circumstances with a lack of technological tools and developmental inferiority in comparison to the twenty-first century. It is ridiculous to draw a parallel between then and now, especially in terms of the toll taken on human life. Instead, we should focus on our current circumstances and ask ourselves: what are the root causes of the world's confusing and chaotic reaction in the case of COVID-19?

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We must understand the importance of acting together and in a coordinated manner while facing a pandemic, which, by definition, is a global issue. This is especially the case in a world dominated by information supremacy and rapidly progressing communication technologies.

This article is aimed at giving one of the many answers we not only owe to our respective publics, but to people across the globe. When I say “we,” I refer most of all to politicians, diplomats, and scientists. Now, to avoid misunderstandings, I state up front that I am not an expert on viruses, and certainly not on COVID-19. Thus, I will limit my discussion to an examination of its implications on politics and diplomacy, which I have been involved in for almost half of a century.

Let me begin with a first impression concerning the behavior of national governments after the outbreak of COVID-19. It cannot be said that most countries were on high alert, with some exceptions. Some reactions were delayed, chaotic, and rather confusing due to attempts to downplay the pandemic by the leaders of countries including the United States, the UK, Brazil, and Italy. This underestimation of the coronavirus's toll has backfired. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, and now U.S. President Donald Trump all contracted the virus themselves.

On the other hand, the lockdown approach on a global scale turned out to be counterproductive: a false perception was given by many governments of the need to convey to the public the impression of “protecting their nation” from an “invisible enemy.” This was, again, largely unsuccessful.

From the point of view of national healthcare systems' organization, the lockdown approach made sense, but only to a certain extent. However, from the point of view of regional integration—for instance, in the case of the European Union—or for the purpose of ICTs, this resulted in a total breakdown of mutual, immediate exchange

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of information in a digital era facing a pandemic. This new era is without precedent and required quite the opposite approach. Even once everyone was aware that the coronavirus was transcending national borders, it represented, in this regard, a major force against this approach.

Why even have international organizations such as the UN or the WHO when, amidst a global emergency, they were locked down or sidelined? The delayed reactions of the UN and the confusing instructions of the WHO at the initial stage of the pandemic compromised their authority.

One example of this was the declaration of the pandemic in China too late, from an international perspective, or the delayed ban on flights to and from China. On the other hand, there is no point now in looking behind us and continuing to identify other shortcomings and failures made at the initial stage of the pandemic on the national and the international level.

Instead, I prefer to discuss another “virus,” and will focus in this article on its viral attacks on multilateralism as the centerpiece of international

relations today and its implications on the future of global affairs. I will especially address the role of the United States in this regard. Talking about America’s role in today’s world in the context of the outbreak of COVID-19

Targeting Trump’s policies as the cause of American decline is not a sufficient explanation. Rather, this decline can be explained as the product of the accumulated distortion of basic values and foundations of American society.

or projecting beyond it requires an analysis more complex than a limited discussion of the Trump Administration’s actions during the pandemic.

There are other premises that need to be seriously dealt with before one reaches descriptive conclusions and assessments of the role and the functioning of

the United States from 2016 up to the present. One should not forget that the U.S. Civil War was a struggle over two competing concepts of the nation state. While the Civil War ended long ago, this struggle continues to this day.

How must we interpret the debate on the “equality of races,” which lasted throughout the whole of the nineteenth century and was reflected in the different views over the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution—known collectively as the Civil War Amendments—about the right of citizens and the powers of nation states? This struggle

implied and indeed led to debates on immigration, racial and gender equality, and the limits of citizenship.

The example of Frederick Douglass, an American social reformer and

statesman of African-American origin, speaks for itself. In 1869 he spoke of America as the “most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world.” To that extent, one may say there is nothing to be added to Douglass’s statement. However, to this day, there is neither clarity nor distinction between what we may

define as “civic nationalism” and “ethnic nationalism” in the United States, despite the fact that the principles behind the U.S. Constitution “rested upon the assumption of the equality of races,” as the notorious vice president of the secessionist Confederacy put it, opposing his racist views to those of Abraham Lincoln, nearly 150 years ago.

The political struggle between what some people call “liberal and illiberal nationalism” in the United States is going on to this day. Take the recent example of George Floyd, an African-American brutally killed by a white policeman in May 2020 in Minnesota.

This quickly put the “Black Lives Matter” movement, founded in 2013, onto the map across America, making it one of the largest movements of this nature in the country’s history. It was further invigorated only a few months later, in

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August 2020 in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Trump’s attempts to deny systemic racism as the cause of these types of occurrences was not conciliatory.

On the contrary, they further deepened polarization at the national level. In fact, this is not the only cause of division and polarization in America. Consider that 1 percent of Americans

control \$30 trillion of U.S. monetary assets. The bottom half of the population, or 160 million people, have more debts than assets. One-fifth of American households have zero or negative net worth: this last statistic applies to 37 percent of black families in the United States.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, over 40 million Americans lost their jobs and 3.3 million businesses had to shut down. This includes 41 percent of all black-owned businesses in America. On top of that, achieving the world’s highest rate of morbidity and mortality seriously impacted America’s reputation and international standing. It has—as

argued in Wade Davis’s latest book *Magdalena: River of Dreams* (2020)—reduced what was known as “American exceptionalism” to tatters.

This is why targeting Trump’s policies as the cause of American decline is not a sufficient explanation. Rather, this decline can be explained as the product of the accumulated distortion of basic values and foundations of American society. The measure of wealth in a civilized nation is not the money accumulated by 630 billionaires, as in the United States, but rather the strength and resilience of social relations and the bonds of reciprocity that connect all people in a common purpose.

Having said that, I would like to emphasize that this has nothing to do with political ideology, as wrongly interpreted by those who claim that they “defend the basic values of freedom and democracy.” On the contrary, freedom and democracy should serve the purpose of serving everything pertaining to one’s quality of life. As a European and a friend of the United States, I think making such a statement is neither pretentious nor an exaggeration. For the European Union and the United States are not only close friends and allies but basically share the same values: freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Communication is the most important tool in international crises, and communicative multilateralism must be at the core of all response strategies.

The “law and order” approach has become a trope in the eyes of new generations, including Americans. It does not impress them at all. They are more inclined to believe in social justice and an economy that works for all. These ideas are similar to ones espoused by one of the greatest American presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Drawing on this heritage, more than two-thirds of young

Americans are embracing these ideas. A, and the future belongs to them.

Their future, of course, depends not only on what is going on in America, but around the globe. And that, again, is

inseparable from the role and the position of the United States in world affairs. One might ask the following two questions: to what extent is America still the only superpower? Are we still living in a unipolar world? But make no mistake, what is happening in the United States is very relevant to the whole world, and vice versa. The interaction and interdependence between America and the rest of the world is a pivotal factor in global affairs and international relations.

For me, September is traditionally the month of the United Nations. This is not only because of the opening of the latest session of the General Assembly, but because of the presence and participation of world leaders in

the high-level General Debate, which allows for an exchange of views at the bilateral level while simultaneously addressing the General Assembly.

In September 2019, I was, as usual, there as a former President of the General Assembly and made use of the opportunity to talk to many of my fellow diplomats. One meeting particularly drew my attention. My interlocutor was representing his country on the Security Council and told me an extraordinary story. His country—considered in normal times as a close ally of the United States—had been elected as a non-permanent member of the Council. He commented on the speech of a high-ranking American official who had come from Washington, DC to attend a particular Council meeting. I will paraphrase what he said to me: “The way our colleague from Washington expressed his views on the role of the Security Council was anything but diplomatic.”

My interlocutor did not hide his anger and was pretty upset, relaying details of what the American official had said. Here, I quote my interlocutor’s recollection: “We [meaning the Trump Administration]

couldn’t care less about what you’re discussing here in this body. We don’t consider it to be representative and relevant as a framework for the conduct of American foreign policy; and moreover, it’s not a competent place, as far as the United States

is concerned, to discuss crucial issues of world affairs as we see them.”

My interlocutor’s conclusion was equally striking: “It was a bashing of the UN and the Security Council as I have never heard before,” he said, obviously bitterly disappointed and annoyed.

I was prompted by this conversation to start thinking about how

serious and deeply-rooted the threat to multilateralism is turning out to be. Can the UN undertake anything to reverse it? Is the Security Council still able to play the role assigned to it by the UN Charter?

I must say, by the way, that I am certainly not the only one who is deeply concerned about the impotence of the UN nowadays. A serious and comprehensive analysis of the current situation and perspectives in the near future must be based on an assessment of the facts on the ground, as well as those found in

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the halls of UN Headquarters in New York. Without the active participation and genuine interest of the United States, it is impossible to imagine an effective and functional Security Council. The same applies to solutions for crises and hotspots such as those in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and so on.

Distancing itself from multilateralism and dialogue, the United States has contributed to a serious handicap in world affairs. This is bound to have implications for global issues of vital importance. Some of these issues include: antiterrorism, climate change, world trade, sustainable development, and maintaining peace and stability. One should not forget that American troops are deployed in more than 150 countries across the globe.

To believe that there is an alternative to multilateralism in pushing for “one-on-one” and “face-off” approaches is very dangerous, and will certainly not persuade other actors on the world stage to act unilaterally. Two examples come to mind: the total failure to discipline North Korea and Iran demonstrates that there is no way to come to a real solution without the active participation of China, Russia, and the European Union.

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In addition, the Trump Administration’s response to the current pandemic can be viewed as proof of the growing inability of the United States to define its role and position in today’s world. Our global circumstances differ significantly compared to 75

years ago, when America became the undisputed leader in global affairs. As already mentioned, COVID-19 has had implications globally, nationally, and locally.

It has, above all, reinforced bias towards a national self-reliance,

which coincides with the rise of populism in many corners of the world. This inward-looking lurch hurts our recovery worldwide, makes the world economy vulnerable, and spreads geopolitical instability. This occurred as a separate phenomenon from the weaknesses of the healthcare systems in many countries.

The current situation and further developments in the United States, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, fully embodies this. The country that acted as a world leader since the end of World War II became reluctant to do so during a pandemic. This is without precedent in recent history. Instead, chaos and division prevailed domestically, damaging the

country’s prestige. This was despite the Trump Administration’s desperate attempt to play the blame game with China over COVID-19. For example, in February 2020, Trump praised China’s leaders for successfully dealing with the pandemic. All of a sudden, in June, the administration changed its rhetoric to an endless criticism of China for being responsible for spreading this coronavirus around the globe.

Having said that, my intention is not to advocate in favor of China’s actions during the pandemic. Not at all. China’s confusing and contradictory information at the beginning of the pandemic has misguided not only the response of the WHO, but many countries around the world. Due to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the coronavirus, global public opinion started shifting away from globalization and towards policies of lockdowns and closed borders.

And again, the United States and its forty-fifth president, instead of showing leadership by keeping global cooperation intact, reinforced unilateral approaches and thus came into conflict with basic economic and trade rules. Don’t be fooled into thinking a trading system with an unstable web of national controls will be more humane and safer. On the contrary. Poorer countries will

find it harder to catch up. In the developed world, products and everyday life will become more expensive. Making supply chains domestic does not make them more resilient; rather, it concentrates risk and forfeits economic integration. Instead, they should be diversified and preserve their global nature.

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Geopolitical shifts and mounting great-power rivalries are also straining global cooperative efforts, thus increasing tensions between Washington and Beijing. This too is endangering multilateralism, and not solely in the economic sphere. On the other hand, mounting tensions between the United States and Russia risk inflicting long term damage on arms control and the global non-proliferation regime.

To effectively uphold a system of multilateral cooperation, the system’s biggest players must agree on the basic principles of cooperation. This represents an opportunity for the European Union to finally become a partner on equal footing with the United States, China, and Russia. This is for its own benefit, and for the world as a whole. The opportunity is there. What is missing, though, is more power and the ability to speak with one voice. This way, the United States will feel less inclined to choose unilateral action.

In order to make this possible, it must start within the Western alliance: we must recognize the operational mechanisms the Transatlantic community has in place and work on those needing fortification. This means the EU must build its own armed forces and NATO must undergo a serious transformation to be able to accept a “joint venture” approach in terms of its military capacity. Being on equal footing in this regard, the Transatlantic alliance will function better and be fully prepared to address an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment.

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To sum it all up: the more European partners see themselves in a leadership role, the more inclined the United States will be to see multilateral action as the most viable solution and most effective tool to achieving its end goals.

In addition, drawing from the lessons from COVID-19 means avoiding divisive behavior, which has been compounded by the lack of clear communication. This is especially relevant in communications between the WHO and UN member states. Communication is the most important tool in

international crises, and communicative multilateralism must be at the core of all response strategies.

The UN would be well-advised to lead, and to stand at the forefront of this effort. World leaders must step back from knee-jerk reactions and instead come together in order to pursue forms of international cooperation based on the needs of the globalized, digital era. This should take the form of communicative multilateralism.

Autumn 2020 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. It represented a unique opportunity of evaluating its results, failures, and contemporary position. As for the United States—a co-founder of the UN and one of its leading members—we should reflect on their role then and now. As one of the major architects of this system, America cannot afford to ignore its corrosion. On the contrary, the United States should once again step into the breach and play a leading role. It should take into account the completely changed historic circumstances as well as the timeless and universal values of the UN, which aim to preserve global peace and security. ●