

Human Security in Crisis:

Analyzing the Role of International Institutions in a COVID-Regulated World

Yatana Yamahata

International institutions are integral forces in world politics as they have the political authority to set norms and provide governance. Although the World Health Organisation's (WHO) declaration of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak as a global pandemic prompted a series of emergency responses worldwide, much of the power as well as the fate of the post-coronavirus world rests on the voluntary cooperation of states themselves. This paper discusses how traditional theoretical frameworks of IR—realism and constructivism—answers the following question: how important is power in explaining the role of international institutions in the post-coronavirus world? The paper argues that an understanding of power should not be limited to states as international institutions themselves wield symbolic power that influence state and non-state actors alike. This logic is explored by focusing on the concept of human security introduced in the 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and its application in managing the AIDS pandemic. The paper suggests realists and constructivists to consider the lessons learned from the AIDS pandemic and apply them in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic by making two seemingly radical shifts: (1) to acknowledge the power of international institutions in the context of

a global pandemic and (2) prioritize human security as a crucial power-generating source in the context of a global pandemic as they create exceptional circumstances where the behaviours of actors above the state (i.e. international institutions) and below the state (individuals in the masses) significantly influence states' decision-making and crucially, undermine the realist's and constructivist's understandings of statehood that give it power.

INTRODUCTION

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic, prompting a series of emergency responses worldwide, such as the issuing of travel-bans, national stay-at-home orders, and financial relief. The WHO and other international institutions are integral forces in world politics as they have the political authority to set norms as well as to provide governance. However, realists and constructivists argue that much of the power as well as the fate of the post-coronavirus world rests on the voluntary cooperation of states themselves.

This paper discusses how traditional theoretical frameworks of IR—realism and constructivism—answer

the following question: how important is power in explaining the role of international institutions in the post-coronavirus world? Both approaches understand that power is possessed by states; it is states that wield material and/or discursive power, determining the role that international institutions play in world politics. Alternatively, this paper argues that the understanding of power should not be limited to states as international institutions themselves wield symbolic power that influence state and non-state actors. Locating power in different actors, and not just its effects, thus becomes central to the analysis of international institutions, especially in the context of a global pandemic.

The paper expands on this argument by discussing how international institutions can shape the post-coronavirus world by focusing on the concept of human security introduced in the 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, realists and constructivists need to make two seemingly radical shifts (1) to acknowledge the power of international institutions in the context of a global pandemic and (2) prioritize human security as a crucial power-generating source in the context of a global pandemic as global pandemics create exceptional circumstances where the behaviours of actors above the state (i.e. international institutions) and below the state (individuals in the masses) significantly influence states' decision-making and crucially, undermine the realist's and constructivist's understandings of statehood that give it power.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN A POST-CORONAVIRUS WORLD

At the most basic level, power is at work "when one actor compels another to do something they would not have done otherwise."¹ Traditional theoretical frameworks recognize that states possess and exercise power. For example, the Charter of the United Nations (UN) "gives the Security Council enormous formal powers, but it does not give it direct control of the tools with which to enact those powers."² Although the UN Security Council (UNSC) holds various authorities from enacting economic sanctions to authorizing military action to maintain international peace and security, its decisions are ultimately dependent on the political standing of

the states that sit on the council. Similarly, the WHO provides leadership in providing information and laying out a framework to tackle the pandemic but does not dictate state policy. Efforts to contain the coronavirus have therefore varied by country and according to the extent to which individual governments perceive it to be a threat to national security. For example, Denmark, Finland, Norway, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam and New Zealand are some of the countries that "locked down early and/or used extensive test and tracing" while Brazil, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, Spain, Sweden, the US and the UK "locked down late, came out of lock down too early, did not effectively test and quarantine, or only used a partial lockdown."³ If the WHO and other international institutions are commonly perceived to not have political authority over states, where is power located in the post-coronavirus world?

Realism: Locating Material Power in States

The foundations of realist theory lie in the supposedly anarchic nature of the international system, where there is no overarching, centralized authority that oversees state actions.⁴ Anarchy forces states to share a common goal of survival, in which they "compete among themselves either to gain power at the expense of others or at least to make sure they do not lose power."⁵ Power is thus understood in terms of material capabilities, which include a powerful military and strong economy, among other things. In other words, realism locates power in state capacity, and hence, treats the role of international institutions as instruments that are constructed by states in order to serve state interests. Although realists maintain that international institutions "do not have significant independent effects on state behaviour," they recognize that "great powers sometimes find institutions—especially alliances—useful for maintaining or even increasing their share of world power."⁶ For this reason, international institutions are also easily influenced by great power conflicts.

3 Kelly Bjorklund and Andrew Ewing, "The Swedish COVID-19 Response Is a Disaster. It Shouldn't Be a Model for The Rest of The World," *Time*, October 14, 2020, <https://time.com/5899432/sweden-coronavirus-disaster/>.

4 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979), 105.

5 John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 77.

6 John J. Mearsheimer, "A Realist Reply," *International Security*, 20, no. 1 (1995): 82.

1 Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

2 Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy, Power, and the Symbolic Life of the UN Security Council," *Global Governance*, 8, no. 1 (2002): 45.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there have been some speculations regarding the extent of Beijing's influence on the WHO.⁷ These speculations had reached a peak in the US when the Trump Administration "framed the epidemic in China in geopolitical terms, used it to blame China's political leaders and system for the tragedy, and faulted WHO for complicity with China's perceived deception and propaganda."⁸ Following these claims, the US under the Trump Administration announced its intention to "sever its relationship with

make of it" as there is no 'logic' to anarchy "apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process."¹¹ In other words, state interests can be "transformed through interaction, persuasion and socialisation."¹² Therefore, constructivists understand that international institutions are mutually constructed concepts, formed through discourse, between states. Constructivism attributes discursive power to states as they form

...when human security is weak within and beyond a state's borders during a global pandemic, state power is threatened.

WHO and redirect funds to US global health priorities," despite the decision being unlawful.⁹ The pandemic has heightened pre-existing tensions between the US and China as well as further polarized the international system, placing the WHO in a difficult situation with respect to its ability to effectively carry out its responsibilities during the pandemic.

Constructivism: Locating Discursive Power in States

Alternatively, constructivist theory focuses on "norms, beliefs, knowledge and understandings," contending that world politics is fundamentally made up of social constructions.¹⁰ It asserts that "anarchy is what states

intersubjective understandings that serve as a basis for international institutions.

For example, members of the UN and regional organizations (e.g., EU, ASEAN) have increasingly placed importance in discursive power over material power in order to enjoy the benefits of international cooperation. Following the US's unlawful withdrawal from the WHO, other members of the international community prioritised the importance of international institutions in managing the coronavirus:

French President Emmanuel Macron has condemned Donald Trump's decision to suspend funding to the WHO indicating that slashing the budget in the middle of the global crisis was more than bad timing. Macron and Merkel launched a \$8 billion drive to develop a vaccine and China has since donated \$2 billion.¹³

7 Michael Collins, "The WHO and China: Dereliction of Duty," Council on Foreign Relations, February 27, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/who-and-china-dereliction-duty>.

8 David P. Fidler, "WHO Criticisms: The World Health Organization and Pandemic Politics," Council on Foreign Relations, April 10, 2020, <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/world-health-organization-and-pandemic-politics>.

9 Lawrence O. Gostin et al., "US Withdrawal from WHO is Unlawful and Threatens Global and US Health and Security," *The Lancet* 396, no. 10247 (2020): 293.

10 Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Why States Act through Formal International Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 1 (1998): 8.

11 Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no.2 (1992): 394-5.

12 Shahr Hameiri and Lee Jones, "Rising Powers and State Transformation: The Case of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 1 (2016): 76.

13 Michael A. Peters et al., "The WHO, the Global Governance of Health and Pandemic Politics," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*

Constructivists view international institutions as essential instruments that uphold values shared among different states, especially during a global pandemic.

LOOKING BEYOND STATES: SYMBOLIC POWER IN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE EMERGENCE OF HUMAN SECURITY

Both realist and constructivist approaches place states as the 'exerciser of power' in international institutions. In other words, material and/or discursive power of states determine the role international institutions play in the international arena; without states, there would be no international institutions. However, this paper proposes an alternative approach: international institutions have the power to influence states in a manner not reducible to the collective or individual agency of states themselves. This approach is discussed in relation to the concept of human security.

International institutions can place importance on symbolism as "an institution that is perceived as legitimate gives rise to symbols that possess a mobilising power because of their association with the institution."¹⁴ Symbols are understood as a currency of power, because "once an object becomes a symbol and is invested with this power by association, it becomes a power in itself and the object of contestation in search of that power."¹⁵ It places special focus on how language, "as a key symbolic system of political value, both reflects and constitutes power," continuously producing and reproducing reality.¹⁶

The concept of human security was introduced in the 1994 Human Development Report by the UNDP with an aim to ensure that people from all corners of the world are able to live with freedom from fear and freedom from want. Unlike traditional conceptions of security in IR scholarship that places states as a referent object—or in other words, an entity that is the target of protection—the concept of human security places the individual as a referent object. Therefore, the components of human security include economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and

political security.¹⁷

States and non-state actors have implemented UNDP's vision by incorporating human security into policy. For example, the Japanese government "stressed the importance of a human security perspective as one of its five basic policies when renewing its ODA Charter in 2003" and included human security in "the 2005 Medium-Term Policy on ODA as an effective approach to development assistance."¹⁸ States legitimise the symbolic power of international institutions and hence the role they play in world politics to regulate and oversee aspects of political, economic and social interactions. The introduction of human security and its worldwide implementation show how the traditional conception of security was challenged and reconceptualized by international institutions.

Human Security in Crisis: Lessons from the AIDS Pandemic and Implications for the COVID-19 Pandemic The previous section establishes that the symbolic power possessed by international institutions provide them significant political authority in world politics. Their legitimacy continues to be affirmed and reaffirmed through everyday practices of states. The following case study serves as an example of why states should be drawn to generating power through advancing human security in the post-coronavirus world by examining the role international institutions played in framing the AIDS pandemic as a global human security.

In January 2000, the UNSC met to consider the growing impact of AIDS on peace and security in Africa, temporarily abandoning "its traditional concern with regulating the deployment of armed force in international politics."¹⁹ In this historic meeting, the President of the World Bank stated: "many of us used to think of AIDS as a health issue. We were wrong ... We face a major development crisis, and more than that, a security crisis."²⁰ Securitisation is a process that identifies a threat and provokes an immediate response to it, such as through the implementation of certain public policies. By defining "who (or what) threatens whom and how" through the speech act, the language of securitisation had in this case effectively "endangered,

[2020]: 4.

14 Hurd, "Legitimacy, Power and the Symbolic Life," 36.

15 Hurd, "Legitimacy, Power and the Symbolic Life," 37.

16 Eagleton-Pierce, Symbolic Power, 3.

17 UNDP, Human Development Report 1994 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24-25.

18 JICA (2010): 2.

19 Stefan Elbe, "AIDS, Security, Biopolitics," International Relations 19, no. 4 (2005): 4.

20 Elbe, "AIDS, Security, Biopolitics," 4.

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ordered and conditioned international relations.”²¹ The UNSC’s designation of the AIDS pandemic as a ‘security threat’ resulted in policy responses, involving a wide variety of actors and relations. These actors include the following:

- (i) Predominantly Western governments including the United States;
- (ii) international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations, the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union;
- (iii) a plethora of prominent multinational corporations working through the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS;
- (iv) non-governmental organizations such as the Civil-Military Alliance to Combat HIV/AIDS and the International Crisis Group;
- (v) think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Chemical and Biological Arms Control Institute;
- (vi) media organizations; and
- (vii) scholars in the academy.²²

The UNSC, as a legitimate political authority has been effectively able to mobilize such actors in combating the issue of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, the security threat of the AIDS pandemic is reproduced through everyday acknowledgement. In the few years following Resolution 1308, which argued that “the pandemic, if unchecked, ‘may pose a risk to stability and security’”, it was explicitly included in “the Millennium Development Goals; the UN General Assembly’s Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June 2001; the establishment of the G8-backed Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2002; and the launching of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) by the Bush Administration in 2003.”²³

In the process of securitising the AIDS pandemic, the UNSC played an important role in recognizing it as a human security crisis by identifying individuals as a referent object, releasing recommendations, establishing funds and urging a variety of global actors to get involved in addressing the issue. The UNSC will continue to produce and reproduce its authority and influence as long as both state and non-state actors recognize its important role in world politics.

Similarly, the post-coronavirus world must learn from the human security-centric approach taken by international institutions and later, state and non-state actors in managing the coronavirus and its many related issues. Global pandemics create exceptional circumstances in which the extent to which the behaviour of actors above the state (i.e., international institutions) and below the state (individuals in the masses) significantly influence a state’s decision-making becomes starkly clear. Crucially, this undermines the realist’s and constructivist’s understandings of statehood that give it power. Taking the resurgence of the coronavirus in India into account, when human security is weak within and beyond a state’s borders during a global pandemic, state power is threatened not only because individual agents in the masses struggle to survive existential threats, but also because a state’s lack of capacity to provide human security to its own population can become a threat to other states’ populations. India hit a devastating second wave in April 2021 when the seven-day rolling average of new reported cases peaked at 392,000²⁴. Furthermore, the delta COVID-19 variant first detected in India has “now spread to more than 80 countries and it continues to mutate as it spreads across the globe.”²⁵

Although the successful vaccine rollout in the US and UK has brought hope towards the end of the pandemic, states must not be quick to declare victory²⁶. Global vaccine rollouts trail behind, which is especially a concern for least developed countries (LDCs) where the pandemic has exacerbated poverty and other threats to human security.²⁷ Instead of focusing on border closures and other state-centric measures to counter the pandemic, states should direct their efforts towards widespread testing and mass vaccination drives that would emancipate individuals from the coronavirus and other related threats to human security. Prioritizing

24 Soutik Biswas, “COVID-19: Has India’s Deadly Second Wave Peaked?,” BBC News, May 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57225922>.

25 Rich Mendez, “WHO Says Delta Covid Variant Has Now Spread To 80 Countries And It Keeps Mutating,” CNBC, June 16, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/16/who-says-delta-covid-variant-has-now-spread-to-80-countries-and-it-keeps-mutating.html>.

26 Aria Bendix, “The US and UK Lead the World’s Coronavirus Vaccinations – But They May Struggle to Reach Herd Immunity If They Reopen Too Soon,” Business Insider, April 22, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-uk-vaccinations-herd-immunity-reopening-too-soon-2021-4>.

27 Paul Akiwumi and Giovanni Valensisi, “When It Rains It Pours: COVID-19 Exacerbates Poverty Risks In The Poorest Countries,” UNCTAD, May 4, 2020, <https://unctad.org/news/when-it-rains-it-pours-covid-19-exacerbates-poverty-risks-poorest-countries>.

21 Jonas Haggmann, “Securitisation and the Production of International Order(s),” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21, no.1 (2018): 195.

22 Elbe, “AIDS, Security, Biopolitics,” 407-8.

23 Colin McInnes and Simon Rushton, “HIV/AIDS and Securitization Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1 (2012): 122-3.

human security would not only bring an end to COVID-19 but also prevent or mitigate future pandemics as the coronavirus exposed and exacerbated failures in providing people with the dignity to live free from fear and want.

CONCLUSION

Power is fundamental to understanding the role international institutions play in the post-coronavirus world. Mainstream IR theories—realism and constructivism—treats international institutions as a result of state power. Realists posit that international institutions are ineffective due to the supposedly anarchic nature of the international system. Therefore, states with significant material power use international institutions to serve their own interests. On the other hand, constructivists emphasize the importance of discursive power, which establishes intersubjective understandings between states. Constructivists thus view international institutions to be important tools in upholding shared values established by interactions between states. However, neither approach sufficiently explains the importance of power in understanding the role international institutions play in the post-coronavirus world.

This paper argues that an understanding of power should not be limited to states as international institutions themselves possess and use symbolic power. The introduction of human security by the UNDP and the securitisation of the AIDS pandemic by the UNSC are discussed to explain that the existence and authority international institutions are recognized through the mobilization of both state and non-state actors in its agenda to address the 'security threat'. Just as the material and discursive power of states determine the role international institutions play in world politics, the symbolic power of international institutions also influence the role states play in world politics, especially in the context of a global pandemic. Therefore, locating power in different actors as well as its effects become central to the analysis of international institutions.

Finally, the paper emphasizes the power of international institutions by highlighting the introduction of human security and its widespread implementation by different state and non-state actors. Although the coronavirus pandemic had uncovered that human security is in crisis perhaps unlike ever before, lessons from the management of the AIDS pandemic can be learned

to prioritize individuals over states to face COVID-19 and other related human security threats in the post-coronavirus world. Global human security crises like the AIDS and COVID-19 pandemic show just how much power international institutions can have over states' decision-making processes. At the same time, the responsibility to provide people with the dignity to live free from fear and want lies with states.

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