

EUROPEUM BRIEF ON COVID-19

WHO under threat ? Maintaining multilateralism
and global cooperation in times of COVID-19

Danielle Piatkiewicz

- **If the COVID-19 crisis will teach us anything, is that today's society has never been more interconnected. The need for multilateral and international cooperation has proven to be vital for the communication and exchange of information, support and resources.**

From global markets to the exchange of technology, innovation, security and now health services - multilateral collaboration has set the rules and standards we live by today and remains the bedrock of our existential foundation. Traditionally led by the United States and Europe after World War II, multilateralism has been supported by systems of collective cooperation aimed at setting the international principles that govern today's rules-based order.¹

As the world faces a global pandemic, one multilateral system established to tackle emerging global health challenges finds itself under threat. On April 15, United States' President Trump announced that his administration will "halt funding while a review is conducted to assess the World Health Organization's (WHO) role in severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus."² Accusing the WHO of failing to adequately assess the outbreak when it first emerged in the city of Wuhan.³ Trump's motivation has been tied to WHO's handling of China's outbreak but it clearly highlights his own failures during the crisis.⁴

Early on in his term, President Trump has questioned the US's role in many multilateral organizations. The "America first" approach has been dominated by a quid-pro-quo mentality focused on making the best 'deal' for the United States, often at the expense of others – and often inadvertently at the expense of US geopolitical interests as well. This pattern has led to a flood of bilateral agreements and challenging multilateral partnerships from the Paris climate agreement to multiple trade deals including TTIP, TPP, NAFTA, and IMF – the list goes on.⁵ The WHO is just the latest example of a multilateral institution being under threat by the current US administration and highlights the lack of US leadership and withdrawal from the global stage.

Who cares?

The US currently stands as the top contributor to the WHO along with private foundations and countries including the UK, Germany, Japan and China who currently fall far behind the US's contribution. While many hope that some European countries may be able to step in to fill the gap, this amount of defunding will have severe near and long-term impact on how the WHO operates and provides support for countries particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

¹ <https://www.aicgs.org/2018/11/the-fate-of-multilateralism-can-civil-society-come-to-the-rescue/>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52289056>

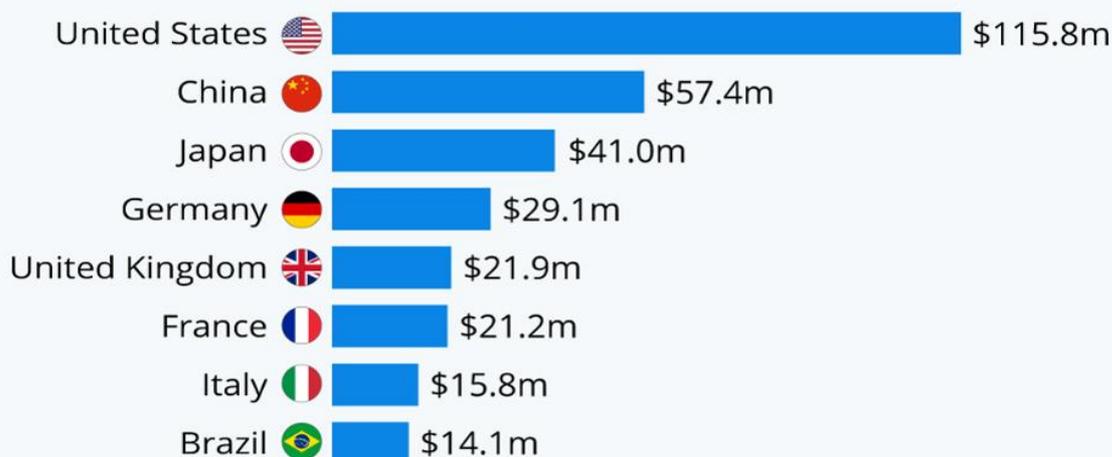
³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52289056>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/15/trump-turns-against-who-to-mask-his-own-stark-failings-on-covid-19-crisis>

⁵ <https://www.aicgs.org/2018/11/the-fate-of-multilateralism-can-civil-society-come-to-the-rescue/>

The Biggest Financial Contributors To The WHO

Assessed contributions to the World Health Organization for 2020 (as of March 31, 2020)*



CHF conversion rate at time of billing

* Assessed contributions are paid for membership and are calculated relative to the country's wealth and population. WHO also accepts voluntary supplementary assessed contributions.

Source: World Health Organization



<https://www.statista.com/chart/21372/assessed-contributions-to-the-world-health-organization/>

Shortly after the statement, many denounced Trump's move and pledged support towards the organization. EU foreign policy chief responded that "the 27-nation bloc 'deeply' regrets the suspension of funds and added that the U.N. health agency is now 'needed more than ever' to combat the pandemic."⁶ WHO

director-general responded that "when we are divided, the coronavirus exploits the cracks

between us," and that the WHO will review the impact of the funding gap and will continue its work "without fear or favour."⁷ Overall, global leaders warned that this move could "jeopardise global efforts to stop the coronavirus pandemic."⁸

Global order after COVID

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/world-reacts-trump-withdrawing-funding-200415061612025.html>

⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/15/now-is-not-the-time-global-alarm-as-trump-halts-us-funds-to-who-amid-coronavirus-pandemic>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/world-reacts-trump-withdrawing-funding-200415061612025.html>

As we witness the US's disengagement from the global arena, mounting threats like the COVID-19 stand to challenge the global order we have become accustomed to. If active measures are not taken to secure the survival of the multilateral order - the West will need to be prepared for challengers like China, to reshape and challenge the rules-based system. Or can other global players like Europe emerge from this crisis as a multilateral defender? The jury is still out.

With its economy in limbo and its handling of the COVID-19 remains in question, how China emerges from the crisis remains unclear. China's has been accused of manipulating "statistics for political reasons and engaged in vigorous propaganda — all in an attempt to turn the narrative of its early failure into one of a benign response to the pandemic."⁹ China has in turn, taken the charm offensive approach to repair their international image. We have seen examples of this with China sending support and resources to affected areas despite reports of faulty tests and equipment. China even responded to Trump's move to defund WHO as a decision that would "undermine international co-operation" in fighting the virus.¹⁰

Europe's handling of the crisis has also been highly criticized. It has even led to the questioning of the EU's leadership and lack of coordination during times of crisis. As individual

countries grapple with how to move past the crisis and struggle work in tandem, the need for closer cooperation and support from regional systems like the EU, are vital in overcoming the pandemic and the struggles to come afterwards. Without a doubt, the EU will have to fundamentally strengthen their cooperation and role with member states if they want to emerge stronger once the pandemic is over.

As the crisis continues, it is difficult to gauge who will emerge from this as the global leader especially as the economic and political aftermath remains uncertain. One hopes that Europe will be able to get their internal affairs in order to help lead the charge, or perhaps the US under new leadership can turn the tide? Only time will tell but what does remain constant is the need to support the multilateral system in place including those established to help during times of crisis. Combatting COVID-19 will require global cooperation and multilateral support – not a unilateral approach.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/coronavirus-pandemic-china-united-states-power-competition/>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52291654>