Global leadership in the 21st Century

Alexander Likhotal

Professor, Geneva School of Diplomacy & International Relations, Switzerland;
Fellow, World Academy of Art and Science

Abstract

This generation has grown in the belief that history has ended before them, that now we live in an era of comfort and stability. Indeed, the post-Cold War context has given birth to beliefs that global solutions could be agreed upon and implemented to tackle global challenges. This proved to be an illusion. Awakening from a happy slumber to face reality was bitter. The COVID-19 crisis shock reminds us that we live in history, that the world is continuously morphing. The pandemic and its aftermath is not so much a turning point but a catalyst and activator that brutally reveals and intensifies tendencies in the transformation of the world that arrived long before the current crisis. Change and leadership are absolutely inseparable. However, it is exactly at this time of rapid change that there is an overall feeling of political leadership deficit. What shall we expect in the post-coronavirus world? Does leadership still matter? And if yes, what kind of leadership? If we want to cure the disease rather than its symptoms, it is time to start thinking in terms of synergies and opportunities, outside the usual multiple-choice box of threats and priorities. Only new "effective multilateralism" can re-establish trust, based not on traditional states' balance of power and interests but on globally shared risks and concerns of communities. The real transformational leadership required today lies not in enhancing what is, but in advancing toward what will be!

"Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things".

– Peter Drucker

This generation has grown in the belief that history has ended before them. Revolutions, wars... All this was before them. We live in an era of comfort and stability. Everything is calculable, predictive, almost predetermined. Everything is the same: boundaries, lifestyles, growing standards of living. We have not learned the shocks of the 20th century—the orphan of the Belle Epoch as the "sorcerer's apprentice" summoned the genie, the monster, that it failed to cope with—and as a result, the monster killed it.

Indeed, the post-Cold War context has given birth to firm beliefs that global solutions could be agreed upon and implemented to tackle global challenges. Binding global agreements and international law would be implemented and enforced with the help of strong international institutions. The world moved from MDGs to SDGs, from G7 to yet another G20 session. We have developed a whole set of complicated and elaborate political "newspeak" that screens us from the real-world problems: "underprivileged people", "overseas contingency operations", "targeted killings", "nature-based solutions", etc. We have done everything to generalise the

problems, thus decoupling ourselves from genuine human suffering—"capacity building", "rights-based approach". The future, it seemed, belonged to unbridled globalisation.

"The current crisis will be not so much a turning point but a catalyst and activator that brutally reveals and intensifies those tendencies for the transformation of the world and human behaviour that have already matured and have begun to appear in concrete social and political practices."

This proved to be an illusion. The institutional architecture of globalisation failed to develop as had been hoped. The World Trade Organization, established in 1995, today finds itself in agony, just 25 years after its creation. Plans for global institutions to oversee investment, competition, or climate and environment are shelved. The whole system of the basic international arms control and security agreements (from NPT to Open Skies and New START treaties) is in limbo. The past five years have seen worsening trends across conflict indicators: more wars, more people killed and civilians increasingly targeted.

- Over 68 million people are now displaced due to conflict and persecution—more than ever in recorded history.
- At least 70 conflicts involve non-state actors, a historic high.
- An estimated 151,887 people were killed in conflicts in 2018.[*]

Lately we have entered what media calls "a perfect storm"—COVID-19 pandemic and the general failure to coordinate response across the states' borders is costing lives, creating untold economic damage, and enacting disproportionate harm on locked down individuals, isolated households, and communities. All this is perceived as a shock of unprecedented proportions compared already to the damage caused by the two world wars. This can be justified exclusively by the existing inadequate level of historical knowledge.

However, we live in history. Nothing is guaranteed to anyone. The borders of states are changing before our very eyes. Wars begin and end. Heresies are born. Church schisms erupt. Deep tectonic shifts are taking place in politics. We cannot accommodate this, and we perceive every serious phenomenon apocalyptically.

Not long ago, history used to be determined by leaders. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, George Washington, Napoleon, Bismarck, Churchill, Stalin—major world political actors, both heroic and villainous, were thought to drive the world. But then a new trend rose to tell the same stories in terms of deeper structural root causes: geopolitics, power balances, interests, globalisation, ideological conflicts. Leadership came to be seen as just projections of other, more important trends; leaders' personalities and their characters were essentially

---

[*] https://staging.crisisgroup.org/who-we-are

instrumental, if not irrelevant. What mattered was not the "titans and tyrants" but megatrends and "formative impacts".

What shall we expect in the post-coronavirus world? Does leadership still matter? And if yes, what kind of leadership?

I am sceptical regarding the claims that the world will be different after the crisis. The world is continuously morphing and has never changed abruptly. The current crisis will be not so much a turning point but a catalyst and activator that brutally reveals and intensifies those tendencies for the transformation of the world and human behaviour that have already matured and have begun to appear in concrete social and political practices long before the current crisis has had its impact. However, the crisis by all means will dramatically boost the speed of these changes. As a result, the current world will undoubtedly seriously change, and much faster than by a calm evolutionary process.

Change and leadership are absolutely inseparable. However, it is exactly at this time of rapid change that there is an overall feeling of political leadership deficit.

COVID-19 came as a stress test many world leaders have not passed. U.S. President Trump has been gambling with people's lives in an attempt to "outwit" the virus, China's leader Xi Jinping willingly or not prevented any collaborative action to contain the pandemic, while President Putin has "self-isolated" politically, leaving all the responsibilities to Russia's regional authorities.

In fact, politics started lagging behind the transformation process long before the coronavirus crisis. Instead of transformative leadership we have been witnessing isolated efforts to react to the challenges in a "baby-sitter" pattern, when top priority is assigned to where the most noise comes from. The lack of systemic response is the main reason of the multiplying crises we face—not only coronavirus, but equally security, climate, food, water, energy, poverty.

As the days pass by, leadership flaws are turning more and more noticeable internationally. The United Nations Security Council could not agree on a COVID–19 resolution, as the US and China could not concur. Furthermore, the G-20 and the G-7 have been unable to reach even basic decisions on global economic recovery; the G7 was incapable of even issuing a final statement, as the US wanted to "coin" COVID-19 as a 'Chinese virus'. Instead of real efforts to build up cooperation, we are witnessing an endless blame-game. Lately, it was the UN Security Council and World Trade Organization that were under attack. Presently, the World Health Organization (WHO) is the target, exactly when the world needs it like never before.

The epidemic is essentially a public health crisis with massive economic and social effects. In fact, political decisions that guided governments to keep it at bay facilitated the spread of the virus. Clearly the lack of political leadership has already multiplied the price the world is paying on all counts—life loss, economic and social consequences, departure from democratic norms.

World politics is increasingly defined by countries' internal problems, and not the challenges of world transformation. Or, rather, responses to these challenges become more

and more the consequence of internal disruptions**,** exacerbating international contradictions and making them increasingly difficult to untangle. Think about the impact of the upcoming US elections, stability of the ruling regimes in Russia or China and the Brexit agenda of the UK!

"The pandemic has exposed the chronic contradictions between European values and the increasing nationalisation of members' interests."

Every day political news continue to exceed the imaginations of absurdist novelists and comedians, amongst others—President Trump plays golf as the US coronavirus death toll approaches 100,000, Hong Kong police uses tear gas and water cannon to disperse protesters against Beijing's plan to impose national security laws on the city, Russia demands an apology from Bloomberg news agency over a report it published about President Vladimir Putin's low trust rating among Russians—reminding us of Mark Twain's words "It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled."

However, judging by the political response to epidemics and their consequences, we seem to be witnessing again the attempts to reshuffle the core pieces of the post-Cold War international order. A new era of great power competition is unfolding between the United States and China accompanied by a growing leadership vacuum in what has become known as the liberal international order.

Perhaps the most significant of these shifts is the unmistakeable demise of Pax-Americana. The COVID-19 outbreak is the first global challenge that has witnessed the complete absence of American and generally Western leadership. It has also thrown into sharp relief the social and governance vulnerabilities of the West more broadly. Even the EU had to struggle to equitably distribute resources between its member states (so far not very successfully). The pandemic has exposed the chronic contradictions between European values and the increasing nationalisation of members' interests. It turns out that national identities and historical memories do not match across EU. For example, some politicians in Poland argue that the Vatican and the USA brought freedom to the Poles, and the Spaniards remember that it was the Vatican and the USA that extended the dictatorship for forty years, just to prevent the left-wing forces from coming to power. Thus, the gap—between North and South Europe over economics, and Western and Eastern Europe over values—seems likely to widen.

The weakened transatlantic core of the international liberal order is likely to slip further in relevance in the post-coronavirus world. While no one can tell what the future order will look like, it is becoming obvious that new instruments and institutional tools are needed to prevent a situation in which not much may be left for recombination.

Therefore, transformational leadership is required today, which is not about enhancing what is, but advancing toward what will be!

The current systems and institutions of international cooperation were built to address 19th and 20th century problems. But in today's complex and fast-paced digital world, these structures cannot operate at 'internet speed'. Two thousand years ago the entire Pax Romana was doomed like a dinosaur whose brain was too small for such a huge body. Our current world system seems to have similar constraints.

"This is not a crisis of globalisation, but a crisis of financial and economic neoliberal globalisation."

In his Prison Notebooks, the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." In a way, this is an apt description of the world order today.

As a result, the current "interregnum" world order is characterised more and more by a general crisis of leadership and decline in governability.

And it is not that the politicians do not realise it. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel concedes that "the well-tried and familiar framework of order is under strong pressure at the moment." According to Foreign Affairs Minister Heiko Maas, the situation is even worse: "That world order that we once knew, had become accustomed to, and sometimes felt comfortable in—this world order no longer exists." Many also believe that what is known as the liberal international order has been damaged to such a degree that it is hard to return to the *status quo ante*. As French President Emmanuel Macron puts it, this is not "an interlude in history before things return to normal […] because we are currently experiencing a crisis of the effectiveness and principles of our contemporary world order, which will not be able to get back on track or return to how it functioned before."*

In fact, our future is already with us, but our past does not let us out of its tenacious paws!

The new actors are already entering politics: the state maintains (so far?) a monopoly on certain policy areas, but non-state actors play an increasingly important role on the stage of defining the problem, analysing the problems' links, and ultimately shaping the political discourse. The Danish government recently decided to establish the post of an Ambassador responsible for relationships not with other foreign states but with… corporations. The "Digital Ambassador" of Denmark will be facilitating relationship between Denmark and (!) Apple, Google and Microsoft. The French followed suit last year.

Big data companies (Google, Facebook, etc.) have already assumed many functions previously associated with the state, from cartography to surveillance. Now they are the primary gatekeepers of social reality. People today engage in social issues mainly through

---

* http://cpcml.ca/Tmlw2019/Articles/W4900517.HTM

civil society and the use of social media as their primary tool. Facebook this year has reached almost 3 billion users. This holds fascinating prospects for de facto global citizenship and social action, but it does undermine the nation-based representative model of democracy.

The role megacities and provinces played in planning and organizing responses to the pandemics, becoming in fact decisive actors across the globe in this struggle, could dramatically redesign the essential services provision in a more resilient fashion in future man-made or natural disasters, defined less by national identity and more by security, services and well-being they provide for the people living within the municipal areas. The contours of this trend have materialised in the recent legal claims against sovereign state—China, filed by the states of Missouri and Mississippi.

The pandemic has seemingly boosted the process of de-globalisation. However, this is not a crisis of globalisation, but a crisis of financial and economic neoliberal globalisation, based on the belief that social benefits and regulations were a burden on the economy that hampered growth, and that "a rising tide lifts all the boats". However, contrary to expectations, the tidal wave has overturned many boats.

Consequently, regional integration is challenging and has slowly been replacing global integration. Subnational structures (megacities and provinces), empowered by digital technology and capable of responding at faster speeds than states, would inevitably forge their own trade agreements, public health arrangements, and climate change accords with other cities globally, via direct diplomatic relations.

By all means this list is not exhaustive and there might be many more possible stakeholders in the new global governance structures.

Indeed, we are going through what by every measure is a great crisis, so it is natural to assume that it will dramatically accelerate the march of history. The world is on the edge of a systemic reset.

The "perfect storm" we are living through, on the one hand, could further undermine the existing international institutions, reinforce nationalism and spur deglobalisation, the symptoms of which are well visible already.

But on the other side, it could also upgrade multilateralism, a glimpse of which appeared in the G-20's offer of debt relief to some of the world's poorest countries; the "Merkron agreement" (Macron and Merkel initiative of the European €500 billion Recovery Fund) that the EU will share a significant amount of joint debt (some even see the initiative as a step toward establishing a single European nation); a joint plea from more than 200 former national leaders for a more coordinated pandemic response; an unprecedented multinational pact to arrest the crash in oil markets and the recent world scientists' proposal for a strategy to improve the disjointed vaccine development process in which there argue: "To return to a semblance of previous normality, the development of SARS-CoV-2 vaccines is an absolute necessity. To achieve this goal, all the resources in the public, private, and philanthropic sectors need to participate in a strategic manner."

The pandemics and its consequences have tragically put on display the already tangible process of 20th century political structures drowning in a 21st century ocean of deregulated finance, artificial intelligence, autonomous technology, religious militancy and great power rivalry. For increasing numbers of people, our nations and the system of which they are a part now appear unable to offer a plausible, viable and secure future.

Today's circumstances call for an updated "operating system"—call it "effective multilateralism" or "pluri-lateralism"—that is based not only on a Westphalian sovereign states pattern but which also involves nascent stakeholders of the global international society. The gap between the expanding networked pluri-lateral world and governance, traditionally understood and applied within post-Westphalian concepts, is widening and feeding disorder and disruptiveness of the global system. And this gap will not be bridged by any new iterations of a traditional uni-, bi- or even multi-polar global world order.

Coming back to the current crisis, if we want to cure the disease rather than its symptoms, it is time to start thinking in terms of synergies and opportunities, outside the usual multiple-choice box of threats and priorities. Only new "effective multilateralism" can re-establish trust based not on traditional states' balance of interests but on globally shared risks and concerns of communities.

True transformative leadership is all about "uncorking" the future, rather than trying to rekindle the past.

Author Contact Information
Email: likhotal@bluewin.ch