

Nahian Reza Sabriet

COVID-19 AND THE THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Abstract

This article investigates the Covid-19 crisis prevalent all over the world from three dominant theories of international relations: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism. The policies being taken globally, regionally and internationally by relevant states and other actors have been investigated from each of their perspectives. The study also tries to predict how the future policies can be based on the roles of actors or institutions related to the aforementioned theories. While neorealism looks at the pandemic as a traditional interstate competition under the rules of self-help and anarchy, neoliberal institutionalism emphasises on the roles of different institutional endeavours and governance structures. Social constructivism follows a different approach and brings in the dynamics of intersubjective identities, collective measures and normativity. In order to present a holistic analysis, the paper compares and contrasts the situation with other similar events like the outbreak of the Spanish Influenza in the previous century or other major epidemics.

Keywords: Neorealism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, Pandemic, Global Governance, Collective Action

1. Introduction

“No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all.”

— Albert Camus, *The Plague*¹

The recent outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most unpredictable and threatening incidents the world has faced in recent times. Having sweeping impacts on 188 countries and causing the death of millions, it has shaken up the pre-existing notion of security, governance and preparedness. It also proves how the Westphalian state-system² has not prepared itself against the threats which do not come from a traditional geopolitical or geostrategic viewpoint leading to a vulnerable and ramshackle reality.

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¹ Published in 1947, *The Plague* is the memoir of an unknown narrator of an epidemic spread in French Algerian city of Oran. Camus constructed his narration based on the cholera epidemic proportion of Oran's in 1899.

² Stanley D. Brunn, “A Treaty of Silicon for the Treaty of Westphalia? New Territorial Dimensions of Modern Statehood”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1998, pp. 106-131.

Emerging as an academic discipline in 1919, over the course of history, International Relations (IR) has developed its own theories with defined epistemologies and ontologies. However, the prime focus of these theories evolves around the pre-eminence of state and its obsession with sovereignty. Irrespective of the external or internal dimensions of the sovereignty, this has compelled the IR theorists to create new schools like the English school, the Frankfurt school who are the proponents of alternative theoretical perspectives to create spaces for “individual destinies; or, collective destinies”.³ Nevertheless, it has merely led to any change in reality and a large section of international activities is still centred around the states and interstate relations. The two world wars have been responsible for a greater materialistic and militaristic conceptualization in IR which trapped the actors who are inside the states or are operating beyond the stringent web created by these states. It is the outbreak of this kind of epidemics, or any drastic shift that works as a tip of the iceberg and pushes the debates in academia. The changes are significant: the scope for theoretical analysis has widened over the years, the concept of “security” has gone beyond the security of the states and erstwhile “trivial” perspectives like environmental concerns, gender issues and human security are being included. In practice, the picture gets crumbly when the states face real challenges and not just a page full of criticisms.

Therefore, the question comes: how do the mainstream IR theories explain the outbreak of, and the threats posed by, a global pandemic? To answer to this question, the present article analyzes three dominant theories of IR: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism. The reason to choose mainstream and problem-solving theories is that they are the most widely accepted theories in both theoretical and practical realms. All of these theories emerged after World War II (WWII) and are able to tackle a number of contemporary debates. The “classical” variants of the theories might seem much outdated and the comparatively newer variants (i.e. regime theory, neoclassical realism, etc.) might seem to be focusing on only limited aspects. The “neo-” variants of realism and liberalism and the social constructivism theories have come out of the limitations of the classical theories and have broader scopes to address distinct levels of analysis (neorealism), certain actors (neoliberal institutionalism), or the dynamics of the relationship of the actors from a “holistic” approach (social constructivism).

The primary objective of the study is to identify the extent to which these theories can address a global pandemic and how they would suggest solutions by assorting responsibilities upon certain actors. This article thus tries to break the commonly addressed criticism of the IR theories that they are only applicable when

³ Camus, op. cit.

the question is about states and war. While addressing theoretical beelines, this article also attempts to serve as a theory-backed policy guideline for enthusiast decision-makers who might want to look at this global problem from this particular academic discipline and provide solutions in a scrupulous way.

The article is divided into seven sections. After the introductory section, the second section presents an overview of the theoretical stratifications and different schools under them. The next three sections take into account three respective theories (neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism) and their positions *vis-à-vis* the Covid-19 pandemic. The sixth section provides a comparative analysis of the three. The final section is the concluding remarks of the paper.

2. An Overview of the Theories

This section illustrates the thematic cornerstones upon which the future sections are designed. The primary analytical and philosophical stratifications derive from Robert Cox's⁴ idea of problem-solving theory and critical theory. Later, the section investigates deeper into three different mainstream IR theories taken as major departure points: realism, liberalism and constructivism.

In general, problem-solving theories do not look at the problems as something necessarily inherent in the "structure". Such theories look at particular issues or crisis as events limited within a significant temporal or spacial boundary and address the relationship between actors or institutions so that a change can be brought into the international status-quo (Table 1).⁵ On the other hand, critical theories directly look at those issues as a production of the discrepancies lying within the structures and try to reorient the latent empirical and philosophical cavities underneath the status. Therefore, critical theories associate the problems with the features of natural sciences, behaviouralism, positivism or objectivism while comparing the problem-solving theories. They also question the lack of transformative activity embedded in the features of them.⁶ Hence, realism and liberalism belong to the problem-solving umbrella of theoretical underpinnings. However, there is a debate regarding the standpoint of constructivism as it is often regarded to be situated in a grey area between the two.⁷

⁴ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory", *Millennium*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1981, pp. 126-155.

⁵ John S Moolakkattu, "Robert W. Cox and Critical Theory of International Relations", *International Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2009, pp. 439-456.

⁶ Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams (eds.), *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 19.

⁷ Christian Reus-Smith, *The Constructivist Turn: Critical Theory after the Cold War*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1996.

Table 1: Differences between Problem-solving Theory and Critical Theory

	Problem-solving Theory	Critical Theory
International System	Anarchic/Competitive (based on pre-given political and social power distribution)	Subjective understanding of the world order; questions the background and development of the order
Position of the Analyst	Political events are external to the analyst	Analyst is not separated from actors or environment
Value-laden Judgement	No	Yes
Separation of Object and Subject	Yes	No
Aim	Dealing effectively with particular sources of crisis and ensuring smooth operation of the institutions; reduction of the negative effect to a minimum	Deconstruction of constructed ideas; bringing changes to the existing structure

Source: Author’s presentation.

The realist embodiment of security and its eminence derives from the basic assumptions of realism: groupism or state-centrism; illustration of politics as an eternal struggle between different states resonating scarcity (of material and social resources) and uncertainty; power as a fundamental requirement for self-preservation and domination; and, the logic of human rationality - *survival of the fittest*.⁸ Envisioning the world as a perpetual arena of competition, thus, realists envision the paranoia of insecurity with the ubiquity of “anarchy” as well as the uncertainty of rivalry, war and conflict. For the classical realists, *human-nature* (or, the pessimistic view of human-nature, *per se*) becomes the crucial factor that triggers the immediate or long-term concerns of the states, whether it is the case of the political manoeuvres taken by the Greek city-states in the 5th century BC or whether it is the 21st century global politics where is the rivalry between the United States (US) President Donald Trump or his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. One of the prominent classical theorists, Thucydides⁹ has provided an excellent “naturalist” landscape of power dynamics. Attributing Aristotle’s concept of individuals being “political animal”, Thucydides argues, it is the natural course of international politics that states, on the basis of the “reality” of the unequal power, must accept the power

⁸ Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Terry Nardin, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True, *Theories of International Relations*, London: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2013, pp. 30-34.

⁹ Steven Forde, “Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli”, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 1992, pp. 372-393.

relations and act in accordance with political plea. Hans J. Morgenthau¹⁰, one of the “fathers” of political realism, has pointed out six principles: politics being governed by objective laws rooted in human nature; national interest being defined in terms of power; power being shaped by political and cultural environment; absence of correlation between power and morality; rejection of the idea of moral aspiration of the nation; and, autonomy of the political sphere.

For the neorealists, on the other hand, it is not the human-nature, rather the international political structure constituted of ordering principles (or, “deep structure”, as termed by Ruggie¹¹), differentiated character of the units and distribution of capabilities (or, “surface structure”, as mentioned by Ruggie¹²) that appropriates state-behaviour. Upon the question of power and anarchy, neorealists go further assuming a direct linkage between anarchy and war. Kenneth Waltz sees anarchy as the “permissive cause of war”¹³ explicating that war occurs because there is no authority over the states to prevent the war-efforts. Moreover, similar to the conceptualization of the classical realists, power also becomes a stringent factor of competition since the international platform is mechanized by the relative power gap among the power-producers and the power-receivers which the latter wishes to mitigate through internal and external accumulation. Other variants of realism including the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) by Krasner¹⁴, the balance of threat theory by Walt¹⁵, neoclassical realism by Rose¹⁶ etc. are different in many aspects; but they bear the common understanding of self-help and the anarchic structure of world order.

Coming from an idealistic viewpoint, liberalism shifts its views not only regarding human nature but also how the nature of these individuals may have an impact on international relations. Thus, ethics and morality are two of the key elements of liberalism. Some variants of liberalism like “republican liberalism” are often criticized due to their imperialist nature.¹⁷ Kantian liberalism and the democratic peace thesis profess a political tone where warlike instincts are mitigated through

¹⁰ Hans Joachim Morgenthau, Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948.

¹¹ Barry Buzan and Richard Little, “Reconceptualizing Anarchy: Structural Realism Meets World History”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1996, pp. 403-438.

¹² Ibid, pp. 407-11.

¹³ Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade”, *World Politics* Vol. 28, No. 3, 1976, pp. 317-347.

¹⁵ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990.

¹⁶ Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”, *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 1998, pp. 144-172.

¹⁷ Wendy Larner, “Neo-liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality”, *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2000, pp. 5-25.

democratization of states. Or, in other words, proponents of liberalism believe that democracies generally tend to have less warfare among themselves.¹⁸ Neoliberal institutionalism focuses more on the norms and mechanisms set by international institutions, including different regimes and organizations. The doctrine of liberal pacifism intermingles with the capitalist strip of imperialism and form Schumpeterian democracies.¹⁹ When the concept of market-force is attributed to the instrumental aspect of liberalism, the term “market governance” is often used to identify the structure of governance under the realms of “governmentality”.²⁰ Liberal scholars like Adam Smith²¹ have argued in favour of a *laissez-faire* vision where the role of the state has to be confined to the protection of society (from external threats) and the provision of certain public goods while “free-trade” will increase the wealth of all parties. This is why, in light of these theorems, trade regimes, interstate economic relations and global economic norms play a substantiate role in liberal strategies. Liberals, thereby, opt for “international imprudence”²² looking forward to initiating the “perpetual peace” and cleansing the stagnant international environment.

Emerged as a result of the third theoretical debate between the realist and the liberals in the 1980s, constructivism as a theory does not try to instigate radical change in the idea of anarchy or how the world politics operates. Alexander Wendt has pointed out two basic “tenets”²³ of constructivism: (i) the idealist approach that assumes “the structures of human association are determined by shared ideas rather than material forces”, and (ii) the “holistic” approach that implies “the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by shared ideas rather than given by nature”²⁴. Constructivism addresses the abstracted and presumed notions like knowledge and reality, which, according to the constructivists, are socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, constructivism does not take the social actors as constant which do not have any impact on the international order; rather, it investigates the issue of intersubjectivity between two or more actors which can generate communications, the meanings apprehended by those communications, and relations which are further developed. Reus-Smit²⁵ has used a discursive approach

¹⁸ Jo Jakobsen, Tor G. Jakobsen and Eirin Rande Ekevoid, “Democratic Peace and the Norms of the Public: A Multilevel Analysis of the Relationship between Regime Type and Citizens’ Bellicosity, 1981–2008.” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 42, No. 5, 2016, pp. 968–991.

¹⁹ Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4, 1986, pp. 1151–1169.

²⁰ Wendy Larner, “Neo-liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality.” *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2000, pp. 5–25.

²¹ Martin Griffiths (ed.), *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 25.

²² Michael W. Doyle, op. cit.

²³ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 1.

²⁵ Martin Griffiths, Steven C. Roach and M. Scott Solomon, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*,

based on Jürgen Habermas’s communicative action theory where institutions provide a forum for discussion or deliberation and “they involve ethical and moral claims to truth, or reasons that are compelling enough to persuade others that new rules and norms need to be institutionalized.” Constructivism articulates these meanings of interpretation as a result of repetitive interaction which is subject to probable changes if the social environment appropriates it.²⁶

Therefore, it can be said that each of the theories is quite different from one another based on their thematic viewpoints. However, each of the problem-solving theories is determined with its rationality, key actors and their roles which provides a logical option to realize immediate actions regarding a pandemic like Covid-19 crisis and unfold “immediate” and definitive solutions or policies.

3. Neorealism and Covid-19

Neorealism signifies a post-WWII outlook towards the international system based on the militaristic security paradigm. From a simplistic lens, there is hardly any scope to discuss the question of diseases and pandemics; but the theory is not entirely obsolete to justify its position as a feasible theory in the time of this crisis.

3.1 *Waltzian “Images” and Positioning the Pandemic “Problem”*

A deeper focus onto the historical development of the theory would show that Kenneth Waltz’s contribution came in two phases. First, in his book *Man, the State, and War* published in 1959, he pointed out three distinct levels of analysis. He named these three levels as “images”. The first level focuses on human nature; the second image or the state level takes into account the domestic economic and political system; the third image variable refers to the international political structure.²⁷ However, his next major contribution was noted 25 years later when he published *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. Here, he signified three elements of the international political structure, of which two always remain constant. These two elements are—ordering principle which denotes (i) the anarchic system and the (ii) characteristics of the unit where states are presented as functionally alike units.²⁸ Thus, the other variable or the “distribution of capabilities” becomes the key factor in determining the

London: Routledge, 2008, p. 141.

²⁶ Catherine Twomey Fosnot, *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2013.

²⁷ Martin Griffiths et al., op. cit., p. 58.

²⁸ Martin Griffiths (ed.), op. cit., p. 13.

international political structure.²⁹

Assuming the international system as an arrangement where states have to depend on self-help has its own problems. It not only narrows down the school for theoretical development, but also produces complexities in the practical realm. Neorealism definitely has a striking focus on war and interstate relations, but under the broad umbrella of problem-solving theory, the question arises every now and then: what is indeed a “problem” to the neorealists? How does neorealism look forward to tackling a “problem” based on its own understanding?

Pandemics are not very common, and neorealists have a tendency to ignore these kinds of issues as they do not get “global” taglines. However, the Covid-19 outbreak can be seen as an incident which has turned the traditional theorization of epidemics completely upside down. The world had met other critical epidemics over the years, ranging from Ebola to a number of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). However, neorealist scholars would simply blame the international modes of power sharing as the reason behind the lack of capabilities and the weak governing system of some countries to combat those diseases.

Neorealism even has a long-standing notoriety for undermining diseases, environmental crisis, threats stemming from non-state actors as “low-politics”³⁰. Henceforth, anything which cannot be addressed from a strict militaristic viewpoint would be treated as a trivial factor or an incompetent driving force to motivate interstate relationship. Quite often, the critics of neorealism, particularly neoliberal scholars like Joseph Nye³¹ point out its parsimonious nature of negating all the “unease” stemming from its rigid structural interpretation of the international system. Kratochwil³² even goes further and indicates the engagement of neorealism with forms like “anarchy” or “uneven economic growth” and its simultaneous process of substituting actual decision-making processes. According to him, its unhealthy obsession for the cyclic nature of international politics marginalizes the whole reality.

3.2 *Battling the Virus*

Notwithstanding the critical points and focusing on the prevalent scenario of the international political structure may help to comprehend a plausible omnipresent and unequivocal neorealist reality to bring a solution to the persistent coronavirus

²⁹ William M. Hawley, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*: by Kenneth N. Waltz, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 1-3.

³⁰ Robert L Rothstein, “On the Costs of Realism.” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No. 3, 1972, pp. 347-362.

³¹ Joseph S. Nye, “Neorealism and Neoliberalism” *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1988, pp. 235-251.

³² Friedrich Kratochwil, “The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-realism as the Science of Realpolitik without Politics”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1993, pp. 63-80.

crisis. Therefore, the analytical viewpoints are illustrated through two different streamlines—how the states are responding to the crisis based on the relative power distribution in the international system; and, how the situation may lead to bipolarity in the world order.

From a general point of view, considering all other elements as constant as neorealism identifies, a predominantly unipolar system should make the US the highest achiever in terms of combating a global crisis which is affecting almost every part of the world in the same way. Since states are supposed to be “like-units”, their internal activities and decision-making processes do not matter at all. The likeness of the units in terms of functionality does support the neorealist thesis. Particularly, all states have forced their citizens to be under lockdown for around two to three months and tried to address the treatment of the pandemic in a similar way. This also reinforces the importance of state-border since almost all countries have closed their borders and limited all kinds of international transportations. When all the states are compelled to act on their own, or the “self-help system”, they have to comply with the rules of serving their own interest and securing their survival. However, Powell³³ has mentioned four avenues of criticism made by neoliberal and constructivist scholars, among which the first one emphasizes on how preferences are given exogenously and the second one focuses on the inseparability of agent and structure. Therefore, neorealism would not consider any contextual undertones or the importance of decision-makers which may lead to different outcomes even though similar policies are taken.

Nevertheless, an investigation into the current statistics will show a different result. Based on the reports provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) until 17 September 2020, among the top 10 countries affected by the pandemic (Table 2), the US outnumbers any other country in terms of the number of total cases and deaths.

³³ Robert Powell, “Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate”, *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 1994, pp. 313-344.

Table 2: Top 10 Countries Affected by Covid-19 Based on Total Cases³⁴

Rank	Country	Population	Total Cases	Total Deaths
1	USA	331,420,450	6,874,596	202,213
2	India	1,382,900,689	5,212,686	84,404
3	Brazil	212,883,816	4,457,443	135,031
4	Russia	145,948,080	1,085,281	19,061
5	Peru	33,069,039	750,098	31,146
6	Colombia	50,998,462	743,945	23,665
7	Mexico	129,221,511	684,113	72,179
8	South Africa	59,467,369	655,572	15,772
9	Spain	46,758,719	625,651	30,405
10	Argentina	45,284,429	601,713	12,460

Until now, all the P5+1 countries had been in the top 10 list.³⁵ Each of these countries is both militarily and economically strong and has maintained stable image in terms of capabilities on the global platform. On the other hand, India and Brazil are also considered economic tycoons and are great powers in their own regions. Albeit neorealism would not consider regional power distribution as a key factor, both of these states have also established significant status in the global milieu.

It is not that neorealism will completely be unable to address a global crisis which does not revolve around anarchy and power distribution; but the way it deals with the problem may seem arrogant and outdated. It is hard to draw any connection between populist governments and their realist outlook towards the international system, but most of the populist leaders are seemingly joining the team of rejoicing de-globalisation and reinforcement of state borders. The President of the US Donald J Trump has directly mentioned that this pandemic has made everyone understand why borders are important.³⁶ Moreover, he has repeatedly identified the Covid-19 as the “China-virus” and referred to it as a “bad gift” from China.³⁷

³⁴ World Health Organization, WHO Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Dashboard, Situation by Country, Territory & Area, available at <https://covid19.who.int/table>, accessed on 18 September 2020.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Trump Administration Plans to Extend Virus Border Restrictions Indefinitely”, *The New York Times*, 13 May 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/13/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-border-restrictions.html>, accessed on 30 May 2020.

³⁷ “Donald Trump Tweets Describing Coronavirus As ‘A Very Bad ‘Gift’ From China”, *NDTV.com*, 28 May 2020, available at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/trump-tweets-describing-coronavirus-as-a-very-bad-gift-from-china-2236813>, accessed on 30 May 2020.

Neorealism will try to look at the problem by taking it as a confrontation between two superpowers and a probable shift in the international system, which is the transformation from unipolarity to bipolarity. Waltz himself has mentioned that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity.³⁸ However, the context upon which Waltz had created his own theorem reflects on how this problem is going to be dealt as well. Albeit the period of Cold War did not face any direct threat of a global pandemic, the two superpowers- the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) managed to divide the world into two different blocs and provide military and economic support for their own supporters. All the processes starting from the containment theory to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Warsaw Pact reveal, if necessary, the global superpowers can again create intangible blocs and may provide healthcare or other necessary amenities. In the current situation, the call for a US responsibility has been repeatedly referred to as a re-enactment of the Marshall plan³⁹ which definitely has a particular historical connotation. Even during the Ebola breakout in 2015, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf requested a “Marshall Plan for the countries of West Africa” to combat Ebola.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the actual Marshall plan also included a plan for addressing epidemics evident among the cattle in former Taiwan (Formosa) and France.⁴¹

Critics may argue that the application of this theory completely ignores the existence of international organizations, particularly, how WHO had been working as the leading actor coordinating most of the efforts *vis-à-vis* the pandemic. However, it shall be noticed that neorealism simply claims these international organizations as tools of domination by dominant states. Therefore, both the US and China can provide resources to different organizations to leverage their influences. It must also be taken into account how China is now providing assistance to other countries not only in terms of masks, monetary donations and other resources, but also sending the doctors who worked in Wuhan where the virus had its outbreak at first.⁴² Thus, China can continue promoting its own influence via previously existing organizations or can create a newer one, even on an ad-hoc basis.

³⁸ Martin Griffiths et al., op. cit.

³⁹ “A Marshall Plan for Primary Care, Public Health”, available at <https://stateofreform.com/news/texas/2020/05/a-marshall-plan-for-primary-care-public-health/>, accessed on 30 May 2020.

⁴⁰ “Ebola: Liberia’s Johnson Sirleaf urges ‘Marshall Plan’”, *BBC News*, 03 March 2015, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31705594>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

⁴¹ Michael J. Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁴² “China Sends Doctors and Masks Overseas as Domestic Coronavirus Infections Drop”, *The Guardian*, 19 March 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/china-positions-itself-as-a-leader-in-tackling-the-coronavirus>, accessed on 30 May 2020.

Based on the aforementioned discussions, it can be seen that the basic focus of the neorealist venture is to look at the probable confrontational situation among the states in the global system. Therefore, the outbreak will be addressed by the competing states to uphold their responsibilities, but the act is going to be motivated by uplifting their national image and extend power sharing in the relative power distribution.

4. Neoliberal Institutionalism and Covid-19

Neoliberalism, to some extent, was a direct or indirect response to the infatuation of power politics imposed by realism and neorealism.⁴³ The changes definitely created a scope for thinking out of the box where the elements do not necessarily involve militaristic and economic power of the state or relative gains. However, neoliberal institutionalism does not totally disapprove the existence of anarchy or the competitiveness existing in the international system; but according to the neoliberal understanding, this competitiveness can be mitigated and the warmongering attitude of the states can be annihilated by international institutions for the betterment of all.⁴⁴

4.1 *Institutions, Regimes and Governance*

Adding a new form of responsible regimes to the common, authoritative paradigm based on states and the international system created an interesting combination of top-down and bottom-up solutions to “common” problems. Therefore, the scope of engagement has expanded both vertically and horizontally which signifies the extended number of issues being taken into account and also discovers multiple dimensions associated with a single problem. However, the initial task is to identify a “common” problem and adhere to a “common” solution.

Stein⁴⁵ has indicated that the competition between the states does not have to be a zero-sum game; rather, it can formulate a kind of “equilibrium selection” where little conflict between interests can be annihilated via institutional solutions which will bypass the risk of coordination failure. Keohane and Nye’s depiction of neoliberal institutionalism also covers the question of governance and associates the

⁴³ James L. Richardson, “The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism”, in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 222-232.

⁴⁴ Robert Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate.” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1999, pp. 42-63.

⁴⁵ Arthur A. Stein, “Neoliberal Institutionalism”, in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (eds.), op. cit., pp. 210-221.

idea with the concept of enhancement of human capabilities by Amartya Sen, the Rawlsian idea of justice and the question of democratic legitimacy.⁴⁶

However, resorting to institutional solutions does not mean that the “competitive system” will totally evolve itself into a cooperative society. Neoliberal institutionalism does not also want to go beyond the positivist umbrella at the expense of inviting space for idealism or ethical concerns. However, neoliberal schools also sometimes incorporate non-positivist ideas as depictions of good, desirable, legitimate, obligatory etc.⁴⁷ It creates a balance by focusing on the route of the reciprocity approach rather than simply depending on cooperative nature and value-laden judgement of the states. The comparative analysis between the outbreak of the great influenza pandemic around 1918 to 1920 and the current coronavirus crisis provides a synoptic view regarding the means of combating a pandemic. The Spanish flu attacked around 43 countries of the world and killed around 39 million people worldwide.⁴⁸ The difference between then and now is that, at that moment, there was no concentrated form of global governance system. The League of Nations was a budding organization at its initial stage. The only healthcare-centric organization was the Red Cross. All the states were left to rely upon their own governance system, or in other words, on an “idealistic” structure. Addressing the paradox of public health issues at the time of this crisis, Rosner⁴⁹ has pointed out that the only solution which could be used as a common public health model for all the cities at that time was to close down amusement park and public meeting places. Ironically enough, after a century, the world has hardly prepared to offer in terms of a proper institutional model to combat the public health crisis. However, Rosner has also referred to another key issue which was the severe racial and social stratification in the city of Chicago, which, along with unplanned organization, made the crisis catastrophic.⁵⁰

However, still, the global regime has a lot to offer so far as institutional support is concerned. Spinney⁵¹ has clearly identified that one of the major problems when it comes to the globe or characteristic of the pandemic was the lack of information and the lack of means to acquire information from remote areas. The author has also given an example – a group of researchers from Cape Town in 1998 identified that,

⁴⁶ James L. Richardson, op. cit., p. 232.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Robert J. Barro, José F. Ursúa and Joanna Weng, *The Coronavirus and the Great Influenza Pandemic: Lessons from the “Spanish Flu” for the Coronavirus’s Potential Effects on Mortality and Economic Activity*. NBER Working Paper No. 26866, Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020.

⁴⁹ David Rosner, “‘Spanish Flu, or Whatever it Is....’: The Paradox of Public Health in a Time of Crisis”, *Public Health Reports*, Vol. 125, No. 3, 2010, pp. 37-47.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, New York: Public Affairs, 2017.

almost no concrete information was available from South America, the Middle East, Russia, South East Asia and the Mainland China regarding the influenza outbreak and its impact.⁵² Thus, while discussing the global institutional reform, it has to be mentioned how the information revolution has created a bigger scope of intervention for state actors, interstate actors and regional organizations. Similarly, the upheaval in the global civil society organizations contributed to the development of the neoliberal institutional system. Adding a different kind of organization was also an important feature of this new form of governance. Rau⁵³ has referred to a number of civil society organizations which helped in mobilizing organized movements against the HIV pandemic. These organizations include religious societies, women's groups, youth groups, informal sectors business workers, and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). The author also mentioned that, quite surprisingly, the two countries which have shown success in combating the epidemic through the civil society are Uganda and Thailand—both with military governments.⁵⁴

4.2 *Institutions and Their Roles in the Present Context*

Neoliberal institutionalism has always been associated with the motifs of capitalism, and a significant part of it is associated with the trade regimes as much as they are linked with global governance. Pieterse⁵⁵ pointed out the intersection between globalization and establishment of a neoliberal empire: defunding the features of social government, i.e. welfare policies, workfare, funding punitive government, and privatization of government function. Therefore, while ensuring a consolidated success of global governance, significant groups might be isolated when domestic monetary establishment and welfare policies are considered. Gabriela and Otero's⁵⁶ analysis signifies how a neoliberal food regime has created a diversified form of division of labour in the North American region around the neighbouring countries like the US, Canada and Mexico. Refuting the false hopes of success from competitiveness, the construction of this particular regime resulted in creating even more inequalities and extending the existing discrimination prevalent in a society. Given Mexico has been historically struggling as a competitor in comparison to its bigger neighbours, this indeed led to corporate dominations in terms of production and consumption of food.⁵⁷ This information and analysis are not focused on the context of pandemic or a global crisis. But it can be comprehended that a global

⁵² Ibid, p. 15.

⁵³ Bill Rau, "The Politics of Civil Society in Confronting HIV/AIDS", *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2006, pp. 285-295.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Neoliberal Empire" *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2004, pp. 119-140.

⁵⁶ Gabriela Pechlaner and Gerardo Otero, "The Neoliberal Food Regime: Neoregulation and the New Division of Labor in North America", *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 75, No. 2, 2010, pp. 179-208.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 184.

pandemic is less likely going to mitigate the absence of equity in different societies let alone abolish it. It has been estimated by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) that the affected countries are going to have an average of 2.4 per cent downfall in growths compared to the unaffected countries.⁵⁸

Parker⁵⁹ has mentioned how the role of World Bank evolved from a development or a provider organization to an organization which also focuses on healthcare and development dedicated to a lingering crisis like the HIV pandemic, *inter alia*, healthcare in general. The roles of these organizations are never out of criticism. Particularly, the World Bank made a donation of US\$1.7 billion in the post-9/11 era along with an additional commitment of US\$744 million to combat HIV and became an active actor in a sphere which had previously been dominated by the WHO.⁶⁰ On 03 March 2020, the World Bank also announced US\$12 million immediate support for the countries of which were struggling to keep up with the initial situation regarding the Covid-19 crisis.⁶¹ It has also extended the support through “emergency health support” starting from an amount of US\$1.9 billion since 12 April 2020 for 25 countries and a commitment of deploying up to US\$160 million for the next 15 months.⁶²

Meanwhile, the WHO has already established itself as a central organization to coordinate, pre-empt and assist all the responses against the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the true essence of neoliberal institutionalism becomes evident in this case as the WHO has responded rapidly in terms of providing guiding principles, conglomeration of global responses and venturing coherence among the policies. The organization has created guidelines for critical preparedness, readiness, responses, community engagement, operational considerations, laboratory testing, establishment of severe acute respiratory infection treatment centre, adjustment of public health and social measures for all the countries in the world.⁶³ The fact that the WHO works as a specialist agency under the UN also promotes a neoliberal global capitalist agenda. However, it is also true that the US is the largest donor of WHO (along with its US\$100 billion health assistance and nearly US\$70 billion

⁵⁸ United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), “Coronavirus: The Economic Impact”, available at <https://www.unido.org/stories/coronavirus-economic-impact>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

⁵⁹ Richard Parker, “The global HIV/AIDS Pandemic, Structural Inequalities, and the Politics of International Health”, *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 92, No. 3, 2002, pp. 343-347.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ World Bank Press Release, “World Bank Group Launches First Operations for Covid-19 (Coronavirus) Emergency Health Support, Strengthening Developing Country Responses”, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/02/world-bank-group-launches-first-operations-for-Covid-19-coronavirus-emergency-health-support-strengthening-developing-country-responses>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

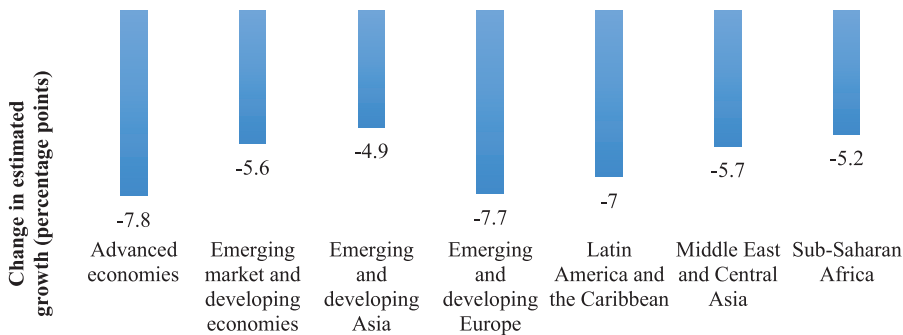
⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ World Health Organization (WHO), “Critical Preparedness, Readiness and Response Actions for Covid-19”, available at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/critical-preparedness-readiness-and-response-actions-for-Covid-19>, accessed on 1 June 2020.

humanitarian assistance to the globe) and the collaboration of this two eventually helped the world fight a number of epidemics which occurred in different regions.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the politicization of the WHO by the US president has led to the cut in its funding as, according to him, the organization was being “China-centric”.⁶⁵

Although most of the regions which are supposedly going to be affected belong to the developed clusters, the UNIDO also shows that the growing small European countries as well as the Latin American and Caribbean regions are going to be affected as much as the high-income countries (Figure 1).⁶⁶ The evidence of unemployment had already putting adverse impacts on different countries. According to the report from Reuters, in the US, around 20.5 million people applied for unemployment benefits in April 2019.⁶⁷ The rates are going to fluctuate depending on the governance system of different states, particularly for the ones which are not welfare-states. The World Trade Organization (WTO) reported that global trade might fall between 30 per cent and 32 per cent in 2020 as a result of the outbreak of the virus.⁶⁸ Neoliberalism puts a higher degree of trust on the global economic regimes to solve an upcoming economic turbulence as well as the global employment crisis. However, it is not just difficult to make common policies for all over the world, rather, a question to what extent states are willing to and are equipped with capabilities to co-opt their existing economic system under a shift in the economic structure, decisions taken by relevant regimes and coherent management strategies.

Figure 1: Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Different Regions⁶⁹



⁶⁴ Jerome Amir Singh, “Covid-19: Science and Global Health Governance Under Attack”, *South African Medical Journal*, Vol. 110, No. 6, 2020, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ UNIDO, op. cit.

⁶⁷ “Explained: How Covid-19 has Affected the Global Economy”, *The Indian Express*, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-how-has-Covid-19-affected-the-global-economy-6410494/>, accessed on 29 May 2020.

⁶⁸ World Trade Organizations Press Release, “Trade Set to Plunge as Covid-19 Pandemic Upends Global Economy”, available at https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres20_e/pr855_e.htm, accessed on 29 May 2020.

⁶⁹ UNIDO, op. cit.

The fast-track financing system from the World Bank promises a total of US\$1.9 billion in 25 countries and another \$8 billion via International Finance Corporation (IFC) for private sectors.⁷⁰ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has already granted Bangladesh a total of US\$177.77 million with Special Drawing Rights (SDR) of US\$244 million or 16.67 per cent of quota under the Rapid Credit Facility (RCF), and purchase of SDR US\$355.53 million with US\$488 million or US\$33.33 per cent of quota under the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI).⁷¹ The IMF also announced that the organization had secured around US\$1 trillion for the deployment addressing the outbreak for the member states along with RCFs and RFIs meeting a US\$100 billion demand.⁷² However, IMF's analysis refers to a necessity of investing more on climate governance for securing a healthy world in the future. Addressing the policymakers, it has been said that

"The current Covid-19 pandemic is a reminder that crisis preparedness and resilience are essential to manage risks from highly uncertain events that can have extreme economic and human costs.

... expanding the availability of insurance and strengthening the sovereign's overall financial strength can lessen the impact of climatic disasters and hence reduce financial stability risks."⁷³

Regarding the regional organizations, the question of the European Union (EU) comes at first since it not only is an organization which stands as the archetype of supranational authority but also considering how Europe has been greatly affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The organization has reported that it has prepared US\$2.18 trillion for post-pandemic recovery funds.⁷⁴ The European Commission (EC) is also proposing approximate US\$884 billion recovery funds, including approximate US\$590 billion for grants and US\$294 billion for loans.⁷⁵ The EU's annual budget for 2020 has been informed to be doubled up from US\$1.3 trillion to US\$2.36 trillion considering the condition of the European countries. As explained previously, some

⁷⁰ World Bank Press Release, op. cit.

⁷¹ International Monetary Fund (IMF), "IMF Executive Board Approves a US\$732 Million Disbursement to Bangladesh to Address the Covid-19 Pandemic", IMF Press Release 20/226, available at <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/29/pr20226-bangladesh-imf-exec-board-approves-us-732m-disbursement-to-address-the-covid19-pandemic>, accessed on 29 May 2020.

⁷² "The IMF's Response to Covid-19", available at <https://www.imf.org/en/About/FAQ/imf-response-to-covid-19>, accessed on 29 May 2020.

⁷³ Felix Suntheim and Jérôme Vandenbussche, "Equity Investors Must Pay More Attention to Climate Change Physical Risk", International Monetary Fund, 29 May 2020, available at <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/05/29/equity-investors-must-pay-more-attention-to-climate-change-physical-risk/>, accessed on 29 May 2020.

⁷⁴ "EU Announces Financial 'firepower' of 1.85 Trillion with 750 Billion for COVID Recovery", available at <https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/27/eu-commission-set-to-unveil-trillion-euro-coronavirus-recovery-plan>, accessed on 29 May 2020.

⁷⁵ Ibid

of the recently developing European economies are going to be hit by the crisis severely, and this support may help them compete with the situation.

Nevertheless, the question is not just about grants but also about mitigating the loopholes in interest and identifying common goals. Thereby, the concern would be: how far has the EU managed to achieve this goal?

An example can be seen by referring to the case of Italy. Italy has been proved to be one of the worst scenarios in the world affected by the Covid-19 situation during the early stages of the Covid-19 outbreak (Figure 2). Following the crisis, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte asked for “coronabond” but failed to convince Germany and the Netherlands from ruling out any kind of debt mutualisation.⁷⁶ In the case of other regions, particularly in South Asia, the situation is even worse. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been persistently infamous for being a victim of political drawbacks even in the moment of crisis.⁷⁷ It has not created a change even as a result of this global pandemic. India has been one of the largely affected member countries of SAARC. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi organized a video conference on 14 March 2020 among the SAARC member states which has been criticised as rather ceremonial and imprudent.⁷⁸ Interesting enough, the crisis brought in some complexities in most of the pre-given dimensions of interstate conflicts, particularly in the Asian region. On one hand, China has promised to include the Asian countries as a part of its US\$2 billion worth loans⁷⁹; while its relation with India started decreasing in the border following a number of border clashes.⁸⁰

In brief, neoliberal institutionalism will try to address the issue of global governance through different institutional mechanisms to combat the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, a neoliberal solution will mostly look at the strategies taken by all of these institutions, such as, rapid and extended policies and monetary sanctuaries provided either by grants and loans. Albeit addressing the pandemic might be the most urgent issue to be solved by these regimes, they also have to take into account

⁷⁶ “Coronavirus: Are Italians Losing Faith in the EU?”, *BBC News*, 17 May 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52666870>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

⁷⁷ Rahila Asfa and Mughees Ahmed. “Prospects of Regionalism: Comparative Analysis of SAARC and ASEAN”, *Asia Pacific-Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2015.

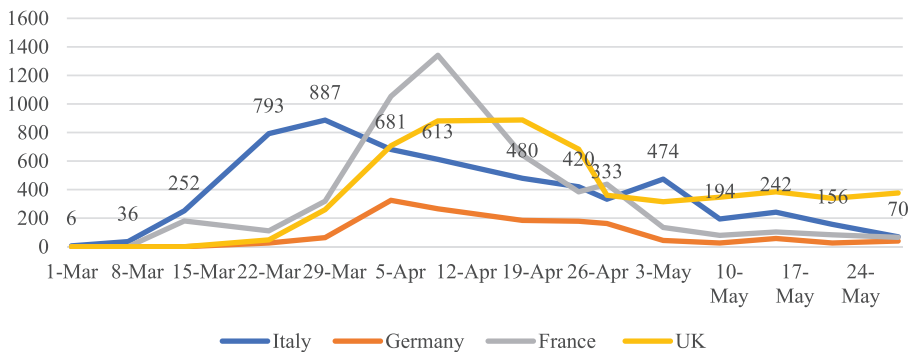
⁷⁸ Partha S. Ghosh, “Playing the Covid-19 Card to Sustain the SAARC Nonsense”, 20 May 2020, available at <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2020/05/20/playing-the-Covid-19-card-to-sustain-the-saarc-nonsense>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

⁷⁹ ASEAN, “Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)”, available at <https://asean.org/declaration-special-asean-summit-coronavirus-disease-2019-Covid-19/>, accessed on 29 May 2020

⁸⁰ “China-India border: Why Tensions are Rising between the Neighbours”, *BBC News*, 30 May 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52852509>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

how these loans are going to be paid back, how they are being distributed and correlations between development and governance equilibria.

Figure 2: Number of New (Daily) Covid-19 Cases in the European Countries (March-May)⁸¹



5. Social Constructivism and Covid-19

Often known to be standing in the middle point between the positives and non-positivist theories, constructivism has created a space for bringing in newer avenues of cooperation while exploring the traditional mediums of interstate relations. In other words, constructivists try to build up a sphere which addresses the problems of both self-help oriented global order and also accepts the roles of non-state or inter-state regimes. In this regard, the key focus has been brought to the question of identity and interest and distribution of knowledge.

5.1 Ideas, Interactions and the Question of a Pandemic

Alexander Wendt's⁸² famous work "Anarchy is What States Make of It" forecasts the necessity of subjective understanding under the theoretical outlines of international relations. As Wendt mentions, individuals or states, act on the basis of meanings rather than depending on objective basis. Thus, the question of interstate relations and self-help are not totally out of order, but a constructivist scholar would like to present a different view where states act differently with other states based on their past experiences and interactions.⁸³ The role of institutions is also not ignored. It

⁸¹ WHO Covid-19 Dashboard.

⁸² Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1992, pp. 391-425.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 398.

is argued that identities and interests are linked to institutional roles, which has been illustrated with reference to Berger.⁸⁴ However, constructivism relies upon human conscience and creates a differentiation between practical and scientific reasoning.⁸⁵ One of the key areas of constructivism is also the agent-structure debate which the two other theories disregard. Ulbert⁸⁶ points out that, regarding the relations between agent and structure, Wendt himself had given preference to structures rather than actors. He even referred to the agent-centric analysis as “historic”.⁸⁷ The basic premise of the debate mostly depends on the question whether (human) actors are the “purposeful actors” who can influence and direct the social relationships or whether they are the ones being motivated by these relationships and the structures being produced by this relationships.⁸⁸ Therefore, in the first case, human beings are either “reflective and goal-directed subjects” and the structures either complement or constrain their goals. In the second case, they have nothing but to move in between the pre-destined structure and play “the rule of the game”.⁸⁹

Therefore, addressing the global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic from a constructivist perspective has to be focused on the dynamics of collectively shared meanings and how they constitute the agent-structure issues. A lot of previously attributed complexities in the previous sections thus become evident and comprehensible. Ulbert has presented a simplistic figure depicting how Wendt would understand the interpersonal relationship between actors and environments vis-à-vis the propensity of violence (Figure 3).⁹⁰ Even the constructivist scale becomes narrow to a point where the threat is a third actor which is completely different from the ones which would not constitute the structures in the commonly attributed forms. Hence, it can be argued that even in the situation of competing a pandemic or a global catastrophe, international relations, more or less configures itself around the relations between states, international organizations, or prominent actors who are making the decisions. Therefore, it is neither the actors nor the structures, rather the tools which would be the key elements to be focused on - norms, rules, process of communication, dissemination of ideas and creation of culture.

Ideas signify the necessity of taking different steps as per the perceptions of the actors. Covid-19 has also provided a picture of how the threat of a pandemic is perceived differently by different actors, or, “security actors” in particular.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Martin Griffiths et al., op. cit., p. 127.

⁸⁶ Cornelia Ulbert, “Social Constructivism”, in Scott Burchill et al., op. cit., pp. 30-34.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

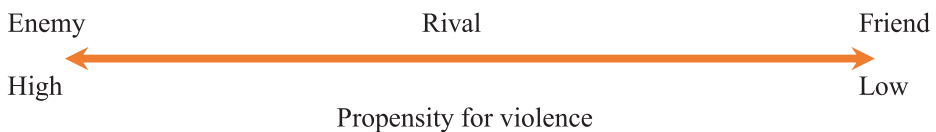
⁸⁸ Alexander Wendt, “The agent-structure problem in international relations theory”, *International Organization* 1987, pp. 335-370.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ulbert, op. cit., p. 253.

Securitization of the state became a vital point and almost in a routine manner, the “war” was declared against a unique enemy with traditional and rather “un-unique” apparatus. Most of the countries had to use their military forces to supervise and control the lockdown. Both the Chinese and the American narratives have also been addressing the question of whether Covid-19 was actually a biological weapon from each other’s end.⁹¹ Manoeuvres depend on the actors’ way of looking at things. Therefore, identification of the problem and dissemination of the knowledge are also key issues. This is why, when the US President looks at it as a traditional war, a war against “a virus coming from China”, the rest of the world looks at it in a different way.

Figure 3: State and Dynamism of Constructivists Interactions⁹²



In the current situation, constructivism can be a theoretical stimulus for collective identities. Zehfuss⁹³ considers the issue of creating collective identity and ensuring stability in two different institutional forms. Hence, he refers to the example of Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) during the inter-war period and the NATO during the Cold War where collective identity was created by military institutionalism against a common threat in two different contexts. However, according to Wendt, identities can be volatile. In order to create a concrete form of identity, it is important to find the actors through interactions rather than interest.⁹⁴ In the case of a pandemic, the importance of solidarity and empathy becomes preeminent beyond everything else. The global media in different parts of the world has been reporting that although lockdown has been initiated in almost every part of every country, it is hard to put the idea inside everyone’s mind how the Covid-19 crisis can rapidly spread from one person to another and then circulate from hundreds to thousands.

International organizations and media have already taken this initiative and are trying to use it for fostering global channel of awareness. Social media provides an extent that serves the tool for escalating these ideas of building a new (imagined)

⁹¹ Bob Fredericks, “Chinese Official Blames Coronavirus Outbreak on US Military”, *New York Post*, 12 March 2020, available at <https://nypost.com/2020/03/12/chinese-official-blames-coronavirus-outbreak-on-us-military/>, accessed on 10 April 2020.

⁹² Cornelia Ulbert, op. cit., p. 253.

⁹³ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

community⁹⁵ when it is occurring at a global scale. Going back to the arguments created in the previous sections, it can be questioned why the economically developed countries are troubled despite their capabilities or governance structure. Constructivism would try to explain it by mentioning that the whole situation depends on how the meaning of the threat is perceived and how the states and the individuals are attributing their identities and responsibilities in comparison with others.

Wendt⁹⁶ himself has focused on the creation of collective identity at the international level in a different article. As per Wendt, the construction of this kind of identity is a continuum from “negative to positive” and also an exploration of the extension of the “self”. When it comes to the identity of the state, he adds that states have their “friends” and “enemies” and a state does not act with a friendly state the way it interacts with another state which is quite “enigmatic”. Hence, the term “enigmatic” has been carefully used rather than an “inimical” state because, in order to think from a constructivist viewpoint, states should not be confined within the pre-determined conceptualization of friendship and hostility. Or, in other words, self-interest or subsequent ideas shall be defined in a way that makes the terms tautological.⁹⁷

5.2 *Towards a Broader Paradigm*

In his works, Wendt tried to explore a different area which can be referred to as “quantum social science” where the state is considered as a “person” and the wave-particle dualism from quantum physics is applied as the body-mind problem of the state.⁹⁸ Wendt has pointed out the issue of “collective consciousness” which indeed leads to the autonomous characteristic of states and the division between facts and ideas.

Therefore, it is definitely understandable why China is not behaving with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the way it is doing with India. The logic goes back to a long history of mutual interactions which did not result in a friendly environment. Just considering the political structure or the regional system of Asia, it can be presented as “anarchic”. However, history will show that India was indeed the first non-communist state to acknowledge China as an independent state on 30 December 1949, just after two months of its proclamation. Starting from the 1962 Sino Indian war, a series of clashes between the two countries had created this

⁹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Routledge, 2006.

⁹⁶ Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2, 1994, pp. 384-396.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 386.

⁹⁸ Cornelia Ulbert, op. cit., p. 259.

uneasy environment over the years. Again, Donald Trump's attitude toward China and his ongoing strife with WHO reflect the legacy of tension between him and the Chinese president Xi Jinping. Thus, actions and self-interests are context-specific and all the actions by different actors in international relations do not follow pre-determined models.

The Covid-19 situation can be used to make the countries forget their age-old skirmishes and inspire them to come together for either "social" or "global" cause. Moreover, social constructivism would suggest there is actually a sense of rapprochement between Taiwan and China based on the former's success in tackling the pandemic. China has been blocking Taiwan's participation in the WHO since 2018. There is a possibility of offering olive branches and letting Taiwan share its success story with only 440 cases and 232 deaths.⁹⁹ The UN, other global and regional organizations and the global civil society can play a pivotal role in this regard.

Some significant variants of social constructivism focus more on cosmopolitan ideologies. Wenner¹⁰⁰ had mentioned three kinds of thinking tools which are: (i) normativity premise; (ii) diversity premise; and, (iii) cultural cosmopolitanism. While the first two link up the establishment of norms and institutional mechanism based on "compliance" or "contestation" of the state, the third one depicts the behaviour of states as cultural practices.¹⁰¹ Cosmopolitanism, in general, is more discussed in critical theories. However, social constructivism opens up a door for the creation of "cultures" as international norms which can lead to cosmopolitanism along with an understanding between states and for collective actions. These newly formed cultures can be prepared to look for optimum solutions against a prolonged Covid-19 pandemic and participate in a minimalist lifestyle. The print, broadcasting and social media, as well as the bloggers and the journalists, can create awareness programmes to address this issue.

According to Guzzini¹⁰², the linking of action and observation has to be implanted to utilize a constructivist framework in case of a global crisis. Although his analysis was based on the context of international relations in the 1980s and the Gulf War, the learning of the theory can still be used in the case of a global pandemic. It also addresses the issue of mutualization including the sources of

⁹⁹ Jo Kim, "The Coronavirus Outbreak Presents an Opportunity for Cross-Strait Rapprochement", 07 February 2020, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/the-coronavirus-outbreak-presents-an-opportunity-for-cross-strait-rapprochement/>, accessed on 01 June 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Antje Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation*, Berlin: Springer, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Havercroft, "Social Constructivism and International Ethics", in Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Ethics in International Relation*, London: Routledge, 2017.

¹⁰² Stefano Guzzini, "A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2000, pp. 147-182.

capabilities, creating national agent, use of soft power and consanguine moral and legal languages. For example, in the analysis, Guzzini has mentioned, it is important for an action to happen in order to bring responsibility, guilt, agency and change. Moreover, he has seen power as a counter-factual element which can be used as an element of constructing the “possible”.¹⁰³ Creating a special board or agencies dedicated to Covid-19 can be seen as the creation of “national agents”. These agents have to be given a certain degree of powers to have independent operability beyond the national sphere and bring rapid changes. For a country like Bangladesh, a multi-agency regime including the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and WHO can be an example of such organization. Since “legitimization” is a very important aspect of constructivist knowledge and its appropriation¹⁰⁴, these regimes should be equipped with monitoring and evaluation capabilities so that “responsibilities”, “guilt” and “paybacks” can be easily identified and a lineage of transparency is maintained all around.

A constructivist lens will help identify which countries and actors are responsible for which activities and whether the responsibilities are properly maintained. If this “culture” can be constituted ranging from national to global contexts, not only individuals will understand their duty as national and global citizens, but the states can also correlate with one another and look for a mutual and collective end. In this way, both the state actors and the non-state actors can be held accountable.

The importance of frequent interaction is thus unavoidable. Although physical interactions are not possible at this moment, the global media and organizations can set up virtual meetings known as “health diplomacy” for countries to act on a constructivist agenda. The role of influential actors and social media cannot be denied. Globally reputed celebrities or media personnel can come out to encourage people to stay home and utilize the quarantine in proper manner.

In summary, as per constructivism, the power of observation and responsibility must go through a reciprocal all-encompassing approach. The state should be accountable towards the citizens, individuals should be accountable to each other and both the state and individuals should be accountable to one another as part of global actors.

¹⁰³ Ibid, pp. 167-71.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Griffiths et al., op. cit., p. 141.

6. A Comparative Analysis: Can the Theories Complement One Another to Bring a Successful Solution?

The mainstream IR theories do not directly address the question of a pandemic. However, they do carry their own lenses for identifying problems and addressing solutions. The basic elements would lie in between their focus on actors and the way each of the theories sees a global crisis and the sources and how they address the policy implications.

From the discussion, it can be understood that so far as the primary actors are concerned, neorealism will not bestow the responsibility on any particular state or non-state actors; rather, it will try to look at the balance of power in the global scale and the balancing mechanisms which lead to an international status-quo. Therefore, the solution of the pandemic or any other global crisis becomes the subsidiary factor. On the other hand, neoliberal institutionalism is quite focused on putting the responsibility to international institutions which not only focused on the organizations but also on norms, laws and global customs. In other words, it is the structure of governance which is supposed to run the primary force of tackling the pandemic. However, for constructivism, the discussion is centred around interpersonal and interactive relationship as well as the agent-structure debate. Thus, it is the interplay between the actors and the relationships which will decide to what extent the battle against Covid-19 is going to be successful. This is why, as explained, neorealist scholars would suggest that a competitive scenario between the US and China would lead the countries to look for a faster and better solution, and that is how a revolutionary invention in the medical science (i.e., invention of a vaccine) can be achieved. On the other hand, neoliberal institutionalism would bestow this responsibility on the international inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. Social constructivism would take an all-inclusive approach and suggest bottom-up solutions like creation of awareness and bringing change in the pattern of relationship among the actors. These patterns can be of varied kinds – among the state and the individuals, among the organizations and the states as well as among the organizations and the individuals.

Discussing the key aspects of these three kinds of theories, it should be kept in mind that there are a number of schools and variants under each of these theories which drift from the primary ideas and explore new areas. On the other hand, the newly emerged hybrid theories refuse to fall under any stereotypical formula. Thies¹⁰⁵ has shed light on the fact that constructivism in particular can be used both as a lens and a theory. From this viewpoint, it can put the juxtaposing theories into a

¹⁰⁵ Cameron G. Thies, “Are Two Theories Better than One? A Constructivist Model of the Neorealist–Neoliberal Debate”, *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2004, pp. 159-183.

mixing pot without negating any of them. Therefore, constructivism here is rather a lens or a perspective-tool. More importantly, he also mentioned using constructivism as a tool for maximizing the retention of “high-culture” and minimizing the “low-culture” and vice versa. Therefore, the constructivist lens can be used by both the neorealist and the neoliberal institutionalists to design extended portfolios to maintain simultaneous balancing, norm-setting and awareness-building strategies and, at the same time, addressing the Covid-19 crisis.

In order to define the midpoint of realism, liberalism and conservatism, Barkin¹⁰⁶ has mentioned how, in terms of power relation, realism goes along with the courses of constructivism while ideas and utopia intersect within the spheres of constructivism and liberalism. He also addresses that over-emphasis on the material aspect of the realism is mostly from the critics rather than the exponents. Ignoring the scepticism of the other two, constructivism can actually use itself for providing a channel for power-dynamics and extend the dynamism between the countries to achieve balancing points. Therefore, the realist ‘competitiveness’ can actually be fruitful to inspire scientists in the technologically advanced countries so that they can look for a faster solution. Similarly, as per neoliberal institutionalism, the inter-governmental organizations can announce certain sponsorship or support for this kind of research.

On the other hand, both realism and liberalism deal with the competitive power sharing reality in the world. In this regard, realism and liberalism are prepared to use both the state and organization while the predetermination of domination between these two is different for the two theories. Baldwin’s¹⁰⁷ reference to the complexities between intention and capabilities also provides a space. One of the notable realist scholars Stephen Krasner has criticized neoliberals’ focus on intention and interests and ignorance towards capabilities.¹⁰⁸ However, this is the momentum where constructivism can dive in and merge with neoliberal institutionalism. Ideas to bring a solution to a pandemic can be standardized based on international customs if they are regularly revised to create equidistant policies. Therefore, ‘capacity’ enhancement can be a point of convergence for both the neorealists and the neoliberal institutionalists. However, the neorealists would focus on the capacity building of the states and the neoliberal institutionalists would prescribe stronger institutional development, norm-building and capacity building of neoliberal non-state regimes.

¹⁰⁶ Samuel Barkin, “Realist Constructivism”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2003, pp. 325-342.

¹⁰⁷ David A. Baldwin, *Neoliberalism, Neorealism, and World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

¹⁰⁸ Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, “Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1989, pp. 183-198.

Although neoliberals are heavily faithful to their desire of mitigating anarchy through international institutions, for neorealists, the implications cannot be ignored even if they are just portrayed as instrumental elements. When Nye¹⁰⁹ asks “can cooperation be learnt?”, it definitely creates a space for incorporation of constructivism which argues that dissemination of knowledge and direction of power can shift the objectivity of identity attached to any state or institution and make it learn or understand the importance of cooperation. Peck’s¹¹⁰ analysis of the “techniques of regime” also represents the power politics embedded in the realist arguments and the opportunity to construct identities and ideas from a constructivist viewpoint. Thus, states themselves can utilize the international organisations to make better ‘instrumental’ endorsements. For example, with no case of Covid-19 for two weeks, New Zealand has lifted up the restriction on public movement on 08 June 2020.¹¹¹ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was also being praised for her role. Hence, she can be invited to speak via international platforms, New Zealand’s role can be studied and discussed to identify and apply proper governance patterns and the ‘ideas’ can be shared to make the great powers find out reason of their failure.

In summary, placing these three theories against one another can be very difficult because the way they juxtapose key elements can completely change the way policies are formed. However, it is the fallacy of problem-solving theories that there is no way to manifest discourse-analysis or value judgment of the narratives in order to expose individual voices or the idea of the subalterns. Therefore, when China and the US will be competing for global influence or will be promoting altruistic policies, the international organizations can also play dominant roles by interpolating corollary schemes. And all of this dynamism can be wrapped around the perspectives which would create intersubjective meanings, underlying connotations, creation of communities and enhancement of responsibilities.

7. Concluding Remarks

Going back to the central research question of the article, it can be said that the mainstream IR theories certainly can address the issue of a global pandemic and predict pattern of responses as per their own sets of ideas and principles. Neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism are three of the most popular theories in the realm of IR. Each of them is preoccupied with distinct discursive structures and defined axioms to analyze the present and predict the

¹⁰⁹ Joseph S. Nye, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Jamie. Peck, “Explaining (with) Neoliberalism”, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2013, pp. 132-157.

¹¹¹ “New Zealand Lifts all Covid Restrictions, Declaring the Nation Virus-Free”, *BBC News*, 08 June 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52961539>, accessed on 09 June 2020.

future. However, it should also be kept in mind that all of the theories are confined within their respective contexts, epistemological and ontological presuppositions. When addressing a practical event, thus, no theory presents a blueprint for the “ultimate” solution. With the change in reality of the international system, theories also gain or lose significance. Therefore, it should not be the theories which may direct the course of human history, rather it is an interplay between the theories and the practical events.

The outbreak of Covid-19 and its rapid spread around different parts of the world signifies how a small event can bring drastic changes to the predicted global purview within a small amount of time. It can always be argued that the role of positivist, behaviouralist and naturalist theories is to predict a probable threat. In this regard, all of these theories have already failed in suggesting appropriate preparation to combat such a threat. The coronavirus crisis is not just a thrust to global governance or healthcare system, it is at the same time a political, societal and security concern for the states as well as the organizations and the individuals.

Even though each of the theories can make an attempt to address the crisis and suggest solutions, this article has presented how none of the theories are complete in its own way to bring a holistic resolution *vis-à-vis* the crisis. Nevertheless, due to its focus on the problem-solving theories, the article also lacks the perspective of the radical and critical theories which can look forward to reorganizing the structure of the international, regional and social system. However, the theories taken into account provide the opportunity to utilize them as “immediate necessities” and even test them if needed. It is necessary to use the theories as lenses to overcome the shortcomings in the policies and revisit them. Therefore, albeit most of the discussions of this article have been rationalized in terms of practical implications and construction of the policies, it is undoubtedly feasible to continue research and academic analysis to make the theories fit on par with the reality—the present and the future.

Concerning the present situation, there is no option to hold any rigidity if a proper solution is to be convened. Thus, the instruments always must be different, but each of the theories has to be flexible and open to criticism so that all the loopholes can be addressed.