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## Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

# International Cooperation during the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis: A Realist Analysis

*COVID-19 Pandemi Krizi Sırasında Uluslararası İşbirliği: Realist Bir Analiz*

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COVID-19, ulusal sınırları tanımayan ve güçlü bir uluslararası işbirliği gerektiren küresel bir sağlık krizini beraberinde getirirse de dünya aktörleri beklenilen aksine uluslararası işbirliğini gerçekleştirememiştir. Devletler, diğer ülkelerin ihtiyaç ve endişelerini göz ardı ederek bencilce hareket etmiş ve uluslararası sistemdeki rollerini ve güçlerini artırmaya çalışmışlardır. Sonuç olarak bu durum, bu çalışmayı realist Uluslararası İlişkiler kuramının anarşi, kişisel çıkar, güç dağılımı vb. ile ilgili varsayımlarını kullanmaya yöneltmiştir. Bu makalede, söz konusu kavramlarla ifade edilen koşullar ve güdülerin, devletleri sağlık krizi sırasında iş birliğine odaklanmak yerine kendilerini korumaya ve güçlerini artırmaya yönelttiği sonucuna varılmıştır. Ayrıca, ABD ile Çin arasındaki iki kutupluluğu ifade eden güç dağılımındaki mevcut durum geçerliliğini korumuştur.

### ABSTRACT

Although COVID-19 has brought about a global health crisis that does not recognize national borders and requires a strong international cooperation, contrary to expectations, the world actors could not achieve international cooperation. States have acted in a selfish way by ignoring the needs and concerns of other countries and tried to foster their role and power in the international system. Consequently, this situation has made this study to use the assumptions of realist theory of International Relations regarding anarchy, self-interest, distribution of powers and so on. In this article, it is concluded that the conditions and motives expressed by these concepts have made the states tend to protect themselves and increase their power instead of focusing on cooperation during the health crisis. Additionally, the current situation in distribution of power, which refers to the bipolarity between the US and China has remained in effect.

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## Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the last quarter of 2019, the world has been struggling with an unprecedented global health crisis. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022a), as of 25 May 2022, more than six million people have passed away due to the pandemic and only a few territories (e. g. Turkmenistan) have not reported any COVID-19 case so far. The crisis that went beyond a public health emergency has required global coordination and cooperation on health issues and economic recovery as well. However, as soon as COVID-19 had begun to spread across the globe, states began to implement some measures at their borders to hinder the spread of virus at the expense of ignoring the needs and concerns of other countries. In that regard, although the pandemic has evolved into a comprehensive global crisis, it seems that there is lack of (or just limited) international cooperation to cope with the crisis among the actors of the world. In other words, international cooperation during the pandemic could not go beyond epidemiological intelligence and gene sequencing data sharing. Moreover, it is evident that the availability of relevant international rules and institutions has not provided sufficient international cooperation necessary to fight the pandemic.

This paper aims to discuss why today's international actors cannot achieve a good level of cooperation in order to defeat the pandemic despite the availability of relevant international rules and institutions. In that regard, states' responses to the crisis and their inability to cooperate will be analysed within the realist perspective of International Relations (IR). It is argued accordingly in this paper that the competitive response of most states against the global challenge of the coronavirus seems to reinforce the realist position on the possibility of international cooperation in an anarchic environment. Therefore, states' failure to cooperate against the spread of the virus seems to validate the assumptions of the realist theory. As will be emphasized throughout the paper, self-interested states as the main actors of international politics prioritize power and security even when there is an opportunity for mutual gain. While realism is a useful tool to understand states' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, interdependence has relatively less impact on this global health crisis. Moreover, the efficiency of the institutions, particularly the WHO in this case, has come into question gradually.

This article is organized in three parts. In the first part, it will be explored how states react to the global pandemic in line with their self-interest as realist theory assumes, particularly in the initial period. Great power rivalry, ineffectiveness of the WHO, COVID-19 restrictions and the mask diplomacy will be addressed as the main issues of discussion in the first part. As the lack of cooperation is also relevant for the vaccination against the pandemic, in the second part, it will be analysed why states got into a vaccine race in spite of the interdependence of vaccine producers. In the last part of this paper, the role of the bipolarity between the United States (U.S.) and China during the pandemic will be examined by using the realist theory of IR.

### **Covid-19 Restrictions, Mask Diplomacy and International Cooperation**

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused by “a virus that does not respect jurisdictional borders” (Everett et al., 2021, p. 1) turned into a global crisis that could be resolved through the collective action of international actors, most states preferred to take unilateral restrictive measures for the sake of their own national interests. Hence, “the transboundary mutual challenge” posed by the pandemic has inflamed the great power competition between China and the U.S. Conversely, the growing tension between China and the U.S. worsened the crisis. The U.S. that had been the largest contributor to the budget of the WHO with its 15% share decided to halt its funding on the reason that the WHO was siding with China. Their rivalry then took the form of a “blame game” and constrained the efficiency

of the international organizations. While the Trump administration alleged that the virus spread from a lab in Wuhan, Chinese authorities asserted that the U.S. soldiers brought it with them from outside (Alhammedi, 2022, p. 157). Furthermore, the WHO has proved relatively ineffective in fighting the pandemic due to the conflicting interests of its members. In addition, regional organisations such as the EU and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) were not able to coordinate the mutual efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic (Basrur and Kliem, 2021, p. 7).

To elaborate the matter beyond the Chinese-American rivalry and the resultant blame game, the close of borders and export prohibitions might exemplify the failure of attempts to provide international cooperation. As the spread of the Coronavirus accelerated, many states decided to close their borders one by one in order to fulfil their needs first, and the most distinctive example in that context was related to the measures on the movement of people and goods. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO) (2020), 80 countries and separate customs territories have introduced export prohibitions or restrictions in the beginning of the global health crisis for a wide range of products focusing on medical supplies (e.g. facemasks and protective shields), pharmaceuticals and medical equipment (e.g. ventilators) as well as other goods such as foodstuff or toilet papers. After securing enough supply of these essential goods, such restrictions seem to be used as a diplomatic tool in world politics.

As an example of this ‘mask diplomacy’, China became eager to provide masks and medical equipment to European countries when the epicentre of the pandemic shifted from China to Europe where the virus began to spread rapidly. For instance, China aimed to boost its image in Italy that was anxious for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Wong 2020). Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Serbia, and Spain were among the other European receivers of Chinese aid (Qi et al., 2022, p. 206). Moreover, Chinese ambassadors’ personal participation at the hand-over ceremonies in the countries that accepted Chinese donations (or purchased Chinese medical supplies) demonstrated China’s efforts to improve its image (Kowalski, 2021, p. 214). It was regarded by the EU as an intention to build a rapprochement with Europe at a time when collaboration between Brussels and Washington was poor (Euractiv, 2020). China was also ready to play the role of a “benevolent world leader” providing medical support to many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America through its global health diplomacy (Gauttam et al., 2020, 319).

Furthermore, the export volume of nonwoven, which is an essential component to produce facemasks, classified under 56.03 customs tariff code, increased only %15 from 16.4 billion dollars to 19 billion dollars in 2020 compared with the previous year (TradeMap, 2021). Whereas Chinese exports in the same product rose 62,1% in the same period, either other countries’ exports increased slightly or some countries’ exports including industrialized ones like Germany decreased (TradeMap, 2021). The lack of expected increase in the export of nonwoven in producing countries except for China might indicate a lack of cooperation or at least its use as a diplomatic tool since manufacturers chose to preserve the domestic supply capacity first. In other words, states have given the priority to their own security of supply of the essential goods to combat the virus before pondering about fighting the coronavirus at global level. Thereafter states like China where these goods are in abundant even provided aid in order to consolidate its position within the current balance of power in line with their own national interest.

Morality is another dimension of debates about international cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was questioned, for instance for the U.S., whether “preparing for and responding to a pandemic is a zero-sum game” requiring competition over scarce resources although such competition was the way the U.S. operated in response to the pandemic. It was emphasized that strengthening a multilateral response system would benefit all parties

(Inglesby, 2020, p. 87). However, this dilemma supports the argument that states tend to put the moral concerns aside so as not to compromise on their own security. It is in line with the realist premise that states might ignore morality in the anarchic world order since “self-interest overcomes morality principles” (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). In that context, Morgenthau (1949) distinguishes the role of morality for individuals and states and asserts that foreign policy is built upon the national interest. He contends that self-preservation is the ultimate obligation of the state whereas individuals may behave in generosity even at the expense of his/her own interest. On the other hand, it is emphasized that states often can behave morally like individuals and international aid outpours in the wake of political and national disasters (Donnelly, 2013, p. 50). Accordingly, states can support international aid and collaboration during global crises as China delivered masks and medical equipment to several countries. However, states do it in accordance with their self-interest and always prioritizes their own national security and interest.

Beyond the issue of morality, the availability of norms and institutions that have a critical role in the world order might be expected to enhance the cooperation at global level during the COVID-19 outbreak. Accordingly, the institutionalist liberal theory in IR refers to the set of rules that govern state behaviour in specific policy areas as “institutions” and believes that anarchy can be mitigated through international regimes that can constrain state behaviour by formalizing the expectations of parties and institutions. Thus, they have the role of encouraging the cooperative habits, monitoring compliance and enforcement where possible (Burchill, 2013, p. 67). It also assumes that this legalization of institutions reduces uncertainty and transaction costs (Keohane, 2012, p. 112). Without doubt, the WTO is one of the most important international institutions regarding global trade in goods. In fact, in the framework of relevant legal rules, the WTO has called parties to notify trade-related COVID-19 measures, created a platform to provide trade-related information, and thus enhanced transparency during the crisis in the area of world trade. However, it is also evident that international institutions have not provided the continuity of rule-based free movement of people and goods during the pandemic.

It should not be neglected that the realist motives might have little effect on the restrictions that the states put into practice in their own countries or at borders during the crisis. In that regard, it is emphasized that the influence of positivism on public health authorities was prevalent in the initial period of the pandemic. The responses of many EU members to COVID-19 were in line with the opinions of public health experts who assisted political decision makers (Correia and Willis, 2021). However, in 2020, the WHO advised against the application of travel or trade restrictions to countries experiencing COVID-19 outbreak on the grounds that these kinds of restrictions during public health emergencies were ineffective in most situations and may interrupt medical aid and technical support. Moreover, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the most important pillar of the WTO, prohibits any quantitative restrictions on both imports and exports under Article IX. Although Article IX of the GATT exempts export prohibitions or restrictions temporarily applied to prevent or relieve critical shortages of foodstuffs or other products essential to the exporting contracting party from this prohibition, the scope of this legal norm is vague. As Bhala (2005, p. 370) points out, ‘other product’ in this provision depends on the Member state concerns and is probably self-judging. Moreover, Börzel and Zürn (2021, p. 285) argues that rule-based multilateralism has failed to effectively address crisis like COVID-19 due to the lack of problem-solving capacity and distribution of power under international institutions. This consequence is observable regarding the restrictions applied by national states in line with their national interests and security.

The moral dimension of the health crisis is experienced not only at global level but also at the EU level, which is inspired from an idea of European solidarity. After the spread of the

outbreak of coronavirus across Europe, the health ministers of the EU member states came together to coordinate their policies, yet the free movement of people was abolished due to individual uncoordinated decisions taken by European countries instead of taking preventive measures at the EU level. Some countries like Germany even blocked the export of protective medical equipment, which not only conflicting with the idea of European solidarity but also violating sacrosanct domestic market rules (Tkachuk, 2020, p.212-213). Although the pandemic was an opportunity for the EU to “demonstrate the value of multilateralism” and invest in the Global South, it was perceived as the actor that hoarded COVID-19 vaccinations (Balfour et al., 2022).

When Italy, the most affected country at the beginning of the crisis, asked the EU member states to supply medical equipment, they did not send it to ensure their own supplies for their own hospitals, patients, and medical staff although none of them was suffering as badly as Italy (Braw, 2020). Moreover, Austria, Malta and Slovenia closed their borders to Italy when it reported 168 deaths in a day (on 11 March 2020) as the hardest-hit European country (Van Beusekom, 2020). While European countries were reluctant to help Italy and unable to activate the Civil Protection Mechanism (CPM) based on EU members’ volunteer help, on the other hand, China, Cuba and Russia responded Italy’s request in late February. Furthermore, millions of health masks sent from Sweden to Italy and Spain were blocked by France (Ocak and Erhan, 2021, pp. 28-29). This was exactly what realist argument in IR would expect. This is because, the EU member states prioritize their self-interest and security by leaving aside the EU solidarity and the EU single market rules at supranational level.

In short, the failure of the states to cooperate in this case brought the assumptions of realism about human nature and international system to the fore again. As realism focuses on egoism and anarchy, it is emphasized by realists that the quest for power and security dominates international relations (Donnelly, 2013, p.32). Accordingly, Morgenthau (1952, p. 972) argues that the national state as a political organization aims to protect “the national interest” regarded as “the last word in world politics”. In accordance with their interest-based approach, realists hold a pessimistic view about the prospects for international cooperation and the international institutions’ capability to mitigate the effects of anarchy (Grieco 1990, 27). Therefore, institutions are regarded by realists as “a reflection of the distribution of power in the world” (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 7) This assumption has been verified during the COVID-19 pandemic as countries chose to close their borders for the sake of their individual national interest and the availability of international organizations could not provide easing of national measures in order to reach the cooperation at global level.

### **Covid-19 Vaccination and International Cooperation**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination has been thought to be one of the most effective measures against the spread of the virus both on national and global scales. Accordingly, collaboration was required among the international actors in the fields of vaccine development, production and distribution. The belief on the need of solidarity among nations created an expectation for efficient allocation of resources, share of knowledge and experience among vaccine developers, and ultimately equitable distribution of the vaccines. However, trust in global cooperation has gradually eroded during the pandemic since states were able to collaborate in neither the invention nor distribution of the vaccines. It is therefore needed to remind again the assumptions of realism in IR. As Fay (2021, p. 212) argues, vaccine nationalism refers to key premises of classical realism particularly focusing on self-interest, concerns for power and a lack of obligation to the international community, and implies that international initiatives regarding vaccine distribution remain at the mercy of great powers. Therefore, vaccination has been regarded as an element of power by the states rather than a global response against the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Vaccine Development and Production**

Within the framework of vaccine development, it should firstly be recalled that the United Nations (UN) and its institutions including the WHO provided significant alerts to the international actors regarding the necessity to pool together scientific knowledge and experience. In addition, a number of countries came forward to address vaccine development (Baier, 2020, p. 233-234). However, these efforts within the framework of international institutions seem to remain limited. It was even argued that the WHO declared the pandemic (six weeks) late since it had already spread to world by March 11, 2020 (Silk, 2021). In the end, different vaccinations have been developed around the world instead of a globally developed one invented through global collaboration. Eleven vaccines have been granted emergency use authorization by the WHO (2022b) so far and the number of vaccines in clinical development is 161 as of 27 May 2022 (WHO, 2022c).

Although simultaneous development of different vaccines might imply the lack of global cooperation, on the other hand, reliance on a single vaccine could make receivers dependent on a certain manufacturer or limit access to alternative vaccines with a higher efficiency rate. Therefore, it was understandable that states with enough resources to develop their own vaccination programs would not prefer to rely on any vaccine developed by others. It indicated that states' concerns about the possibility of dependence on "foreign vaccines" tested the liberal premises on the value of interdependence. Liberal theory in IR focuses on the role of closer interdependence and assumes that interdependence enhances international cooperation within a commonly agreed economic and political framework (Burchill, 2013, p. 66). In that context, the existence of global supply chains which created a web of interdependence among international actors was regarded as a factor increasing the likelihood of the emergence of an enforceable international vaccine agreement.

Since inputs necessary to produce vaccines might be imported from countries that do not manufacture their own vaccines, the resultant interdependence between countries consisting of the vaccine supply chain will not imperil the opportunities for cooperation (Bollyky and Bown, 2020, 106). On the other hand, it is also emphasized that the level of interdependence is comparatively low and insufficient to generate high levels of cooperation in case of Covid-19 pandemic. It is because the survival of the states is not under major threat (Basrur and Kliem, 2021, p. 7). In fact, states could achieve cooperation against the COVID-19 with specialization if they brought their economic and technical resources together. However, Waltz (1979, pp. 106-107) argues that each state tries to protect itself against others in self-help system where each state worries about being dependent on others. Therefore, it sounds quite understandable for states to follow their own vaccination development programs rather than cooperation which could make them dependent on others' resources.

Another factor determining states' approaches to vaccine production was related to the economic aspects of the crisis. The economic burden of the health crisis might explain why states have found themselves in a "vaccine race" for inventing the vaccine. In that regard, one of the primary motives for this race is to increase their relative power due to their ability to reopen their economy before others (Fay, 2021, p. 208). Accordingly, vaccination has been regarded as a tool to reach relative gains against others, and a diplomatic tool that facilitates power maximization in international area. Hence, states do not even hesitate to denigrate other vaccines. For instance, the US alleged that China and Russia were spreading anti-Western vaccine disinformation saying that the vaccines developed in Western-origin vaccine development programs are ineffective and unhelpful against the virus (The Guardian, 2021).

## **Vaccine Distribution**

Although scientists have collaborated at the international level on the development of

vaccines, “military and security involvement in vaccine programs” complicated cooperation on vaccine distribution (Pannu and Barry, 2021). Accordingly, after various vaccines began to be produced by different countries, the risk of dependence on a particular vaccine manufacturer was replaced by the fear of delayed access to the vaccines. As a result, the vaccines have not been distributed to all nations in a just way. Although there were some initiatives such as COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) as a global access facility which aimed to ensure that all countries have access enough COVID-19 vaccines, the scope and efficacy of this kind of initiatives to achieve equitable access for COVID-19 vaccinations have still been viewed with suspicion considering the limited resources (Fay, 2020). Even before candidate vaccines were approved by international health authorities, some countries had begun to compete for early access to vaccines. It indicated that in the absence of global coordination of allocation, leaders would adopt “my country first” approach and prioritize their own citizens. Poorer countries would have access to vaccines after large numbers of people were vaccinated in manufacturing states (Bollyky and Bown, 2020, pp. 96-99).

It is emphasized that less than 20 countries have “the sophisticated technological capacity to produce vaccines” and its inputs. Moreover, high-income countries have purchased large amounts of Covid-19 vaccines and dominated the demand as well as supply sides for vaccines. As a result, 80% of people have received at least one dose of a vaccine in high-income countries by February 2022 while this rate has been fewer than 10% in low-income countries (Gill and Ruta, 2022). A study citing a group of 13 countries as the “vaccine club” found that they were both the main source and destination of exports of key vaccine ingredients. It means that vaccine producers import key ingredients from other vaccine producers (Everett et al., 2021, p. 2). Not surprisingly, vaccines became “national security assets” and “diplomatic bargaining chips” that were made available only for favourite partners or allies. While developed countries followed nationalist political agendas or attempted to benefit from “the soft power of vaccines”, low-income countries ultimately became victims of the unequitable distribution of vaccines (Pannu and Barry, 2021).

For instance, Russia that began to export Sputnik V vaccine in late 2020 was accused of playing EU members off against each other since Hungary and Slovakia signed deals with Russia for vaccine supply although European Medicine Agency (EMA) had not approved the use of the Russian vaccine (Connolly, 2021). While Hungary was eager to highlight the inadequacies of the European vaccination program, Slovakian Prime Minister Matovič was forced to resign in March 2021 after a secret deal with Russia to purchase two million Sputnik V doses (Moreno et al., 2021, 15). Furthermore, several non-EU countries in Europe including Albania, Belarus, Moldova, San Marino, and Serbia authorized the use of Sputnik V (Kovalev, 2021). On the other hand, it should be reminded that following the informal initiative of joint vaccine procurement led by France and Germany in April 2020, a supranational framework within the EU emerged in June, and thus the Commission had the authority to negotiate with vaccine makers. However, the Commission failed to provide leadership for cooperation on vaccine procurement due to the lack of national support and institutional capacity (Deters and Zardo, 2022, pp. 6-10).

It was also argued that countries that were able to produce vaccines distribute them as a return on their soft-power and China provided free vaccines in line with its geopolitical interests (Fetahu, 2021). Despite China’s vaccine diplomacy had a limited role in increasing its geopolitical power and promoting its international image, it successfully used vaccines as a nationalistic tool in domestic politics (Zhang and Jamali 2022). Besides great powers in the world, other countries like Serbia used vaccines for political aims and distributed vaccines to ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo without any permission of Republic of Kosovo, which is not recognized as a sovereign state by Serbia (Fetahu, 2021). This shows how vaccines that are

essential against COVID-19 are used as a tool of power for the sake of countries' self-interest. Mearsheimer (1994, pp. 12-13) argues that states worry about relative gains which means each side not only considers its individual gain but also compares others' gain in balance of powers when considering cooperation and this shackles cooperative efforts. Therefore, in this anarchic world system, there is no surprise states have preferred to increase their powers against others and regarded the vaccination as a tool for power maximization. Therefore, vaccination is used as a tool of power and this has made collaboration difficult accordingly.

Another issue regarding the distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations is that other countries particularly developing ones are dependent on the vaccines produced by developed countries due to the intellectual property rights (IPRs). States could resort to a waiver in the framework of The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights and ease the IPR restrictions but they failed to do it and this can result in a failure of liberalized multilateralism (Gupta et al., 2021, p.5). In other words, liberalized multilateralism does not help international community so that developing and least-developed countries can reach the vaccine technology. The states who have enough sources for vaccinations seem likely reluctant to contribute to international cooperation with regards to the contribution of vaccinations as they see vaccination as a tool for power.

### **Bipolarity, Alliances and International Cooperation**

In the world order where anarchy prevails, states seek the ways of balancing the competitors' power and search possible allies to do it. Although the balance of power doctrine in IR is used frequently in modern times, it can be traced back to Platonic argument in Ancient Greece (Gordon, 2013, p. 63). In fact, most structural realists accept that bipolarity creates a more peaceful environment while multipolarity is often portrayed as a risky structure. Accordingly, Waltz (2000, p. 6) claims that bipolarity is more desired than the competition in multipolar system that is more complicated with uncertainties about the comparative capabilities of states and strength of various coalitions. Similarly, Mearsheimer (1994, p. 14) argued that bipolar distribution of power provided the key to stability during the Cold War. The bipolarity, however, seems likely to affect the collaboration possibilities against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The bipolarity between the two big powers, China and the U.S. has deepened the crisis, and they blamed each other rather than seek ways to cooperate. As Drezner (2020) pointed out that China and the U.S. have resorted to different approaches to COVID-19 crisis and the disease has not caused rapid shifts in distribution of power in the world order. Whereas China has pledged funds to the WHO for research and development against Coronavirus and has tried to be the global supplier of key global public goods, the U.S. took minimum level of preventive actions during the early stages of the pandemic. As soon as COVID-19 had begun to spread across the world, the anti-Chinese propaganda was deployed by the U.S. that blamed China for the emergence of Coronavirus and spread of the pandemic. Thus, the U.S. aimed to make alliance with other Western countries for spreading anti-Chinese campaign (Catone, 2020). It seems that bipolarity and the power balance between the U.S. and China have been significant and observable during COVID-19 health crisis.

Moreover, the realist theory in IR contends that both allies and adversaries might have common or competing interests and relative gains considerations might be muted among allies against common enemy or competing interests might even hinder balancing against it (Donnelly, 2013, pp. 46-47). This appears in the collaboration of Russia and China as well as competition of them in certain regions. Accordingly, while Russia and China as strategic partners cooperate in vaccine development and spread the rumours about COVID-19 originating as a U.S. biological weapon or from other Western countries as well as vaccine



scepticism against US vaccines, they are in competition for vaccine markets in traditional territories of Russian influence in Central Asia (Wishnick, 2021). This shows the importance of distribution of power in the anarchic system of international area and the fact that states use appropriate policies in line with their self-interest. Therefore, states make coalitions and collaboration in line with their self-interest. However, this polarization in the world order makes it difficult to collaborate at global level against the COVID-19 health crisis in the end.

Furthermore, the polarization in the world order has hindered the effectiveness of international institutions and any effective international health cooperation under an institutionalized system. For instance, it might explain why the U.S. has accused WHO of being “China-centric” (Catone, 2020, p. 65). In fact, institutions can reflect the distribution of power in the world and be based on self-interested calculations of big powers (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 7). When the big powers compete each other, the function of international institutions including the rules and norms might remain limited. Additionally, Chorev (2020) points out that political calculations as a part of multilateral game are reflected at the issue of U.S.’s attitude towards the WHO to foster or at least protect its position. This shows that the power-related concerns between the U.S. and China have profoundly affected the role of multilateral institutions. Consequently, the bipolarity and competition between great powers in the world system have played a significant role for collaboration efforts against the global health crisis. Although bipolarity is a desired situation from the point of structural realists’ view in IR for the sake of peace and power balance, it has challenged the possibility of a joint collaboration.

### **Conclusion**

As soon as the Coronavirus had begun to spread across the world, states decided to impose unilateral trade and travel restrictions as well as border closure measures. In so doing, they have prioritized their self-interests and security in the anarchic world order and left the concerns of other nations aside as realists would expect pessimistically from human-nature. Although states have assisted other countries against the spread of the virus by sharing epidemic intelligence and gene sequencing data, the implementation of measures and restrictions was more urgent. Accordingly, this paper analyses the causes and consequences of the lack of cooperation at desired level in international area during the COVID-19 in the light of realist IR arguments. It is concluded that states’ responses to the global health crisis seem to prove the realist assumptions in this case as international actors could not cooperate successfully on the development, production, and distribution of the vaccines.

In addition, the availability of international norms and institutions has not had significant effects on states’ behaviour regarding restrictions and international vaccine cooperation. It would be an overstatement to assert that institutions have been useless as they have provided a platform for transparency that combines information, actors and ideas. However, their role seems to be limited for international cooperation as even the WHO itself became a subject of competition between the U.S. and China. Furthermore, it was evident that states as the main actors of international politics have taken national restrictions by leaving aside international or even supranational norms and institutions. In this case, Italy and Spain were presented as the victims of the lack of the European solidarity in the initial stages of the crisis. Naturally, the role of international institutions has remained limited in such a competitive environment that required rapid reactions in face of an unexpected global health crisis.

In this paper, vaccination is considered as an element of power since states preferred to develop their own vaccine programs in order to decrease their dependence on others and to increase their power. Thus, the concern of relative gains has adversely affected the prospects for cooperation in the area of vaccination development and production. In addition, the uneven distribution of Covid-19 vaccines was also a clear indication of the lack of international

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cooperation. Lastly, it was underlined that the bipolarity between the US and China has also remained during the health crisis and affected states' behaviours in a negative way. In short, it seems likely that similar cases will test the realist assumptions about international cooperation since there are allegations that food is weaponized like viruses or vaccines by some international actors in the first months of 2022. Moreover, the imminent dangers of global warming and climate change might reveal whether states will squander the opportunity for international cooperation again in the near future.

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