

## MULTILATERALISM AND THE QUESTION OF U.S. LEADERSHIP AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### COVID-19 Salgınında Çok Taraflılık ve ABD Liderliđi Sorunu

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#### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had major implications on the global economy, international politics and societies. Even though the pandemic is a global issue, states have turned inwards, proposed national solutions and have failed to coordinate a global response. The United States, as the predominant global power with its leading material capabilities has been expected to lead collective international effort and to solve collective action problems during the current pandemic. However, the Trump administration has been showing a lack of global leadership. Drawing on theories of hegemonic leadership and Hegemonic Stability Theory, this article focuses on the global role has been played by the United States during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas classical realism emphasizes that national interests are determinant of states' foreign policies, dominant powers have responsibilities beyond their nations. The pandemic demands the dominant power to bear the main responsibility and lead a collective response to mitigate impacts of COVID-19. Based on this claim, this paper argues that U.S President Donald Trump's America First approach failed the United States to commit to multilateralism and to organize a collective action in response to the pandemic which in turn has put U.S. global leadership at stake.

#### Keywords:

Multilateralism,  
International  
Governance, Foreign  
Policy, U.S. Global  
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19

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#### Özet

COVID-19 tüm dünyayı etkiledi ve sınırları dahi dikkate almadan küresel olarak yayıldı. Pandeminin küresel ekonomi, uluslararası politika ve toplumlar üzerinde büyük etkileri vardır. Bu süreç, küresel bir sorun olarak karřımıza çıksada, devletler ie döndüler, ulusal çözümler önerdiler ve küresel bir tepkiyi koordine etmekte başarısız oldular. Potansiyel güç kapasitesi olarak uluslararası sistemdeki en güçlü devlet olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin pandemi sürecinde kolektif uluslararası çabalara önderlik etmesi ve bunun yanı sıra kolektif eylem sorununu da çözmesi beklenmektedir. Fakat Trump yönetimi küresel liderlik rolünü yerine getirememiştir. Egemen liderlik teorileri ve Egemen İstikrar Teorisi'nden yola çıkarak, bu çalışma Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin COVID-19 sürecindeki küresel rolüne odaklanmaktadır. Her ne kadar klasik realizm ulusal çıkarların devletlerin dış politikalarının belirleyici unsuru olduğunu belirtse de, egemen güçlerin kendi sınırlarının ötesinde sorumlulukları vardır. Pandemi süreci, egemen gücün ana sorumluluđunu üstlenmesini ve COVID-19'un etkilerini azaltmak için kolektif bir yanıtta liderlik etmesini gerektirmektedir. Bu iddiaya dayanarak, bu çalışma ABD Başkanı Donald Trump'ın Önce Amerika (America First) doktrininin dış politikada çok taraflılıđa bađlı kalmasını ve kolektif bir eylemi organize etmesini başarısız kılmıştır, bu da Amerikan küresel liderliđini riske atmaktadır.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Çok Taraflılık, Küresel  
Yönetişim, Dış  
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## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in China in November 2019 and its rapid spread across the World in the first months of 2020 have increased the concerns in international community on the potential global impact of it. Especially after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic in March 2020, multilateral response and collective action on a global scale have been widely discussed.

The scale and depth of COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest global crisis of this century, is enormous. The pandemic has had global socio-economic and political challenges and has unprecedented socio-economic impacts around the World. The pandemic has hurt the global as well as local economies in many ways and has led to global unemployment, decline in supply and demand and the reduction in value of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of many countries. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted international relations and politics with its severe effects on global governance, international cooperation, great power rivalry, diplomatic relations and prospects on peace and conflict. Even though some regions have had suffered by those challenges more severe than others, still the pandemic has revealed that the world is so interconnected and multilateral means should become vital to overcome existing threat facing the globe. Yet, as the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated "The COVID-19 pandemic is a tragic reminder of how deeply connected we are. The virus knows no borders and is a quintessential global challenge. Combatting it requires us to work together as one human family" (United Nations, 2020a). Global damages by COVID-19 demonstrate the critical need for international cooperation to recover together, and the United States should claim responsibilities to lead such efforts. As Kindleberger (1973) posited in his public goods argument, later called as Hegemonic Stability Theory, international crisis needs a hegemon, which he meant leadership. In liberal international order that was created by the United States in devastation of the World War II (WWII), the United States played a leading role what Ikenberry (2011) calls a "liberal Leviathan" in forming and maintaining international institutions. Since assuming power, Trump has been challenging liberal international order and traditional leadership role that the United States has been playing since the end of WWII. Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Trump administration has been unwilling to assume responsibility for leading multilateral cooperation and collective response even though the need for an enhanced multilateralism is as vital today as at any time of the interconnected world.

The article argues that the Trump administration's American First approach to COVID-19 has underestimated the importance of international collaboration and has failed to lead a global response, hence has undermined U.S. global leadership and influence in international arena. Ethics of research and publication were followed in this study, which does not require permission from the ethics committee and / or legal / special permission. This article proceeds by first examining main pillars of hegemony and leadership as well as possible foreign policy strategies of the dominant power within the international system by focusing specifically on multilateralism. Second, the role played by the United States in emergence of liberal international order after WWII and the changing role of U.S. global leadership will be discussed. Third and final section will focus on American global response to the COVID-19 by examining the Trump administration's America First approach and evaluating its effect on the lack of collective response to combat the current global health crisis.

## **2. Hegemony and Leadership**

### **2.1. Hegemony**

Since the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the United States as the only superpower has led scholars to pursue the link between hegemonic governance and stable cooperation in the international system. By the mid-1980s, explanations of regimes become mentioned with explanations of international cooperation more generally. Basically, regime theory focuses on institutional factors affecting international cooperation, more specifically international organizations. Krasner (1982, p. 186) defines international regimes as “implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations” and argues that “regimes must be understood as something more than temporary arrangements that change with every shift in power or interest”.

Regime theory is accepted as a contribution in understanding the relationship between the international political structure and the possibilities for international cooperation. In particular, a well-established IR theory- Hegemonic Stability Theory, emphasizes the link between the formation and maintenance of regimes to the existence of a hegemonic power, which leads to the provision of public goods in turn stabilizing the system. Accordingly, the stability of the system can be assured only if hegemon bears the costs of public goods. Hegemon has the ability to provide public goods since he has predominant military, political and economic capabilities. If a hegemon does not exist, then the cost of providing these international public goods would be too high. The theory also emphasizes the role of the hegemon in generating cooperation and ensuring international order by creating international organizations. Accordingly, the hegemon has sufficient resources to enforce and maintain international institutions (Gilpin, 1981; Keohane, 1984; Kindleberger, 1973). The concept of hegemony, by definition, refers to the dominant power in the system who possesses a predominance of power capabilities -military, economic, political, and institutional capabilities- and who also be able and willing to lead others within the international system (Layne, 2007).

### **2.2. Leadership**

For Kindleberger, hegemony is the leadership position of one country over other countries in the international system. Nabers (2010, p. 931) argues that “the connection between leadership and hegemony is one of co-constitution. Leadership is necessarily based on hegemony, while hegemony can only be sustained through leadership”. The leadership is likely to be either benevolent or coercive. Benevolent leaders bear a disproportionately larger share of providing the public goods while coercive leaders force other states in the system to contribute to the cost of providing public goods<sup>1</sup> (Lake, 1993).

In addition to benevolent and coercive types of foreign policy strategies, the dominant or hegemon power can choose to act unilaterally or multilaterally. Interactions among states may take different forms to solve common problems and safeguard national and global interests. As

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<sup>1</sup> Different types of leadership have been identified in the literature. For a detailed analysis on the leadership typology, see Young (1991).

Martín (2006, p. 768) stresses "states can reach decisions through genuinely multilateral decisions, a series of bilateral agreements, or the imposition of decisions on a unilateral basis". Unilateralism refers to "a formulation of policy without collective input" (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier, 2011, p. 184). A hegemonic power may choose to act unilaterally to accomplish its objectives. The norm of multilateralism has been one of the main elements of U.S.-led liberal international order which was established in the aftermath of WWII<sup>2</sup>. What is meant by multilateralism? In general, multilateralism involves cooperative activity and as Caporaso (1992, p. 603) puts it "not all cooperation is multilateral, but all multilateral activities include cooperation". Robert Keohane (1990, p. 731) presents a useful definition of multilateralism in his article by stating that multilateralism is "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions". In his definition of multilateralism, Keohane refers to institutional arrangements involving states, and defines multilateral institutions as "multilateral arrangements with persistent sets of rules; they can be distinguished from other forms of multilateralism, such as ad hoc meetings and short-term arrangements to solve particular problems" (Keohane, 1990, pp. 732-733). For Ruggie (1993, p. 11), by contrast, multilateralism is "an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct". His definition of multilateralism consists of three principles: (1) indivisibility, (2) nondiscrimination, or generalized organizing principles, and (3) diffuse reciprocity. Ruggie's conception of multilateralism differs from Keohane in terms of its emphasis on generalized application of rules to all participants without discrimination. Multilateralism, as a foreign policy strategy can refer to an activity, a cooperation strategy or principle. Guterres puts it "We need a networked multilateralism, strengthening coordination among all global multilateral organizations, with regional ones able to make their vital contributions; and an inclusive multilateralism, based on deep interaction with civil society, businesses, local and regional authorities and other stakeholders, where the voice of youth is decisive in shaping our future." (United Nations, 2020b).

### **3. Liberal International Order and US Global Leadership**

In the aftermath of WWII, the United States emerged as a great power and became one of the major players in international politics. During this period, the United States led the creation of liberal international order organized around alliances, shared rules and norms, security and economic cooperation and institutions. "Order" is defined by Mearsheimer (2019) as "an organized group of international institutions that help govern the interactions among the member states". According to Mearsheimer, an order can involve security, economic and multifaceted institutions. Ikenberry (2018, p. 16) also lays out key founding characteristics of the liberal international order and summarizes them as "it was built around multilateral trade....

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<sup>2</sup> Ikenberry (2003, p. 534) distinguishes multilateralism from other types of interstate relations by stating that "First, because it [multilateralism] entails the coordination of relations among a group of states, it can be contrasted with bilateral, "hub and spoke", and imperial arrangements. Second, the terms of a given relationship are defined by agreed-upon rules and principles—and sometimes by organizations—so multilateralism can be contrasted with interactions based on ad hoc bargaining or straightforward power politics. Third, multilateralism entails some reduction in policy autonomy, since the choices and actions of the participating states are—at least to some degree—constrained by the agreed-upon rules and principles".

American liberal hegemony was also defined by its commitment to a managed open world economy.... The postwar liberal order was built around new and permanent international institutions. There was a special emphasis on relations among the western liberal democracies". As a great power, the United States pursued a multilateral foreign policy, formed political and military alliances, and led the formation of international organizations (Keohane and Nye, 1985). The common security challenge of Cold War dynamics led the United States, European countries and Japan to facilitate cooperation among them. U.S. multilateral foreign policy was reflected in alliances in East Asia, the creation of Marshall Plan, the United Nations (UN), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance (Holloway, 2000). Some of those organizations were established to promote the United States economic and security interests while others were to prevent global conflict and to promote global peace and prosperity. Despite the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the United States kept following multilateralist foreign policy (in some means unilateralist actions) in the immediate Post-Cold War period. The United States led to the formation and expansion of regional and international institutions such as the expansion of NATO along with the formation of World Trade Organization (WTO) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Western alliance system went global under U.S. leadership (Stokes, 2018). September 11 changed foreign policy strategies of the George W. Bush administration fundamentally. In the aftermath of September 11, the United States under the Bush administration has adopted a more unilateral approach. The Bush administration chose to act alone and rejected to accept institutional constraints and other widely accepted norms in its 'war on terrorism' (Ikenberry, 2001). Moreover, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of a new global balance of power, and the United States has become unrivaled and unprecedented sole power. In this new unipolar international system structure, the United States had achieved global hegemony and felt less constrained in its foreign policy strategies (Ikenberry, 2003).

Today, the diffusion of power is changing, so the international dynamics. Despite the growing international competition, the United States remains a powerful country as the world's most dominant economic and military power while China and Russia emerge as rising powers. Hegemony requires both dominance and leadership while U.S. global leadership has eroded gradually. U.S. scholars of International Relations claim that the election of President Trump has played a major role in weakening and destabilizing the U.S.-led post-war liberal order (Allison, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). Scholars have been expressing their deep concerns about the Trump administration's foreign policy route. Ikenberry (2018, p. 7) claims that "for the first time since the 1930s, the US has elected a president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism" and adds that the "liberal international order is in crisis". U.S.-led liberal international order emerged over the Cold War years, and the United States bore variety of responsibilities by providing hegemonic leadership including running the order, becoming the provider of public goods, forming the rules and institutions of the order, and fostering security cooperation.

The Trump Administration has been making cost-benefit analysis of maintaining the role of hegemonic stabilizer and arguing that the costs of this role outweigh the benefits (Stokes, 2018). The Trump administration's foreign policy agenda has demonstrated a decline of U.S. benevolent leadership which has been providing public goods and maintaining global stability since the end of WWII. Trump's America First vision of U.S. foreign policy has reflected in his

speeches and actions. In his foreign policy speech in 2016, Trump represented a challenge to multilateralism, and claimed that "We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism .... I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down" (The New York Times, 2016). After he assumed the power, in his speech before the UN General Assembly in 2018, President said "We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism." (The White House, 2018). In contrast to his predecessor, Barack Obama, who put greater emphasis on U.S. multilateral engagement in the international system; the direction of American foreign policy with the Trump administration has taken a more unilateral approach. The Trump administration's unilateral approach to foreign policy has affected global unity and coordination to deal with the current global health emergency.

#### **4. U.S. Global Response to COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about the discussions for global cooperation, and its effects have demonstrated that challenges caused by the outbreak demand multilateral cooperation to overcome its impacts. The importance of collective action through multilateral efforts of states has been highlighted by multilateral platforms, including the United Nations, and the European Union. However, multilateral coordination among states has been very weak and multilateral organizations failed for developing a collective response. Forums such as the European Union, G-7, and G-20 have gathered; however, they did not take decisive steps. Based on the global role and responsibilities of the United States, The Trump administration has been expected to collaborate and lead the global response to combat COVID-19. In past international or regional health crises, the United States assumed the role of global leader and responded quickly- sometimes through international organizations while directly in others. In 2003, for instance, the Bush administration inaugurated one of the biggest global health initiatives, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). With this initiative, \$80 billion covered some 50 countries (Ingram, 2007). The United States has also participated in UN programs related to Ebola epidemic in 2014 (The White House, 2014). But, the current worldwide emergency clearly shows that the Trump administration has failed to develop a quick global response in contrast to the past crisis.

First, the America First approach largely influences U.S. lack of contribution for a global response. The rules-based liberal international order is built around international institutions and alliances; however, the order has entered a state of decline especially with the Trump administration's contesting the multilateral system by claiming that the system is stacked against the United States. Even before he assumed the office, in the campaigning speech Trump drew attention on U.S. defense burden in international order and criticized unfair burden-sharing by emphasizing that "allies are not paying their fair share" and "they must contribute toward their financial, political and human costs of our tremendous security burden" (The New York Times, 2017). Trump highlighted that the administration prioritizes the interests of US citizens and disengaged from many international organizations and treaties. The Trump administration has resisted the creation of international organizations and withdrew from various multilateral platforms, including the Paris climate accords, the Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights with Iran, the Intermediate -Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia (Smith, 2018). Trump also denied the validity of organizations including World Trade Organization and

recently World Health Organization. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Trump has kept focusing on the United States and has emphasized that his priority is to protect Americans from the health crisis. Clearly, Trump has treated the battle against the pandemic as an international competition among states.

The neorealist theory of international relations which focuses on the effects of anarchy on state behaviors can offer some explanations for Trump's unilateral COVID-19 actions. According to the theory, the absence of a central authority to regulate state behaviors leads international system to be anarchic. In the absence of a legitimate, capable central authority, states must take care of themselves, and no state can count on another state for its security for threats (in this case COVID-19) (Waltz, 1979) Based on this perspective, states operate in a self-help rather than a cooperative system which leaves little space for international organizations. However, as neoliberal school of thought argues, some threats demand collective action as governments cannot solve the challenges of threat alone (Ikenberry, 2003; Nye, 2019a). As Keohane (1984) argues states sometimes do cooperate, and those are deep and strong patterns of cooperation. Accordingly, international organizations should be seen as significant entities for shaping international relations. Nye (2019b) also argues that globalization creates new issues in world politics, and these issues increase world-wide interdependence which may require global unity. Rather than calling for global unity and leading an international response through international organizations to combat current global health crisis, Trump announced that WHO 'failed in its basic duty' over its response to the pandemic. Trump said that he ordered to halt funding to the UN health agency which constitutes roughly %20 of the organization's budget (BBC, 2020a). Trump accused WHO of being China-centric by claiming that China and WHO, he argued, had misguided the world (Norrlof, 2020). Trump stated that "the Chinese government, and the World Health Organization – which is virtually controlled by China – falsely declared that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission (Reuters, 2020). WHO is a multilateral organization which establishes public health norms and monitors their implementation and since the beginning of the crisis, WHO has been playing a vital role in tackling the pandemic and leading the multilateral response. The organization's chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus mentioned five reasons the world needs WHO by outlining them as " helping countries to prepare and respond, providing accurate information, busting dangerous myths, ensuring vital supplies reach frontline health workers, training and mobilizing health workers, the search for a vaccine" (United Nations, 2020).

Second, The Trump administration has been unwilling to cooperate with rising powers, including China. The current rivalry between the United States and China for international influence, and conflicting ideological views between the two have been limiting cooperation between them. With the spread of the COVID-19, the relationship between two powers has further strained, and both countries blamed each other for the emergence of the virus. The Trump administration insisted on calling the virus as the "Wuhan or Chinese virus" and claimed that the virus had been created in Wuhan in a biochemical laboratory (BBC, 2020b). On the other hand, China claimed that a U.S. army personnel brought the virus to Wuhan (The New York Times, 2020a). National Security Strategy of the United States which was announced by Trump in 2017 defines the international system as a great-power competition in which China and Russia are strategic rivals of the United States (Trump, 2017). While the United States adopted the strategy to emphasize its strategic posture, the pandemic has demonstrated that the strategy which puts America first is inadequate to protect U.S. security. Yet, the COVID-19 has

become a transnational issue, and such threats require international cooperation rather than competitive propaganda.

Collaboration between China and the United States especially on global allocation of vaccines and economic assistance to less-developed countries is critical. First of all, we are in an era in which countries label the pandemic as a threat to national security, and governments put their people first. The current pandemic demonstrates that there is a silent rise of nationalism. National governments have been prioritizing their nations and engaging in nationalist moves by banning exportation of medical equipment, restricting movement of people from specific countries, and declaring national emergency. The rise of nationalism is likely to lead to the threat of vaccine nationalism that WHO also warned against (The Guardian, 2020a). Vaccine nationalism will be a threat for less-developed countries since the vulnerable people in those countries will have late access to vaccine. Indeed, to do so, the global vaccine plan COVAX which is a global vaccine alliance backed by WHO was engaged so far by 172 economies (World Health Organization, 2020). The Trump administration, on the other hand did not join this international cooperative effort by claiming that the United States does not want to be constrained by multilateral organizations (The Guardian, 2020b). China, on the other hand just joined the initiative. The statement by Dr. Peter Marks director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) emphasized the intention of the United States regarding to global vaccine allocation. Accordingly, "in a sense, it's an oxygen-mask-on-an airplane analogy. You're gonna put on your own first and then help others. We want to help others as quickly as possible" (Bollyky and Bown, 2020). The statement by Marks clearly shows that the United States deals with the crisis on a national basis and prioritizes its nation rather than contributing to organize the provision of global public goods, the COVID-19 vaccine in this case.

Moreover, as the COVID-19 crisis escalates across the globe, the pandemic has hit less developed countries hardest. The lack of economic resources and medical infrastructure lead to health and economic crisis in those countries which ask for immediate support from international community, more specifically from developed countries. China has been acting as a responsible power and has become good in its economic soft power by providing assistance in various forms to developed and less developed countries<sup>3</sup>. China has turned focus outwards and sent aid to Italy and Serbia as well as provided medical supplies to countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa (The New York Times, 2020b). However, success in the current health crisis requires the cooperation of states and states should exercise power with other states.

## 5. Conclusion

This article aimed to demonstrate how the Trump administration's America First approach of foreign policy which puts American security and interest above all else, and the U.S. National Security Strategy which defines international system as great power competition affect U.S. global response for the COVID-19. The Trump administration's America-First agenda clearly does not advocate liberal internationalism and rejects multilateralism which in turn led to U.S. failure in coordinating a global policy through international cooperation. U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> Nye (2011, pp. 20-21) defines soft power as "the ability to affect others throughout the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction to obtain preferred outcomes".



National Security Strategy also puts America first and makes coordination and cooperation with China more difficult.

Since the end of WWII, the United States has been leading the liberal international order and exercising its leadership through multilateral platforms and partnerships. This order was organized around alliances, international institutions, security as well as economic cooperation. The United States took the central role to organize and maintain the system. According to the UN Charter, permanent members of UN Security Council –that is, great powers – have the “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security”. Given their responsibility to promote international peace and security, great powers have special responsibility to lead international organizations and provide public goods through multilateral institutions. As a widely known phrase emphasizes “with great power comes great responsibility”.

The current interconnected world system witnesses transnational complex problems which require international cooperation. States need to adopt the principle of multilateralism as a way of responding to the challenges of globalized world and achieving international cooperation. The United States had taken the lead on global response during times of past international crisis while has explicitly failed to take the lead during the current crisis. Since the spread of pandemic around the globe, the national sentiment has been rising among countries. Today most great powers, including the United States prefer to solve the challenges of pandemic at the national level instead of collaborating at the international level. An effective and efficient response to the current global health crisis demand collective action. Traditionally, the United States would lead such collective action in times of global crisis. However, the absence of traditional U.S. global leadership has led to poor coordinated response in international system level. The spread of Covid-19 affects everyone and the United States cannot manage the current health crisis alone. The threat of vaccine nationalism and fair global allocation for future COVID-19 require states to join global partnerships. To do so, states need to coordinate globally, and support funding COVID-19 vaccine effort.

The world has been facing a transnational health threat which does not discriminate against borders and could be a turning point for the international system in which states operate. Global powers can overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 by cooperating with other countries rather than acting alone. In a world of growing complexity, states, especially as the dominant power the United States should use soft power to create regimes and institutions to combat common global threats. International crises need global leadership. Trump, in this case, can reshape the situation by supporting vaccine efforts and leading G20 in funding all less-developed countries.

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