

RAJA MANDALA: BETWEEN NATIONALISM & GLOBALISM

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Is everyone for himself, when the chips are down? That is not true of most communities—a village, city or a nation—where the social capital is strong enough to put the collective above the self. But when it comes to the society of states, it would seem that each nation is for itself, especially in the middle of a [pandemic](#).

Although all world leaders have acknowledged the global imperative in dealing with the virus, they have put the nation first. Are all nations now for themselves? Not so fast. Sovereignty is certainly back. Solidarity is under stress, but not dead. The drift is towards a middle path between extreme globalism and hyper-nationalism. The last few decades have seen the growing awareness of “global problems” like climate change and the need for “global solutions”. The corona pandemic certainly adds to that consciousness. But as in the case of climate change, collective action is not easy to come by.

One of the first steps most governments took during the current crisis was to shut down their borders. The idea of a “borderless world” had gained much acceptance in recent years, but is now under serious questioning. See, for example, how the US, Canada and Europe are outbidding each other in buying medical material from China. They are ready to pay a hefty premium if Chinese suppliers break from an earlier commitment. Meanwhile, many nations, including India, have banned the export of much-needed medicines and equipment to combat the virus.

Washington, which initially criticised other countries for limiting exports of essential drugs, has had no option but to go down that path as the toll from [coronavirus](#) rose rapidly. Donald Trump is angry with 3M, one of the leading American producers of masks, for exporting to other nations at a time of huge domestic shortfall. The US ban on exports of medical supplies came just days after the G-20 affirmed that its member states “will work to ensure the flow of vital medical supplies, critical agricultural products, and other goods and services across borders”.

The problem is not that governments are being hypocritical. They are simply trapped in a crisis that is testing two important assumptions that guided the world in the last three decades. One is that globalisation, with its long and transborder supply chains, generates prosperity through economic efficiency. Second was that economic globalisation based on the dispersal of production will serve the interests of all nations.

The new objections to economic globalisation are not coming from the traditional champions of sovereignty in the East and the South, but the West. It was North America and Europe that had preached the virtues of unhindered economic globalisation. They also championed the idea of globalism that will transcend national sovereignty in terms of both institutions and values.

New converts to nationalism and sovereignty began to appear in the West well before corona crisis. Britain walked out of the European Union claiming the need to “take back control” of its borders. Storming the White House against all predictions in 2016, Trump has sought to push Washington away from the trinity of America’s post-war political commitments—to open borders, free trade, and multilateralism. For Trump and his team, the corona crisis is confirmation of the dangers of excessive globalisation. This argument is finding some resonance in Europe. Addressing workers at a factory that makes masks in France, President Emmanuel Macron said,

“We have to produce more in France.... to reduce our dependency. we must rebuild our national and European sovereignty”.

The efficiency argument of the globalists has been countered in the West by many who say societies are not merely economic units; they are also political and social communities. While expansive globalisation has helped generate super profits for the capital, it has put the working people at an increasing disadvantage.

The uneven distribution of the benefits from the dispersal of production and free movement of labour has undermined political support for economic globalisation in the West. Reinforcing this downward trend is the belief that China is misusing global economic interdependence for unilateral political advantage. There were indeed strategic consequences to China’s emergence as the world’s factory. After all, China is not a passive territory; it is an ancient civilisation with ambitions of its own.

Where then does the virus leave us? While economic interdependence among nations can’t be eliminated, we might be past the peak of expansive globalisation and hyper-connectivity. Many countries are likely to move to diversification of external production, short supply chains and stockpiles of essential materials to limit vulnerability during times of crises.

The palpable anger against China in the US and beyond, for keeping the world in the dark about the spread of the coronavirus, has been magnified by Beijing’s “mask diplomacy” and political triumphalism after it got in control of the situation in Wuhan. This anger is bound to translate into long-term changes in the relations between China and the West and some rearrangement of multilateral mechanisms.

Out of this restructuring new international coalitions are likely to emerge. Even as world leaders put their own respective nations first, they will also explore new forms of solidarity. Like the instinct for self-preservation, solidarity too is part of human nature.

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