

International Institutions and the Challenge of the “First Pandemic War”

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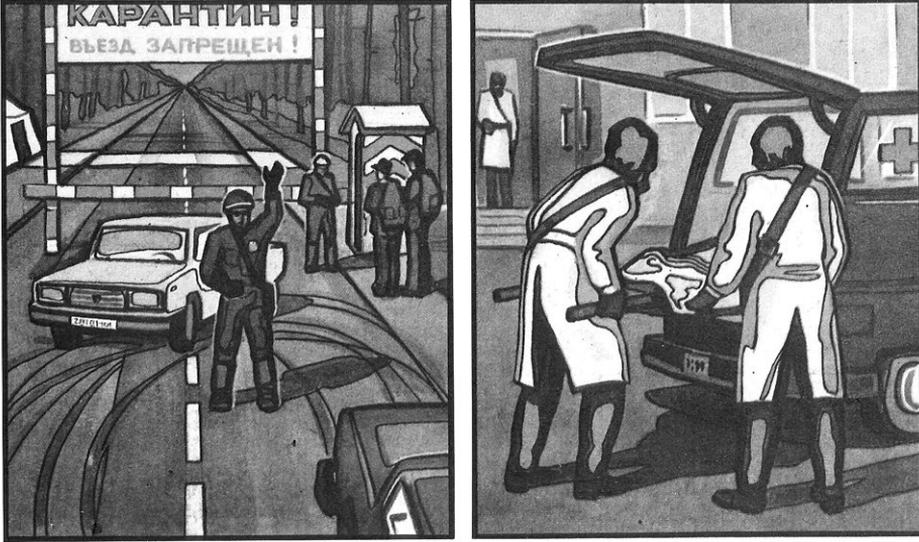
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In the second half of April contradictions between China and the United States basically disrupted a G20 telemeeting. Being the most representative and, at the same time, the least binding in terms of decision-making, this forum until recently was considered the most promising at a time when the world order is crumbling and national egoism is rising. However, the first round of the most critical interstate confrontation of the new era has already called into question the very possibility of discussions between the leaders of the world’s twenty major countries.

Somewhat earlier, the U.S. government announced its intention to stop funding the World Health Organization where it is the main donor. Washington does not like many things about the WHO, and, above all, that China has so far been able to exert more influence on its work than



Illustrations hereinafter in this section: Civil Defense. By E.P. Kuzmenko, O.A. Korolyov and V.I. Zemitan. 5th Edition, Kiev, 1986

the United States itself. President Donald Trump is trying to correct this imbalance in the way characteristic of his policymaking. The result is not yet obvious.

This course of events has highlighted the question of the future of international institutions—the most important achievement of international politics in the 20th century.

Humankind managed without constant norms and rules for most of its political history. Since the formation of the first states, collectives of individuals have embodied nothing but their own conscience and the strength of other collectives in their actions. In Europe, the role of the arbiter was for a short time, less than a thousand years, played by the Catholic potentate in Rome. The Church did not have its own army, but it did have moral authority. Moreover, the popes' lack of their own military power, as well as their claim to the universality of spiritual power, did not allow the Holy See to become an ordinary state. And, accordingly, the values and rules that Rome tried to impose during the Middle Ages did not directly express anyone's values or interests. Therefore, those rules were relatively fair for all. At the beginning of the 16th century, European states became so strong that they found the power of Rome burdensome. Over the next 400 years, they lived practically without any institutions that would demand

compliance with the rules. In the wake of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), most general rules of conduct appeared, for which reason Henry Kissinger in his book *World Order* wrote that “the Westphalian arrangement is not about the substance. It is about the procedure.” This was a great achievement for its time, but it was far from an attempt to establish genuinely civilized relations between peoples.

The 20th century was an era of the most horrible mass wars—the First and Second World Wars, fought between 1914 and 1945. They were so impressive in scale and in terms of human suffering and the threat to the states' existence that they caused the awareness of the need for a real “political change,” akin to what Edward Carr wrote about in his 1939 book *20 Years of Crisis*. For the first time in the history of international politics, the balance of power acquired an organizational form which ensured—at least to some extent—justice for those who were weaker. In addition, in the middle of the 20th century, with the appearance of nuclear weapons, there emerged in the international community of countries a special group of five states—permanent members of “the nuclear club.” Their military capabilities are so superior to everyone else, even in the case of France and Britain, that these powers are, to quote George Orwell, “in a state of constant Cold War with their neighbors.”

The appearance in international politics of the nuclear factor, which is practically incontestable, made it possible to create an order in which justice for the selected five nuclear powers is inevitably supplemented by relative justice for the rest. During the Cold War, international institutions proliferated. It happened not because of a mythical “appearance of global problems requiring global solutions.” Humankind found itself to be confronted with such problems as climate change, illegal cross-border trade, and pandemics.

There are some who claim that globalization existed already in the Bronze Age. This is hard to deny. Yet in the new age, as the balance of power became global, international politics and the possibility to regulate the behavior of states also acquired global character. Over the course of several decades this state of affairs became generally accepted as natural and even prompted the emergence of many theoretical beliefs that institutions could change the behavior of states all by themselves.

However, this did not change the nature of international institutions—they still represent a compromise between the power capabilities of their participants and the need for relatively civilized interaction between them. This rule is universal and applies to both the UN and such functional agencies as the WHO or the International Monetary Fund.

Therefore, institutions cannot be effective on their own. Their operability depends on the ability of their member-states to come to agreement, as well as on the presence of objective prerequisites for it. If there is no power of one that could restrain the power of the other, there is no agreement, and institutions appear ineffective.

The European Union is the most advanced institution of our time. But now we see that it is experiencing serious difficulties. EU functional agencies—primarily the European Commission—have little opportunity to influence the development of the association and the ways it can respond to serious challenges like the current pandemic crisis. Direct contacts between EU member-states and their ability to agree without the participation of institutions are becoming increasingly important. And it does not matter at all that the negotiations in which Germany and the Netherlands behave selfishly towards the countries of Southern Europe are part of the online meeting of the EU Council. The contribution of institutions in this case is still negligible. However, when it comes to interstate relations proper, the collective egoism of each member-state again begins to play a decisive role. Strong states get more fair decisions in favor of their interests and values than weak ones.

Incidentally, the Eurasian Economic Union, which brings together Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, seems to be doing rather well in this regard. This organization has not yet advanced to a point where Eurasian integration institutions are required to control the decisions of its participants. At the level of interstate relations, the EAEU countries show much more solidarity towards each other than, for example, the Europeans, who for 30 years kept teaching everyone around how to pursue international cooperation but ended in a fiasco, leaving Italy to the mercy of fate in the spring of 2020.

The level of trust between the EAEU states is quite high in the wake of the pandemic crisis. Most importantly, Russia, as the most powerful EAEU

state, makes no attempt to flex its muscles when dealing with its weaker partners. That is, the behavior of Moscow is less selfish than it could be expected judging from international practice.

Today, governments around the world are worried about the consequences of the shocks of 2020 and are considering appropriate behavioral strategies for themselves. There is a threat of a new, more dangerous “bipolarity”—confrontation between China and the United States on all fronts. This scenario fully conforms to the trends that have developed in recent years. Another possible consequence is an increase in the collective egoism of the “big states” in a world where rules are playing an increasingly smaller role, that is, in a world that is “going wild.” It is highly likely that universal international institutions, except for the UN and its Security Council, will be affected the most. Such an outcome will make the responsibility of the permanent members of the Security Council even more significant. In this context the proposal made by Russian President Vladimir Putin to hold a meeting of their leaders looks more than timely.