

THE NEOREALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM BEHIND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DURING COVID-19

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The literature contains much discussion on the contemporary differences between neorealism and neoliberalism, especially in the context of international relations. However there have, as yet, been limited attempts to investigate how these international relations theories fare in explaining state responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. This study reviews the conceptual frameworks underpinning neorealism and neoliberalism and applies them to key state behaviors during the COVID-19 outbreak. Some examples of neorealism attached to the current pandemic include: criticism of the role of the World Health Organization, the closure of international borders, international competition to collect pharmaceutical products, bans on exports, richer states protecting their national interests, the international misuse of power during emergency orders, restrictions placed on the international media, and the deployment of military forces. By contrast, neoliberalism's focus on international cooperation is noted in U.S., Chinese, and other countries' attempts to distribute knowledge and aid internationally, as well as in the efforts of key international organizations like the World Health Organization and the global Covax initiative. I offer an evidence-based conceptual framework using neorealism and neoliberalism to show how both have informed international behavior during the COVID-19 outbreak—although continued emphasis on the former shows few signs of abating as the pandemic approaches its third year.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Coronavirus, Neorealism, Neoliberalism, International Relations Theory, Economic Interdependence, International Border Closures, United States, China, World Health Organization.

ENTENDIENDO LAS DIFERENCIAS E IMPLICACIONES ENTRE EL NEOREALISMO Y EL NEOLIBERALISMO EN EL CONTEXTO DE LAS RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES DURANTE EL COVID-19

La literatura contiene mucha discusión sobre las diferencias contemporáneas entre neorealismo y neoliberalismo, especialmente en el contexto de las relaciones internacionales (RI). Sin embargo, ha habido intentos limitados de comprender la RI durante el brote de COVID-19 utilizando los lentes del neorealismo y el neoliberalismo. Este estudio revisa una extensa literatura sobre neorealismo y neoliberalismo para comprender el comportamiento de los estados durante el brote de COVID-19. Algunos ejemplos de neorealismo adjunto a la pandemia actual incluyen críticas al papel de la Organización Mundial de la Salud el cierre de fronteras internacionales competencia internacional para recolectar productos farmacéuticos prohibiciones de exportaciones estados más ricos protegiendo sus intereses nacionales abuso de poder internacional durante órdenes de emergencia restricciones impuestas a medios internacionales y el despliegue de fuerzas militares. La originalidad y la contribución de este estudio es la construcción de un marco conceptual basado en la evidencia utilizando los enfoques del neorealismo y el neoliberalismo para comprender las diversas perspectivas de la RI durante el brote de COVID-19.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, Pandemia, Coronavirus, Neorealismo, Neoliberalismo, Conceptualización, Interdependencia económica, Cierre de fronteras internacionales, Taxonomía.

2019 冠状病毒病期间国际关系背后的新现实主义和新自由主义

大量文献探讨了新现实主义和新自由主义之间的当代差别，尤其在国际关系情境下。不过，目前鲜有研究调查了这些国际关系理论如何解释各国对 2019 冠状病毒病（COVID-19）爆发的响应。本研究审视了新现实主义和新自由主义的概念框架，并将其应用于 COVID-19 爆发期间关键的国家行为。一些与当前大流行相关的新现实主义例证包括：批判世界卫生组织（WHO）发挥的作用、关闭国际边境、各国竞争药品、出口禁令、富裕国家保护其国家利益、各国在紧急情况命令期间滥用权力、限制国际媒体、以及部署军队。相反，新自由主义对国际合作的重视体现在美国、中国和其他国家为分配知识和援助所作的尝试，以及例如世卫组织和 2019 冠状病毒病疫苗实施计划（COVAX）倡议等关键国际组织所作的举措。我使用新现实主义和新自由主义，提出一项基于证据的概念框架，以期表明这二者如何在 COVID-19 爆发期间影响了国际行为——尽管关于新现实主义的持续强调表明，大流行衰退迹象并不多且正在走向第三年。

关键词: 2019 冠状病毒病, 大流行, 冠状病毒, 新现实主义, 新自由主义, 国际关系理论, 经济相互依赖, 国际边境关闭, 美国, 中国, 世界卫生组织.

COVID-19 has given rise to diplomatic tensions between nations and has also affected international relations (Davies and Wenham 2020), given its detrimental impacts across the world. As such, on February 26, 2021, the UN Security Council passed a resolution that appealed for a global ceasefire (Charbonneau 2021). In the middle of 2021, there had been about 182,721,607 cases of COVID-19 and more than 3.9 million deaths. Numbers continued to increase daily from this point (Worldometer 2021), despite a global government drive enforcing lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus (Basrur and Kliem 2021; Fischer 2021). These lockdowns served to reduce economic activity across the globe (Mngomezulu 2020) and increased unemployment which has ineluctably resulted in income losses for people. Such a context has heightened a need for coordination and cooperation at an international level (Debata, Patnaik and Mishra 2020; Makin and Layton 2021; OHCHR 2021). Many researchers and practitioners have argued that the pandemic has created the need for serious debate about neorealism and neoliberalism to better understand the conceptual focus in international relations around health-related diplomacy and crisis-oriented politics (see, for example, Basrur and Kliem 2021; Fischer 2021). The present article has its roots in that specific political context and sets out to understand the responses to the COVID-19 outbreak using the lenses of neorealism and neoliberalism.

The global pandemic has provided scholars with an opportunity to focus on international relations during a crisis. The most important crises are those that unexpectedly upset economic and political relations. Pandemics and other non-militarized crises have been significantly neglected due to the division of intercontinental relationships into international security and intercontinental political economies. The global challenge of the pandemic calls inevitably for responses at a global level. Neoliberals suggest that addressing such issues through institutions and multilateral efforts is an optimal approach. The responses we have so far witnessed, however, have reinforced the pervasiveness of a more neorealist approach: neither regimes nor institutions can deal particularly well with the challenges of COVID-19, but individual states can. While ostensibly trying to exhibit significant international cooperation, the responses of most states have to date been predominantly self-centered and competitive.

Rather than reinforcing the role of international institutions, the global pandemic has instead reinforced the priority of states, their sovereignty, and their power struggles on the international stage. The self-reinforcing and self-centered responses of states could well lead some to doubt the continued utility of certain conceptual tools that are commonly used to facilitate our understanding of international relations and international capabilities. This is particularly so when it comes to neorealist and neoliberal theories which are often viewed as in an ineluctable tension with each other. This study shows that both approaches continue to have value in discerning the motives behind international responses to the pandemic, though neorealist perspectives clearly have the upper hand.

The pandemic has also given rise to political issues beyond public health ones. For example, international health organizations are operating in an increasingly politically tense environment due to trade wars between the United States and China (Basrur and Kliem 2021; Fischer 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) has been on the receiving end of criticism for “cozying up” to China during the pandemic (see, for example, Bahi 2021). For this reason, many Western countries have criticized the performance of the WHO during the pandemic (Gebrekidan *et al.* 2020; Bahi 2021) and this has stimulated new debate, especially concerning how we understand the interaction between international and domestic politics (Aldar, Kampf and Heimann 2021). To deal with any emergency, including a public health emergency, it is imperative to first understand the current international political environment, which does not simply involve studying the past experiences of nations interacting with each other (Aldar, Kampf and Heimann 2021; Capan, Reis and Grasten 2021). International relations are dynamic phenomena that change daily at domestic and international levels, involve both governmental and non-governmental actors (Bahi 2021; Basrur and Kliem 2021), and are heavily dependent upon the reactions of states to new situations. Each state has its own priorities and agenda, and this has been especially salient during the pandemic.

A healthy political response by a state to a global-level crisis involves maintaining diplomatic conditions and enabling cooperation and coordination among states. However, a focus on gaining more power rather than developing capabilities through coordination can undermine collective efforts between states. This study explores the arenas in which neorealist and neoliberal perspectives have informed responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there is plenty of literature available on neoliberalism and neorealism, limited discussion exists on how the neoliberal and neorealist schools of thought are useful to understand

responses to a pandemic as devastating and as global as that of COVID-19. After an in-depth discussion of the key concepts underpinning both approaches, I examine specific relationships between states (with a focus on the United States and China) and organizations (such as the WHO) that have been shaped by one, the other, or both. I also allude to the contrast between international players and their cooperation and conflict between the Ebola virus and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note how self-centered and competitive attitudes among states can influence the more cooperative efforts of the WHO and can also influence international politics and reactions.

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated neoliberalism and neorealism (Keohane 2020), but the rise of COVID-19 has created further room to uniquely understand the taxonomy of both approaches in the context of COVID-19. These two mainstream schools of thought in the discipline of international relations provide an in-depth understanding of states' actions, reactions, and preferences (Kouskouvelis and Mikelis 2018; Vivares and Martens 2020). There has been some disagreement over the related range of explanatory and specific consequential issues, such as: the implications and nature of anarchy; absolute versus relative gains; capabilities versus intentions and priorities of a state's goals; regimes and institutions; regularity; and the possibility of global cooperation (Keohane 2020; Vivares and Martens 2020).

Waltz (1986), a leading neorealist, proposed that the interactions between states and the reputations and regularities of state behaviors can be explained by the pressures imposed upon them by the anarchic structure of the international system. Waltz also highlighted how the actions of states can be determined through their "positioning" in the system (Keohane 2020). He described how the anarchic global system plays an important role in shaping states (Keohane 2020) since that anarchic structure forces states to pay specific heed to, and to prioritize, the concerns they have about security and to take sufficient measures to acquire it. Waltz further proposed that states within the anarchic system can effectively and efficiently ensure their survival and security if there is a balance of power. A state's preferences alone thus cannot determine international outcomes. In this regard, Waltz (1986, 202–203, cited in Quinn and Gibson 2017) claimed "state behavior varies more with changes occurring in the distributions of capabilities and differences of power than with differences in ideology or in internal structure of relations."

While neorealists focus on security measures, neoliberal institutionalists place a greater emphasis on transnational issues like economic and environmental concerns—those they see can be addressed in a cooperative and multilateral manner (Keohane 2020). Keohane (2021) proposed that interdependence (economic interdependence, in particular) has become the most important key determinant of world politics. Keohane (2020, 2021) described states as dominant actors in international relations and assumed that a hierarchy exists in international politics. He added that force can act as the most effective policy tool and that globalization is a result of an increase in linkages and interconnectedness. Such mutual interdependence among states has a positive impact on behavioral changes and patterns in terms of how states tend to cooperate (Quinn and Gibson 2017).

Neorealists hold a more pessimistic view about the possibility of international cooperation. They continue to follow Hobbes in assuming that, naturally, humankind is driven by self-interest and ceaselessly desires power (Keohane 2020; Vivares and Martens 2020). This makes it difficult to embark upon sustained cooperation because struggles for power disturb the *status quo*. Mearsheimer (2018) highlighted two key hindrances to international cooperation—relative gains and cheating—and both emerge from the anarchic system. For Mearsheimer (2018), the neorealists view states not as atomistic in character, but as positional. Since states are naturally anxious about cheating, they primarily concern themselves with the ways they and their partners can benefit from cooperative arrangements (Quinn and Gibson 2017). Neorealists therefore primarily seek to ensure their survival in a competitive and rather anarchic international system. As states are unaware of the intentions of other states, a state is cautious in its assumptions about what other states might gain from cooperating within such an environment. Within a global anarchic system, Grieco (2018) asserts that, when states are faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gains, they may feel insecure and inclined to ask how such gains will be divided. They are compelled to ask not “will both of us gain?” but, “who will gain more?” In consequence, neorealists emphasize balanced power in world politics, an emphasis that often makes engaging in cooperation difficult (Kouskouvelis and Mikelis 2018; Vivares and Martens 2020).

Neoliberal institutionalists agree that states always act in accordance with their own interests (Grieco 2018). However, they hold a more optimistic view about the possibility of cooperation. For Keohane (2021), the difficult mission of cooperation may create tensions among states even though cooperative strategies offer potential benefits for them.

Here, Snidal (1991) argued that relative gains can influence cooperation positively if considerable economic interests are the rewards. Institutionalists, as with neorealists, place a strong emphasis on cheating. However, unlike neorealists, neoliberals focus on the capabilities that institutions have to ease tensions and mitigate the impacts of an anarchic system (Grieco 2018). Neoliberals contend that international institutions provide states with coordinating mechanisms that facilitate the potential gains/benefits states can elicit from cooperation—the “constructed focal point”—which tends to increase potential cooperative outcomes (Kouskouvelis and Mikelis 2018). In providing an observatory and arbitrary body, institutions furnish states with mechanisms and information that prevent cheating.¹

As a result of the debates and divergences between neoliberalism and neorealism, a renewed focus on international relations theory has recently gained popularity both in developing and developed countries (Tsarouhas 2021). Both schools of thought have gained great importance in defining research and policy making (Jules *et al.* 2021). And while they may at first look starkly opposed, neorealism and neoliberalism are two different views of one approach. The differences are mostly concerned with emphasis and priorities. Both assume the same positions with respect to the international (anarchic) system, which plays an important role in shaping state behavior where states are key actors that act rationally. Both schools also share a similar ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Jules *et al.* 2021; Tsarouhas 2021). The methods through which neoliberals and neorealists study the world are likewise analogous, since both are based on a liberal concept of politics and power that under-problematizes empirical material utilization (De-Buck and Hosli 2020). Nevertheless, the schools disagree over particular issues such as regimes and institutions, capabilities and intentions, and international cooperation.

Neorealism tries to separate the international political system’s external factors from the internal factors. Isolating a realm from other realms allows theorists to handle each individual realm with greater precision. In addition to focusing on the structure of the anarchic system, neorealists analyze behavioral variations and determine their impact on interacting

¹Game theory has been used to explain why states try to increase individual payoffs. The prisoner’s dilemma is a situation analyzed in game theory that shows that two rational individuals might not cooperate even if it is in their own interest to do so. Institutions can get around this dilemma by providing a platform where greater cooperation and coordination can be achieved to ensure maximum benefits for both parties (Quinn and Gibson 2017).

units. They also contemplate the outcomes that divergent variations engender (Waltz 1990). In contrast to neorealists who focus on security measures, the primary foci of neoliberal institutionalists involve economic and environmental issues, with a focus on the latter. Neoliberals hold a positive view about the cooperation of states, whereas neorealists retain doubts about other states. Military posturing as well as unexplained claims and threats are the key focus of neorealism; supporting economic reforms is the key focus of neoliberalism. While neoliberalism champions the efficiency of institutions to achieve cooperation, neorealism tends to underline military force. Similarly, neoliberalism promotes democratic peace and efficient institutions, whereas neorealism emphasizes military force and strength in capabilities in response to perceived security dilemmas.

Mearsheimer (2018) attempts to argue against, and refute, neoliberals' emphasis on international institutions and their functioning. He asserts that international institutions reflect the global power distribution and influence state behavior to a certain degree (Mearsheimer 2018). He adds that institutions provide a very small opportunity to maintain stability during the post-Cold War period. Neorealists are highly suspicious of the existence of any association between stability and cooperation and claim that neoliberal theorists evade military issues. Neoliberals believe there is a strong correlation between economic cooperation, peace, and institutions (Mearsheimer 1995).

According to Mearsheimer (1995), relative gains can apply only to the security realm, whereas absolute gains can apply only to the economic realm. Regardless of the line neoliberals have drawn between security and the economic realm, a correlation exists between military and economic might. Neorealists contend that states act according to their self-interest within an anarchic system in which military power is considered very important. While this is acceptable to neoliberals, they must handle the relative gains issue (Mearsheimer 1995, 20). Tsarouhas (2021), for example, argues strongly that there is no obvious analytical line between economic and security issues. Neoliberal theory, however, emphasizes the role institutions play in terms of providing information regarding how to resolve the uncertainty problem.

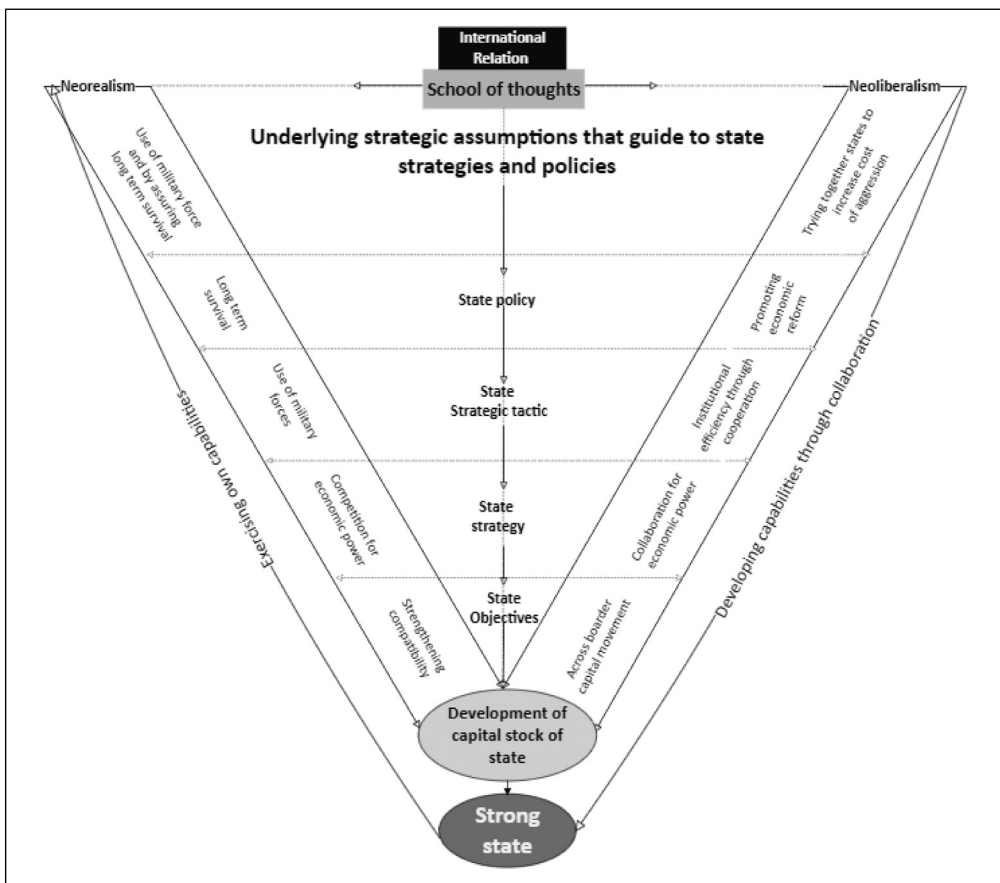
Conceptual Underpinnings

Figure 1 represents a structure that supports and identifies the key differences between neorealist and neoliberal schools in most contemporary debates using a specific context (Keohane 2020; Emirbayer and Desmond

2021). Based on a review of the literature (see, for example, Powell 1994; Jervis 1999; Tarzi 2004; Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010; Keohane 2020), Figure 1 was developed to provide a useful conceptual context that grounds the following discussion of how states and the international system have (or could have) handled COVID-19 to date. It identifies the various strategic assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism that can be used to either explain or guide strategies and policies at the state level.

Conceptual underpinnings—concepts and theories used to understand phenomena (Emirbayer and Desmond 2021)—enable researchers to clarify the ability of theories to make sense of global and regional issues (Emirbayer and Desmond 2021) such as COVID-19. This study uses the lenses of neorealism and neoliberalism to examine the responses of

Figure 1.
A taxonomy of neorealism and neoliberalism.



Source: Developed by the author.

states following the outbreak of COVID-19. A number of key elements have been identified that are important to a discussion of international relations and COVID-19. The key elements of neorealism and neoliberalism that I focus on in the rest of this article are: cooperation and coordination; power and self-centered behavior; economic interests; knowledge and material resources; national interests over collective action; and the distribution of capabilities over multilateralism. I now turn to these six elements in the rest of this article.

The United States, China, and the WHO

The economic crash resulting from the global spread of COVID-19 has been the worst since the Great Depression. The IMF estimates that USD \$22 trillion of global wealth could be lost in the coming years (Kahl 2021). Efforts to fight extreme poverty across the globe took a punishing blow within the first few months of the pandemic (Kahl 2021). The international economy was also affected by a growing tussle between China and the United States, with each seeking to exert the kind of influence over global political affairs most favorable to their own national interests and regional dominance. Although the ensuing global crisis necessitated concerted efforts from stakeholders across the world, international political players and organizations (such as the United States, China, and the WHO) were involved in disseminating conflicting statements that ultimately increased popular panic (Kahl 2021) and undermined collaborative collective international action. As Quinn and Gibson (2017) note, cooperation among countries does not tend to occur very often, especially during crisis situations when there is tension between key players in global politics. Such tensions influence the behaviors of other countries. Their suggestion is that, from its inception, the pandemic has *not* been an optimal context in which to successfully practice some of the key strategies highlighted by the neoliberal school of thought.

As previously discussed, neorealists hold that there is a high level of motivation and self-interest among states to assert power at a global political level. It has been observed that cooperation between China and the United States was poor during previous global pandemic crises (Lee 2020; Li 2021) like the SARS outbreak in 2003, although as noted below, more cooperation occurred in response to the Ebola outbreak of 2013–2016 (Cui 2019). U.S.-Chinese cooperation nevertheless took a monumental nosedive in 2020–2021. Both countries remained focused on asserting their political power at a global level and so collaborative

efforts to fight COVID-19 were not prioritized (Li 2021). This lack of cooperation worsened the crisis and added fuel to the fire in 2020. For example, former President Donald Trump halted U.S. funding of the WHO on the pretext that the organization was siding with China and had failed to handle the COVID-19 crisis competently (BBC News 2020; Lee 2020). The United States had been the largest donor to the WHO accounting for 15 percent (4.5 billion USD) of the organization's budget (Lee 2020). The Trump administration suspected that the virus spread from a lab in the Chinese province of Wuhan and blamed the Chinese government for hiding the truth from the world (Lee 2020). Furthermore, Trump also blamed WHO authorities, claiming that they did not take adequate steps at the right time and remained under the influence of China's authoritarian leaders and the funding of the Communist Party of China (Lee 2020).

Both countries acted as neorealists predict in striving to assert power rather than to cooperate with each other. China blamed the United States for the spread of the virus and suggested U.S. soldiers brought it with them from outside (Lee 2020). The United States blamed China for failing to provide early warnings about the initial Wuhan outbreak, resisting adequate investigation to help prevent future outbreaks, and for peddling conspiracy theories (Ramsey and Chen 2021). It also blamed the WHO for siding with China and for not warning the world proactively about the potential for the spread of the virus once it was identified (BBC News 2020). The WHO acted a more neoliberal role as it performed its functions in the interests of the global public. At the same time, it fought to protect its own international reputation and independence amid skirmishes for the upper hand between the main international players. A comment by the WHO to the U.S. government is worth noting in this context. The WHO's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, suggested that, if the United States did not want to use up more body bags, then it should refrain from politicizing the pandemic (Bender 2020; Watts and Stracqualursi 2020). The health agency said that politicizing the issues surrounding the coronavirus should be put into quarantine to overcome the global-level crisis (Bender 2020; Watts and Stracqualursi 2020). Indeed, the rivalry between the two countries paralyzed both international organizations at the forefront of fighting the pandemic at a global level (the WHO and the UN). It also paralyzed attempts at cooperation between the G7 countries in 2020. Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remained keen on calling COVID-19 the "Wuhan Virus" (Zhao 2020). Subsequently, the G20 meeting also failed to reach a consensus on a way to fight the

pandemic collectively, thereby worsening the crisis globally (Zhao 2020). This issue underlines the neoliberal view that cooperation is difficult to achieve due to tensions among countries, even if such cooperation is beneficial for the different stakeholders involved (Keohane 2021).

When the 2013–2014 Ebola virus outbreak took place, China and the United States cooperated with each other, along with some west African countries, to curb the spread of the virus (Cui 2019). This reflects a neoliberal approach in both countries' policies. China coordinated international efforts to prevent the spread of Ebola and contributed approximately 123 million USD in aid to West African countries in four rounds across April, August, September, and October of 2014 (Cui 2019). China also sent 1,000 medical and healthcare workers to west African countries to help fight the virus. The United States sent 3,000 medical personnel to prevent the spread of the virus (Cui 2019). Such concerted and coordinated bilateral efforts prevented the spread of the Ebola virus to other African countries.

In terms of the WHO and information sharing, the International Health Regulations (IHR) were revised in 2005² in reaction to China not being forthcoming about SARS in 2003. The new IHR have more recently failed to solicit international compliance, which led to the speedy spread of COVID-19, at least in part because China was not forthcoming in sharing initial information about the virus and its handling of the outbreak in Wuhan (Ginsbach, Monahan and Gottschalk 2021). This conflict between the neoliberal need for transparency and the neorealist desire to maintain secrets is noteworthy. However, the sharing of the full genomic sequencing of the virus by Chinese scientists early in the pandemic is also notable (Pinghui 2020).³ It is likewise pertinent that the concerted and synchronized efforts of China and the United States during the 2020 global financial crisis prevented another Great Depression from taking place (McDonald 2020).⁴ And both countries have been vocal in using the soft power benefits of 'vaccine diplomacy' in promising and delivering home-produced vaccines abroad to developing countries (Huang 2021; Ma 2021). However, both can also be seen to follow a

²See <https://www.who.int/ihr/about/faq/en/#faq01>.

³Although it should be mentioned this was not at the insistence of the Chinese authorities. Indeed, the Chinese government shut down the laboratory that published the genomic sequence on open online platforms on January 12, 2020—one day after the valuable online dissemination of this information occurred (Pinghui 2020).

⁴Both countries had also previously enhanced their contribution toward UN peacekeeping missions in 2015 (see Fung 2016).

neorealist approach that belies the self-interested motives accompanying these instances of cooperation—even if this has not fully undermined the cooperative benefits. Both countries tried to obtain the vaccination on a national priority basis, both vaccinated their own people first, both abstained from fully collaborating with the WHO, and both are currently engaged in a fiercely competitive ‘vaccine diplomacy’ battle to distribute vaccines to developing countries in Asia (Ma 2021) and Latin America. The important point to underline here is that the motives described by both neorealism and neoliberalism can inform the same policy and international behavior in one or more countries simultaneously. Whether or not scholars claim the deeper motive of self-interest suggests that neorealist explanations are more accurate—or neoliberal cooperation is merely a superficial discursive tool behind which always lurks baser self-interest—is less important than understanding that both approaches can, in some cases, coexist and work together to inform policy and international behavior for the domestic and the common good.

In fact, the WHO itself contributed what turned out in hindsight to be a grave error in judgment that also exacerbated the initial spread of the novel coronavirus. Cohen (2020) observed right at the beginning of the pandemic that the WHO emergency committee convened in January 2020 found *against* classifying the Wuhan outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)—a procedure emphasized by the WHO in 2005 as part of the IHR to which states have a legal duty to respond promptly. Committee members argued that cases outside China had been as low as nine out of 584 (Cohen 2020). Their reticence to sound the PHEIC alarm was also a response to what they saw were clear Chinese efforts to contain a disease that few expected to be so quickly and easily transmissible across the globe (Cohen 2020).

Cooperation and Coordination

Neorealism is more closely connected with a pessimistic view of international cooperation when compared to the neoliberal view (Tarzi 2004; Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010; Jackson 2016). As noted earlier, for neorealists, it is difficult to achieve cooperation among international actors because each strive for power according to their specific national interests and ‘us-first’ mentality. Excessive cooperation would disturb the balance of power and the *status quo* (Powell 1994; Deudney 2009). Neorealists also emphasize that, because countries do not know the intentions of other countries, they cooperate with each other only highly cautiously (Wæver 2009; Levine 2012). Some stark examples of the ‘us-first’

mentality have unequivocally dominated the COVID-19 crisis (Basrur and Kliem 2021): travel and exit bans; closing international borders; blame games; competition for acquiring pharmaceutical and personal protective equipment (PPE); and nations prioritizing the protection of their own citizens, sometimes at the expense of fairly harsh detainment or managed quarantine measures (see, for example, Kinetz 2020; Taylor 2021) for foreign nationals or their own citizens returning from what their own governments deem to be high health-risk countries. The “us first” mentality decreases the likelihood of coordination and cooperation among states during the pandemic.

The global economy involves myriad networks of finance, trade, and manufacturing that take place grounded upon cooperation among various states (Coe and Yeung 2015). The interlinkage of economies (Coe and Yeung 2015) necessitates cooperation to respond to the economic burden of the pandemic faced by all countries (Bahi 2021; Basrur and Kliem 2021). In the context of cooperation and coordination, countries are obliged to share their material resources as well as knowledge to counter the threat of, and damage caused by, the COVID-19 outbreak. An example is U.S.-led efforts to combat COVID-19 by providing PPE and other aid abroad. Similar multilateral efforts have included aid given by China—particularly to Italy when it suffered one of the first horrific outbreaks of the virus in early 2020 (see Ross Smith and Fallon 2020, 247) and many other countries. Another example involves the increasing international calls for African debt cancellation, or at least debt relief (see Kinyondo, Pelizzo and Byaro 2021) amid the devastating economic effects of the pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Cooperation has nevertheless lacked consistency. For example, Indian officials and media stated that they were not receiving enough U.S. and other financial and pharmaceutical support (e.g., ventilators, oxygen, and vaccines), especially after the COVID Delta Variant peaked in India in April 2021 (Hunter 2021; cf. U.S. Aid 2021). This demonstrates how a blame game can proliferate in international relations. In addition, countries continue to compete for power—as is evident from the tussle between the United States and China over the spread of COVID-19 and its putative origins.

Cooperation between states at an international level also takes place through the delegation of tasks to international organizations (IO) such as the WHO. The WHO represents the centralizing and pooling of resources in a single agency which enables it to rapidly mobilize those resources to respond to any health emergency at a global level. IOs also do not face the same challenges of entry into a country as

those faced by other countries because they are perceived to be neutral and are trusted by many states. This places them in a unique position: rival countries might trust in IOs but not in each other. Another important feature of IOs is that they not only have a concentration of resources, but also a concentration of expertise—particularly useful for responding to any global-level health emergency. This is evident from the response of WHO to the West African Ebola virus epidemic of 2013–2014.

The WHO has faced budget cuts from member states since the global financial crisis in 2008 and this affected the operations of its pandemic response units. The way in which the WHO is funded has been criticized because member states fund the WHO on the basis of their relative wealth as well as by voluntary contributions for particular purposes (see Ravelo 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality of global-level cooperation and collaboration among countries has been exposed. At the 2020 session of the World Health Assembly, member states passed a resolution emphasizing the need to redistribute resources, maintain solidarity, and take action collectively (EU Response 2020). Politicians from other developed countries used their voice to call for increased collaboration among other countries during the pandemic. For example, EU politicians asked to open up internal borders to allow the uninterrupted and unrestricted movement of medical supplies (EU Response 2020), alongside shunning the competition and the race to obtain vaccinations.

Power and the Power of Self-Centrism

Balance of power theory highlights the struggle for power in international politics (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2009; Wu 2018). It highlights that—after the Second World War—the world changed from multipolarity to bipolarity and, since the fall of the Soviet Union, unipolarity has predominated (Jervis 1999; Tarzi 2004; Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010). Neorealism proposes that countries’ self-interest and desire for power hinders cooperation (Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010; Rho and Tomz 2017). Yet, if we are to accept the claim that states act in accordance with their self-interest and perceive that their military power protects their interests, then we also have to deal with the issue of relative gains. Mearsheimer (2018) said that countries holding a balance of power perspective must proceed from the perspective of relative gains and not absolute gains (see also Jervis 1999; Tarzi 2004)—a point which has a bearing on the COVID-19 crisis.

During the pandemic, the deployment of military forces on borders and within nations was ordered with the purpose of minimizing the impact of the virus. The suspension of legal orders delayed election campaigns and rescheduling new elections subsequently took place in many developed and developing countries (Rho and Tomz 2017; Landman and Splendore 2020). Some risks have been associated with the misuse of power during the pandemic (Rho and Tomz 2017; Landman and Splendore 2020), 84 states issued orders of emergency by changing legislative activities (Economist 2020). At least 38 countries controlled the freedom of the media and media organization activities were thus very restricted (Economist 2020), especially in relation to public protests, the use of power by law enforcement agencies, and government initiatives to control COVID-19. DeLisle (2021) emphasizes the rivalry between the United States and China during the pandemic as it applies to media framing through the blame game. Both countries tried to demonstrate they were global leaders through their control over the activities of IOs like the WHO. Emergency orders, the closure of borders, and global leadership rivalry very much reflected the philosophy of neorealists— in prioritizing the maintenance of power, ‘us-first,’ and self-interest—during the pandemic.

Economic Interests

The trade war between the United States and China is a perfect example of the conceptual tension between the neorealist and neoliberal schools when it comes to the role of economic interests, whether they improve interstate relations or are used to serve self-interest and power gains (Tarzi 2004; Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010; Keohane 2020). The protection of national self-interest has been evident in the recent months of the pandemic, even in the unique international cooperation model of the European Union (EU) (Goldmann 2020; Basrur and Kliem 2021). The EU member states contributed to, and are supposed to abide by, a unique setup of supranational institutions that oversee various matters such as agricultural policy. During the pandemic, however, many EU member states took actions that, in essence, violated EU regulations related to freedom of movement, fiscal discipline, and competition laws such as the closing of borders (Goldmann 2020; Basrur and Kliem 2021). The supranational nature of the EU devolved into nationalism, and member states individually took action to protect the safety and security of the people within their national borders (Carreño *et al.* 2020). Some member states even imposed an export

ban on pharmaceutical equipment without consulting EU institutions and in stark defiance of EU regulations (Bayer *et al.* 2020). This took place when Italy was badly hit by the pandemic and was in direct need of medical equipment.

Beijing has used the pandemic to show the world that China is a responsible state that contributes to public health in the absence of strong U.S. world leadership. It is also using this position to grab more political influence across the globe. The G20 failed to perform better, despite providing debt relief to poor countries. However, the US\$5 trillion it promised to inject into the global economy was, in reality, the amount that the individual member states were already committed to contributing (Basrur and Kliem 2021). It is important to note that countries cannot single-handedly deal with a pandemic, given their dependence on imports from other states to meet their medical and pharmaceutical needs. And so, while economic interests during the pandemic have given more influence to arguments that international economic interests require cooperation and coordination for collective action, freedom of movement, economic liberalism, and the centralizing, and pooling of resources, practical efforts to do so have been underwhelming.

Knowledge and Material Resources

Knowledge is a source of power. Neoliberals believe in centralizing knowledge and resources to enable the best collective international action (Tarzi 2004; Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010). However, such centralization is not always practical during a pandemic when states need financial, pharmaceutical, trade, and other support that require greater coordination and mutual trust. Rapid progress can be achieved by sharing knowledge and expertise on a subject (Armingeon 2021). Public health experts can benefit from each other's knowledge and experience of transmission prevention, vaccine development, and successful treatment of COVID-19 (Brankston *et al.* 2021), among many other things. Public health experts are also able to establish good practices when they agree on standard rules and procedures to establish common international health protocols (Brankston *et al.* 2021). This itself gives rise to mutual trust among health practitioners at an international level. All these factors are boosted by collaboration between nations on public health issues. Countries can use IOs like the WHO to share knowledge and information on health issues to reach collective decisions. However, the WHO faces several challenges that affect its operations, including a lack of cooperation and coordination among member

states that results in delays with respect to information sharing and funding of the organization. In the context of the Ebola pandemic, China and the United States coordinated well with western African countries in terms of financial aid, medical assistance, and military forces' support. Yet, during the COVID-19 pandemic, both countries have acted like neorealists as they sought to assert power through more competitive means rather than cooperate with each other.

The WHO is regarded as critical to ensuring the smooth flow of information between countries on public health issues at a global level. However, as noted earlier, the WHO was subsequently criticized for delaying the announcement of the onset of the pandemic. When the WHO announced the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, COVID-19 had already reached 113 countries (Basrur and Kliem 2021). Critics from the United States complained that the WHO had tested U.S. generosity and failed to share critical information in a timely and transparent manner, thereby endangering the lives of millions of U.S. citizens and other citizens in the world (see BBC News 2020). They, and critics elsewhere, also intimated that the WHO had attempted to cover up the spread of the pandemic until it became impossible to do so (Gebrekidan *et al.* 2020). The WHO likewise came under fire for opposing U.S. travel restrictions against China (Nebehay 2020). However, despite its attempts to make the speedy disclosure of PHEICs legally binding in 2005, pandemic or not, the WHO cannot force governments to act or cooperate. Its role is to provide technical support to governments on operational matters related to public health, share information, advise on best practices in healthcare management, create roadmaps for research and development, and monitor the response of countries following a public health emergency.

National Interests over Collective Action?

Logic dictates that there is a dire need for collective action in a pandemic because this is ultimately in the interest of all countries. The short-term reality does not always reflect this logic. It is evident that the United States and China followed their national interests as they became entangled in a power struggle to dominate global politics (DeLisle 2021). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the EU also exhibited nationalistic responses from their member states in the wake of the pandemic (Yeo 2020; Huda and Masrol 2021). Both regional organizations could have collaborated at supra-regional levels to share knowledge expertise and resources, but this was often eclipsed, despite the longer-term self-

interested goals involved. The interdependence of countries does, of course, necessitate greater collaboration in times of emergency—especially global emergencies. Thus, any state that protects itself from the pandemic while its neighboring states are unable to do so is also at risk because of its interdependence with other states.

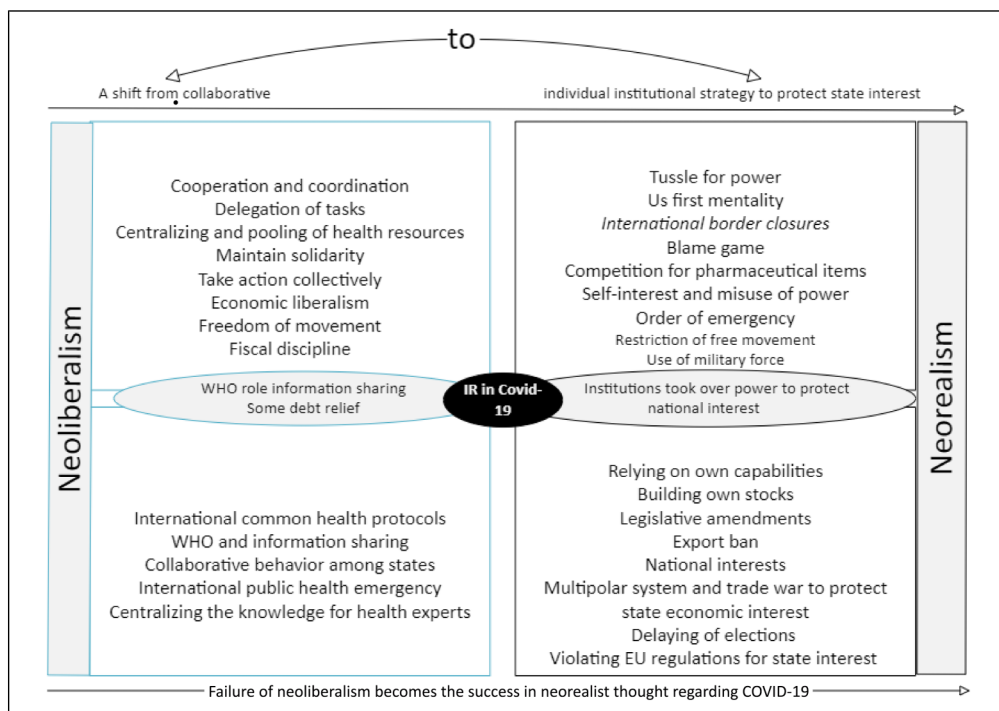
Short-term, self-interested thinking has, perhaps understandably, been common. As all countries are fighting the same pandemic and are stretched to their limits in terms of medical equipment, doctors, hospitals, and health facilities, they cannot provide each other with medical supplies as they are accustomed to doing outside of a pandemic situation. Moreover, rich countries have outbid developing countries for the manufacture and supply of medical equipment. A vivid example of this involves the efforts of the Trump administration to relocate German scientists to the United States and to have a vaccine delivered exclusively to the United States (Bennhold and Sanger 2020). Similar attempts and a resultant shortage of vaccines were also faced during the H1N1 outbreak in 2009. This behavior (pursuing national interests) of rich countries limits the ability of developing countries to access vaccines—which the international Covax initiative, while laudable and promising, has only had limited success in mitigating. Indeed, Covax admitted, in September 2021, that it was 500 million short of its vaccination distribution goals (Ducharme 2021). Another example is the limited international support made available to India when the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 got out of control in early 2021 (Hunter 2021). The state's own interests seem to have been highly preferred as compared to collective action during the COVID-19 outbreak—despite the longer-term global benefits of more integrated cooperation.

Figure 2 summarizes the shift from neoliberalism to neorealism in the context of international responses to COVID-19. These emerging factors in the debate between neoliberalism and neorealism can be used to inform a conceptual framework that applies specifically to current international relations during the COVID-19 pandemic

Distribution of Capabilities over Multilateralism

Reaching the last of our six key arenas of neorealist and neoliberal debate, neorealists posit that the principle of international order, along with states and their capabilities, defines the international structure and its nature (Copeland 2000; Mearsheimer 2007). States may have similar needs, but they differ with respect to their capabilities—and this difference dictates variations in power between states (Copeland 2000;

Figure 2.
Neorealism and neoliberalism: implications for international relations during the pandemic.



Source: Developed by the author.

Mearsheimer 2007). Cooperation between states is influenced by the structural distribution of their capabilities which is underpinned by their fear of relative gains or interdependence (Beni 2019).

With regard to the distribution of capabilities, neorealists identify three possible systems: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar (Levine 2012; Keohane 2020).⁵ They argue that a bipolar system is more stable than a unipolar or multipolar system because unipolarity results in the concentration of power in one state only. This enables it to dictate to, or firmly influence, other states, rendering stability likely in the absence of competing powers. Multipolarity can destabilize the system due to the existence of many powerful states that focus on making alliances to outnumber the others (Levine 2012; Keohane 2020). Trade wars and blame games are more likely to

⁵Unipolar represents the existence of one major power in the international political arena due to its unmatched capabilities such as the United States. Bipolar represents the existence of two major states (e.g., China and the United States). A multipolar system represents the existence of more than two major states.

emerge in a multipolar system, which can destabilize international order due to an imbalance of power. This is especially salient during a pandemic or other global crisis that swiftly exacerbates power vacuums or opens up new power arenas to capitalize on new circumstances—arenas to be captured and dominated by states capable of seizing the opportunity.

Multilateralism, on the other hand, resonates with the neoliberal model and implies the participation of three or more governments (Fehl and Thimm 2019; Marques *et al.* 2019). It involves certain qualitative principles or elements shaping the character of an institution or supranational arrangement. These principles include dispute settlement, diffusion of reciprocity, and indivisibility of interests (Fehl and Thimm 2019; Marques *et al.* 2019)—all of which focus on bringing about particular behaviors among member states. A prime example is the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons, signed by nearly 200 countries. A related version in international organizations attempting to uphold principles concerning the diffusion of reciprocity and indivisibility of interests in a globalized world would be the PHEICs of the WHO, discussed earlier.

Multilateralism involves the acting together of several member states or alliances of states such as the UN and NATO. Multilateralism can also occur as a regional-level pact among states. Multilateral institutions are not imposed on states (unlike the EU, which has supranational institutions exercising competence in areas in which member states have limited their competence by way of treaties). Nevertheless, multilateralism is intended to serve as a framework for limiting and checking opportunistic behavior. It is conducive to facilitating coordination between member states particularly in terms of exchanging information. As such, the benefits of successful multilateral practices during any global pandemic do not require much underlining for the benefits they imply for effective international cooperation. This approach drove the UN's 2021 call for a global ceasefire mentioned at the beginning of this article as well as increasing international calls for African debt relief before the pandemic. However, while multilateral principles and institutions have had some impact on how the response to the pandemic has been handled internationally, cooperation results have been patchy and underwhelming, at best—as the very limited national responses to the UN Report on Multilateralism and COVID-19 show (OHCHR 2021).

Conclusion

The thrust of this study has been to add to the literature and debates regarding how neorealist and neoliberal concepts continue to apply to

international behavior during the COVID-19 outbreak. These lenses stress the power of the state and the prevalence of competition (neorealism) among those states that focus on the role played by international institutions and cooperation (neoliberalism). I compared the usefulness of these approaches to highlight their respective strengths and to identify what they can and cannot tell us about responses to specific regional and global issues—in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. At a local level, the study clarified how different conceptual approaches explain new policy developments and undergird old behavioral patterns, particularly in the United States, China, India, the EU, and the WHO. Both conceptual approaches have something to offer. For example, neorealism focuses on the causal impact of structural changes and other forces of the system on state behavior. It also emphasizes the priority that the distribution of abilities has over multilateralism and that relative gains have over absolute gains. In the context of COVID-19, it has been unsurprising that neorealist priorities surrounding short-term national self-interest have gained an upper hand since January 2020 in an anarchic international system full of unprepared and panicking states. The neoliberal focus on international cooperation also explains subsequent multilateral attempts to work together to distribute knowledge, technology, aid, vaccines, and certain economic costs of the pandemic internationally—so long as doing so can be achieved in a manner that does not interfere with national self-interest.

Both neorealist and neoliberal views and practices have been applied to some extent during COVID-19. There is, however, strong evidence that many states have prioritized a neorealist approach to the degree each has used the pandemic context as a way to leverage more power for themselves on the international stage and more benefits for their own national populations. According to neoliberals, the strong bond between the fates of nation states requires them to cooperate or pay a high price (see also OHCHR 2021). The human, economic, and other costs of not cooperating more fully at the beginning of the pandemic are now becoming extremely salient. This is especially so since the pernicious and more readily transmissible COVID Delta and Omicron Variants have rendered the original vaccines less effective at curbing breakthrough infections and continued viral spread. There are definitely instances where sharing material resources, knowledge, and contemporary technology have permitted states to more effectively and collectively respond to the pandemic. There are also many instances where state blame games, fake news, and conspiracy theories—shared as rapidly across the Internet as the Chinese scientists shared the original Wuhan genomic sequence—

have seriously undermined international cooperation, international solidarity, and contributed to a fair level of vaccine hesitancy worldwide. All these things have impeded optimal handling of the pandemic and facilitated the continued spread of the virus as well as its mutation into new and more worrying variants of concern.

Continued state prioritization of the ‘us first’ mentality combined with a suboptimal international cooperation and coordination are likely to continue to be major barriers to effective collective international action to combat the COVID-19. Future quantitative and qualitative studies are therefore much needed to further evaluate the impact of neorealist and neoliberal approaches to the pandemic response of individual states and internationally—to identify with more precision where security, self-interest, and sovereignty can be successfully combined with effective international collaboration in a pandemic that is clearly not near its end yet.🌐

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