South Korea's prospects for a middle-power alliance in the era of COVID-19

Throughout the history of humankind, plague and disease such as malaria, measles, smallpox, and the Black Death, have decimated indigenous populations and even whole civilizations.

In the aftermath, power relations between colonizers and colonies and the balance of power among sovereign states changes and is reformed. Pandemics create a new normal where new power balances and new standards of civilization arise, potentially with better global governance and cosmopolitan growth beyond excessive free market capitalism.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in China at the end of 2019 and its precipitous expansion into a global pandemic resets every corner of individual lives and government policy. In so doing, it could result in change to the current structure and rules of governance at both national and global levels.

There is no simple answer to which political system has responded best to COVID-19

Given that there are huge variations in terms of the success in handling the pandemic, both between democracies and authoritarian regimes, it cannot be asserted that a particular form of political regime is the best for responding to

pandemics. The assumption that democracies will prevail over authoritarian regimes in dealing with national and global crises has not been proven true, with no strong evidence that democratic countries are doing a better job than authoritarian ones.

China has declared victory over COVID-19, with Chinese authorities reporting less than 200 remaining infections and a total of approximately 90,000 cumulative cases—far below the US, with more than seven million cumulative cases. China is also claiming a significant contribution to the global fight against the pandemic by allowing investigators from the World Health Organisation into China to examine how the virus was transferred to humans.

However, other authoritarian nations, such as Iran have not been successful in containing the virus. Iran, with more than 443,000 confirmed cases, has the highest rate in the Middle East.

Such variations across authoritarian states can be also found in democratic nations. G7 nations such as the US, UK, and France are all underperforming relative to their wealth and the quality of their democratic institutions. India is soon expected to record more COVID-19 cases than the US. Canada, Australia and New Zealand are among those democracies who have responded to the pandemic fairly successfully.

South Korea, a democratic middle power, is one of the most successful nations in responding to COVID-19 without lockdown (approximately 23,500 cases, in a population of more than 50-million, compared with Australia which has recorded 27,000 cases in a population half the size) through transparent public information and widespread virus testing.

Such variations cast doubt on the conviction that authoritarianism is unjustifiable and ineffective, and also whether democracies are able to take a lead in reshaping the international architecture of global governance.

Which nations will reshape global governance in the post-COVID-19 era?

Leading democracies of the past such as the United States, Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Japan, have been taking protectionist action to secure their own national interests, rather than supporting multilateral cooperation to sustain the liberal international order: US President Donald Trump's 'America First' doctrine, Britain's decision to leave the European Union, and Japan's ambition for normal statehood to legitimise its intervention in war overseas by amending the constitution.

In particular, the heightened rivalry between the United States and China and the blame of each other for the pandemic has shown that the two superpowers will not collaborate to find solutions to its health and economic effects. If we cannot rely on democratic states or the two most powerful nations in the world to restructure global governance, should then we leave it to non-state actors or international organisations? Surely not.

New standards of civilization and the need for a new leadership

In his paper, "[The 'Standard of Civilization' as an English School concept](#)," Barry Buzan puts forward the idea of the continued relevance of the 'standard of civilization' as an underlying mechanism to shape a just [international society](#), capable of responding to global challenges.

A seachange in the landscape of international society, such as potentially created by the COVID-19 pandemic, may entail new standards of civilizations and be a critical juncture where global governance is reformed. However, it is unclear which nations are qualified to steer the great transformation of the standard of civilization in the

era of post-pandemics.

What is clear is that we need a new leadership to govern a new normal beyond the G2, G7 and G20. Major democracies have mishandled their COVID-19 response. Multilateral cooperation has severely deteriorated and neoliberal globalisation has retreated from its powerful position limiting government interventions. The rebirth of big government has emerged with isolationist approaches to protect national constituencies from the pandemic.

Middle powers, which share not only the core values of liberal democracy and multilateralism but also positive experiences of successful COVID-19 management, could provide a new set of global public goods, particularly in developing countries; and reconnect the fractured structure of global governance between democracies and authoritarian states, the Global North, the Global South, and the United States and China. Acting as an international mediator, a middle-power coalition could help restore global governance, reform it and act as a political buffer-zone, cushioning the world from the worst effects of protectionism by proposing a new form of multilateral collaboration and new 'standards of civilization'.

South Korea could lead the way to a 'new normal' through a middle power alliance

South Korea would be one of best candidates to marshal an alliance with like-minded middle-power states.

It has certainly demonstrated its leadership capabilities in the context of COVID-19 by handling the pandemic in a democratic and accountable way. It has also shared its experience of best practice. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has introduced the ten best practices for dealing with the pandemic and its consequences. These include international economic co-

operation to address trade issues created by border closures, continuing with key democratic events such as elections, and using new technology for contact tracing and quick virus testing to reduce transmission without widespread lockdowns.

Indeed, flattening the curve on COVID-19 in South Korea has relied heavily on civic engagement including citizens' voluntary compliance with self-quarantine measures and social-distancing. Public participation has materialised into civic activism nationwide in the form of volunteering for response efforts in hard-hit areas, as well as supporting vulnerable communities that are likely to be overlooked, such as undocumented foreign workers.

At the global level, South Korea's widely lauded management of COVID-19 is a timely reminder of its worth as a regional actor, collaborating with successful partners in the Asia-Pacific such as Australia and Taiwan, and showing competency as a global initiator of middle-power coalitions and new standards of civilization. Seoul should avail itself of opportunities created by the pandemic to reinforce international cooperation and lead a returning to 'normal' global governance.

First, Seoul could lead a new set of international frameworks for infectious diseases in collaboration with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN member states' framework to prevent new and reduce existing disaster risks). Japan has long been a leader in terms of the Sendai Framework in the context of natural disasters, but Seoul could add expertise on viral pandemics.

Second, Seoul could link the Global South with the Global North as a middle power through its official development assistance and the other methods of foreign aid. In May 2020, South Korea took the lead in launching the Group of Friends of Solidarity for Global Health Security with Canada, Denmark, Qatar, and Sierra Leone to combat COVID-19.

Third, South Korea could galvanise a coalition for health security with like-minded middle powers, particularly Australia. In April 2020, South Korea's foreign minister took the initiative in adopting a joint statement on COVID-19 and international

health cooperation with foreign ministers of the MIKTA member countries – Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey and Australia. South Korea could also help fill the political vacuum left by G7 countries via middle-power coalitions; and in May, US President Donald Trump proposed South Korea, Australia, India and Russia should be invited to the next meeting of the G7 to form the so-called 'G11'.

The COVID-19 crisis has created possibilities for South Korea and other middle powers to lead proactive cooperation at bilateral and multilateral levels. Indeed, it is high time to reinvigorate middle-power coalitions to launch a new leadership capable of enhancing a new standard of civilization and the 'new normal'.

Image: South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, arriving at the G20 summit in Argentina in 2018. Credit: G20 Argentina/Flickr