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Masks Down: Diplomacy and Regime Stability in the Post-Covid-19 Era

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Abstract

Natural disasters can create peaceful diplomatic interactions between conflicting parties, be they warring states or warring domestic factions. Advocates of "disaster diplomacy" argue that while events such as epidemics, earthquakes, floods, windstorms, and tsunamis result in human tragedies, they also generate opportunities for international cooperation, even between enemies. Conversely, natural disasters can also create rifts between friends and allies. Case studies of individual disasters show that while these events sometimes facilitate diplomatic efforts, they may also emphasize existing differences, creating rifts and exacerbating conflicts. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a unique opportunity to test the disaster diplomacy hypothesis on a rare global health crisis that affected many nations of various regime types and with various relations between them. We argue that pandemics and large-scale emergencies can change the rules of the diplomatic game by exposing states' genuine interests while disregarding international community norms. As such, the Covid-19 pandemic is tearing off the masks from states' faces, opening paths to cooperation with unexpected partners while creating rifts between yesterday's allies. We thus argue that post-Covid-19 diplomacy may be characterized by previously rare tendencies such as "trading with the enemy" on the one hand and abandonment of international agreements on the other. Moreover, on the domestic front, such crises tend to exhibit strong fluctuations in regime type, with a clear shift toward populist parties. Additionally, this article provides two alternative explanations for these phenomena and offers an in-depth analysis of two case studies.

Keywords

China; Covid-19; democratic backsliding; diplomacy; disasters; emergencies; European Union; international organizations; liberal order; terrorism

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1. Introduction

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic not only created an immediate global health crisis but also prompted a profound re-evaluation of governmental priorities and norms worldwide. National interests were reassessed, and international norms were altered to accommodate the survival instincts of states and the emergency aspects of international interactions. The unique amalgamation of threat, uncertainty, and urgency disrupted the accustomed rhythms of political decision-making, policy implementation, and public service delivery, and uncovered the "naked truth" of self-preservation and a global solidarity crisis (Boin et al., 2021).

Viewing the global Covid-19 crisis through a disaster diplomacy perspective reveals striking parallels with other emergencies. The deep uncertainty about the course of the pandemic, along with how people perceived it and how it was discussed and treated in politics, reflects challenges often faced in other types of crises. Watching how Covid-19 was handled by the authorities in different countries, citizens struggled with a lack of knowledge and information, as well as with their fears and emotions and with how the narrative of the crisis was communicated to them.

The primary challenge confronting post-Covid politics and diplomacy arises from the persistence of altered methods, structures, and norms, even as the immediate emergency subsides. Just as pre-Covid mechanisms proved inadequate for addressing the era of global pandemics, the adjustments already made by politicians, institutions, and organizations throughout this prolonged crisis are ill-suited for addressing present and future challenges.

In essence, examining the political and diplomatic results of the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of crisis management that characterizes disaster diplomacy illuminates not only the immediate challenges faced by governments but also the enduring norms and practices that shape crisis responses and distinguish them from everyday norms. This article seeks to unravel the intricate interplay between crises and diplomacy, shedding light on how pandemics alter state priorities and unmask true intentions in an era where diplomacy is forced to "take its gloves off." We argue that natural disasters, such as pandemics, set in motion a process that forces states to reveal their true preferences, and those can be far removed from what has been known by then.

The article proceeds as follows: The next section overviews the disaster diplomacy scholarship. The third section analyzes how pandemics and global health emergencies, as a subset of natural disasters, alter state preferences and unmask norms. The next two sections evaluate the case studies of the Maldives and the EU. The sixth section ties up the ends and discusses diplomacy and politics in the post-pandemic world. The final section concludes and offers recommendations for future research.

2. Disaster Diplomacy in Theory

Disaster diplomacy is a fast-growing, eclectic, and interdisciplinary field, drawing insights from multiple areas concerned with war, peace, disasters, and humanitarian aid. The main argument advanced in the disaster diplomacy scholarship draws upon the international relations literature and emphasizes the necessary prerequisite "shocks" for ongoing conflicts to reach an end. At the heart of this argument lies the assumption that sudden and significant changes in the existing political environment are needed for rivalry to end

because shocks force decision-makers to overcome the paralysis inherent in enduring rivalries (Diehl & Goertz, 2000). However, some differences are evident since natural disasters, unlike enduring rivalries or regime changes, represent external shocks to the system or specific states that are not caused by forces inherent to rivalry politics, and this may result in a counter-reaction to the inertia in interstate conflicts. This process may proceed in a completely different direction and thus start (or initiate) peace-making between rivals.

However, the shock of a natural disaster may also lead to opposite consequences; that is, it may exacerbate existing rivalries and initiate a spiral of greater violence, especially in cases where parties can blame one another for the loss of lives or insufficient collaboration in recovery efforts. The scholarly literature has given ample attention to these two potential opposite effects in the context of climate-related disasters, particularly water-driven shocks such as droughts and floods, to explain the mixed findings reported in studies investigating the relationship between these disasters and the risk of violent conflict (Döring, 2020; Mach et al., 2020).

In a recent study on how natural disasters can escalate or defuse wars, insurgencies, and other types of conflicts, Ide (2023) uses both qualitative insights and quantitative data to explain the link between disasters and the (de-)escalation of armed conflict, and examines over 30 case studies of earthquakes, droughts, floods, and storms in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. He also examines the impact of Covid-19 on armed conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and the Philippines. To show the significance of natural disasters in recent decades, Ide offers the following data:

> Since the year 2000, such disasters have claimed 1.25 million lives. Some past events were even more devastating, such as the 1959 Yellow River flood in China (2 million deaths), the 1965–1967 drought in India (1.5 million deaths), the 1983–1984 drought in Ethiopia (300,000 deaths), and Cyclone Bhola in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1970 (300,000 deaths). To this, one can add the health effects of disasters—for example, injuries, post-traumatic stress, the destruction of housing, health, water, and food infrastructure, and post-disaster disease outbreaks. (Ide, 2023, p. 2)

This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the closest in its approach to our study of the links between natural disasters and conflict (or diplomacy and policy, in our case). The most relevant findings to our current study are the conditions under which natural disasters can lead to more peaceful relations between belligerents.

An additional contribution of Ide's study is the comparative analysis of societal resilience to natural disasters. If we assume that those are exogenous shocks to societies, we also need to acknowledge that there is a variation in how societies deal with them. Some have better capabilities and are better equipped than others to mitigate the adverse effects of natural disasters. The magnitude of natural hazards can also impact societies in various ways, depending on different factors that vary across societies.

One particular feature of Ide's (2023) research that is directly relevant to our current study is the chapter on the conflict implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the dynamics of ongoing armed conflicts between a government and a rebel group in four cases: Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Nigeria. The findings are as follows:

1. The pandemic can lead to conflict escalation, facilitate conflict de-escalation, or, in some cases, have no impact at all on conflict dynamics. These outcomes also depend on contextual variables. It is, however, unclear under what conditions these variables have more (or less) impact.
2. The effect of Covid-19 on armed conflict dynamics was much more significant in societies that are already vulnerable to health crises and "where at least one conflict party was negatively affected by the pandemic" (Ide, 2023, p. 212).
3. The strategic environment of armed groups is the variable that best explains the linkages between Covid-19 and armed conflict dynamics.

While these findings are ground-breaking in some respects and explore initial links between Covid-19 and diplomacy, Ide's (2023) study does not explore the variation under which the same conditions can lead to a crisis (a pandemic, in this case). In contrast, others can lead to (more) peaceful relations. Additionally, while Ide's research explores the impact of Covid-19 on conflict at the intrastate level, our study focuses on interstate conflict.

We identify three features that make natural disasters especially prone to affecting and potentially altering relations between rivals (Lutmar & Mandler, 2023).

Responsibility (or the lack thereof): Natural disasters (as opposed to man-made disasters) are considered a force majeure, influencing all parties' perceptions. Moreover, in natural disasters, one cannot attribute blame to any party (as opposed to cases of man-made disasters).

Universality: One cannot know where natural disasters will strike or the type of disaster (earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and wildfires) that is more likely to occur. Moreover, we cannot predict the speed with which these disasters develop and occur, and we cannot say with certainty which type of natural disaster will hit a particular area on the globe even though there is some knowledge on regional vulnerabilities to specific types of natural disasters (Stoltman et al., 2004). This unpredictability makes countries potential recipients and donors of aid. Furthermore:

> [This] makes natural disaster prevention, relief and reconstruction different from any other type of international collaboration. The universality of natural disasters implies perceiving any state's relief efforts as an impartial, benevolent act of solidarity and support. Thus, when such a proposal of collaboration on disaster mitigation, prevention or relief arises among rival parties, it carries the potential of being treated entirely differently than any other negotiation possibility. (Lutmar & Mandler, 2023, p. 4)

Transience and geographic demarcation: Given that natural disasters occur suddenly and require an immediate response from all possible sources, geographical proximity plays a crucial role in disaster relief. Therefore, a geographically close neighbor can offer help if it has good relations with its stricken neighbor or even if there are no relations at all. At the same time, the aid can be perceived as a conciliatory gesture (extending a hand) to a neighbor in cases with a history of hostile relations. The most recent examples of China offering help to Taiwan in the 2024 earthquake or of India providing help to Pakistan in 2005 showcase how disasters can create dynamics that influence and alter a rival's preferences.

3. Covid-19: How Pandemics Alter State Priorities and Unmask Intentions

3.1. Emergency Politics

Recent studies have increasingly shown how exogenous events, such as storms, rainfall shocks, and droughts, affect various domestic political factors. A key focus of this literature is on the mechanisms through which governments can use post-disaster relief measures to consolidate their control over society. Rahman et al. (2022) found a negative relationship between the frequency of storms and levels of democracy in island nations, suggesting that governments may exploit these emergencies to tighten their control over society. This mechanism is also highly relevant to health crises.

During a health crisis, governments are confronted with the imperative to emphasize collective health and safety needs. Stringent surveillance and control measures, often deemed necessary to contain the spread of disease and minimize casualties within the state, may encroach upon individual privacy rights and civil liberties. To mitigate risks and minimize uncertainties, governments may also resort to temporarily expanding executive powers, which poses inherent risks to democratic norms and institutional checks and balances (MacGregor et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the socioeconomic ramifications of health emergencies exacerbate existing disparities within impacted societies. Vulnerable populations, already marginalized by socioeconomic inequalities, are disproportionately impacted by both the disease burden and the economic fallout of control measures. In such contexts, democratic governments face mounting pressure to adopt inclusive policies designed to rectify underlying structural inequalities and ensure equitable access to healthcare and social support systems. At the same time, autocratic regimes may encounter unrest and social upheaval that threaten the regime's survival.

The rapidly worsening economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a heated political debate on the ethical conundrum of balancing the health needs of vulnerable groups against the broader societal imperatives of prosperity and well-being. Governments were criticized for persisting with measures such as social distancing, lockdowns, and other restrictions which, while potentially prolonging the lives of the elderly and infirm, extracted a steep cost from the rest of the population. In navigating these complex moral dilemmas, politicians found themselves compelled to act within pressing time windows and under great uncertainty about the effectiveness of their decisions and the political toll they entailed (Boin et al., 2021).

This shift towards "emergency politics" was accompanied by the suspension of due processes in the name of addressing urgent threats. Furthermore, the pandemic exacerbated implicit and explicit associations between Covid-19 and the "Other"—individuals, groups, minorities, and even races. Exclusionary nationalism and racism have led to the stigmatization of specific groups as carriers of diseases, resulting in the disproportionate disadvantage of marginalized communities. In this way, the pandemic response reinforced the majority's dominance while further marginalizing vulnerable groups (Bieber, 2022).

Governments, confronted with multifaceted challenges amid the exigency of emergencies and constrained by a lack of time for traditional decision-making processes, frequently opted for expedient, occasionally populist measures with indeterminate ramifications. Prioritizing the interests of the majority over those of minority groups, opting for expedient remedies over enduring solutions, and withholding information that might cause

complications revealed the underlying motivations of political actors and their primary orientation toward their own political survival. Consequently, such practices profoundly eroded citizens' trust in various forms of authority, causing a split between politicians and the public, the reconciliation of which is a significant challenge for all governments in the post-Covid-19 era.

Several studies published in the initial stages of the pandemic argued that political measures such as lockdowns triggered a "rally around the flag" effect, boosting institutional trust in some European countries (Bol et al., 2021; Esaiasson et al., 2020). However, Schraff (2021) suggests that this apparent rise in political trust might actually stem from the initial anxiety caused by the growing number of cases. Therefore, it is more likely that initial anxiety, rather than an appreciation of government measures, explains the early surge in political trust during the first Covid-19 waves. Subsequent studies examining political trust after the first month of the pandemic indicate that political trust began to decline (Davies et al., 2021).

3.2. Pandemics Fuel the Urge to Isolate and Withdraw From Others, Fostering Selfishness

The most promising strategy for managing and ultimately mitigating any global crisis, such as Covid-19, resides in extensive, multidimensional collaboration among nations, including the exchange of vital information and resources. It is ironic, then, that the basic human instinct in times of emergencies is to turn away, to seclude oneself, and to restrict contact with others. The pandemics serve as catalysts for these natural tendencies, igniting the innate human inclination towards seeking closure and erecting barriers for protection and containment (Diamond, 2020).

In addition to implementing domestic policies to address social, economic, health, and safety issues within their own countries, governments applied their foreign policy strategies to bolster their response to the effects of Covid-19 and isolate themselves from other countries. Border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic epitomized the widespread adoption of isolationist policies on a global scale. Several governments closed their national borders to visitors from countries with high Covid-19 cases, while others closed their borders entirely. Numerous countries opted to shutter their international airports, with the transatlantic travel ban as a prominent example. These measures substantially reduced air passenger traffic, severely impacting industries such as tourism, travel, lodging, and restaurants. The ensuing economic downturn led to widespread unemployment as governments prioritized safeguarding public health and preventing healthcare system collapse over economic considerations (Alhashimi et al., 2021).

At the international level, health emergencies necessitate cross-border cooperation and diplomacy, especially as multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization take the main stage. Despite the common interest to contain and eradicate the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and divergent national interests may impede collective action, underscoring the challenges of global health governance (MacGregor et al., 2020). It was, therefore, no surprise that the Covid-19 pandemic strained intergovernmental relations, especially in federal and multilevel systems such as the EU, challenging their ability to coordinate effective responses and avoid politically harmful blame games (Boin et al., 2021).

The pandemic reinforced the primacy of the state in international relations. The rapid escalation of state intervention witnessed globally in the weeks following the pandemic outbreak starkly diverged from the traditionally limited role of the state within the neoliberal global framework (Bieber, 2022). The renewed

primacy of the state caused by the Covid-19 crisis also weakened global governance and cooperation. China's handling of the coronavirus, particularly its lockdown policy, incurred significant economic costs, potentially eroding its long-term power. However, countries such as Russia and China expanded their global influence through propaganda, power projection, and growing self-assurance, placing democracy on the defensive.

The pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of individual nations to fluctuations in global supply chains and exacerbated pre-Covid-19 challenges to the liberal international order (Lake et al., 2021). During times of health crisis, vulnerability exposes many countries to potential shortages in vital medical supplies. In addition to medical-related shortages, government control measures during the pandemic caused significant disruptions in global supply chains, leading to shortages of other critical goods. These shortages sparked both public and elite discussions about the need to promote national production and shorten supply chains. As Mansfield and Solodoch (2022) show, anxiety, fear, and economic damage fueled a rising anti-trade sentiment across the US. This sentiment, which is not unique to the US, coupled with the need to reduce strategic vulnerabilities, led to a re-evaluation of globalization, as articulated by numerous leaders. Resulting protectionism among the greater powers, such as the US and China, amplified existing rivalries (Lake et al., 2021). Smaller states bolstered nationalistic sentiment, intensifying competition for power and influence on the global stage (Bieber, 2022).

3.3. Pandemics: An Opportunity for Autocratic Tendencies

Epidemics, and particularly pandemics, demand prompt and resolute government action, providing fertile ground for autocrats to further their agendas (Diamond, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic spread amid an ongoing global backdrop of democratic decline (Diamond, 2020). Over the past decade, there has been a marked recession in freedom and democracy, with more nations witnessing a loss rather than a gain in political rights and civil liberties.

The mainstreaming of exclusionary nationalist ideas, propelled by the rise of the far-right, permeated societies across numerous countries, fostering widespread acceptance of these ideologies. This trend had already been gaining momentum before the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, laying the groundwork for a global crisis. As the pandemic unfolded, it provided an unprecedented opportunity for autocratic leaders to wield executive power, leading to the erosion of democratic institutions and checks and balances (Bieber, 2022).

In line with Stephen M. Walt's predictions, the emergency measures implemented across regimes during the pandemics have had a twofold, already observable impact (Allen et al., 2020): On the one hand, the pandemic strengthened the state and reinforced nationalism by empowering governments, with many reluctant to give up their newfound powers once the Covid-19 crisis had faded. On the other hand, we are now experiencing a severe crisis in state legitimacy and severe state weakness, which is putting ever more states at risk of becoming failed states, challenged by global crime and terror organizations. While the pandemic caused some states to strengthen their grip on society in order to survive, others' readiness and capacity to address the spill-over of global challenges into local problems is quickly diminishing.

In vulnerable, mixed regimes where the risk posed by natural disasters is higher than in autocracies or consolidated democracies, a pandemic serves as an advantageous situation for political conflicts (Nel & Righarts, 2008). Especially within nations undergoing democratization, an emergency or disaster tends to

regress the regime toward its original autocratic inclinations. Conversely, within hybrid systems initially rooted in democracy but experiencing deterioration, a pandemic that is inadequately addressed by the government accelerates the erosion of democratic values. The governmental measures designed to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic come with a threat of transforming fragile democratic systems into competitive authoritarian structures. These regimes, pivoting towards nationalism and separatism as a central legitimizing doctrine to perpetuate their authority, threaten international security and stability (Bieber, 2022).

3.4. The Post-Pandemic Era: Post-Truth, Post-Shame, and Post-Trust?

As mentioned, the pandemic induced diminished institutional trust, factual disagreement, and a blurred distinction between opinion and fact. This era heightened citizens' craving for certainty, often sought in reassuring information from trusted institutions that aligned with their existing beliefs. Confusion and uncertainty arose from conflicting facts and sources. Charlatanism, misinformation, and errors emerge in response to individuals' desires and interests aligning with comfortable, non-dissonant facts (Schulman, 2020).

While the deliberate misinformation propagated by some government officials stands out as characteristic of the mishandling of the Covid-19 response, the global dissemination of falsehoods and conspiracy theories through social media and other mass communication channels during the pandemic has shaken the basic distinction between lies and truth (Adler & Drieschova, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic created an environment where governments were more inclined to engage in willful obfuscation for various reasons: either to downplay the severity of the pandemic to maintain public calm and to avoid panic, or to manipulate information to portray their response in a more favorable light or to deflect blame for any shortcomings in their handling of the crisis. In the post-pandemic era, even if the governments themselves are not directly causing willful obfuscation, the "lead by example" effect is already in place, creating conditions that facilitate such behavior in politics and governance (Shelton, 2020). Indeed, public figures today appear to exhibit less embarrassment or remorse when their falsehoods or lies are exposed. Voters want public figures and political leaders who say and do what they believe to be true, even if those beliefs are unpopular, inconvenient, or even inaccurate (Hannon, 2023). However, when political leadership is characterized by dishonesty or misconduct without any expression of shame, people stop being surprised or feeling ashamed about their own behavior as well. It also becomes more difficult to know whom to trust. If we believe others do not feel bad about lying or behaving contrary to accepted social norms, it makes sense to trust them less.

When political leadership is marked by dishonesty or misconduct without any sense of shame, it normalizes unethical behavior among the populace. This erosion of trust and moral norms provides fertile ground for conspiracy theorists, extremists, terrorist groups, authoritarian regimes, disinformation networks, hate groups, cybercriminals, cults, and political opportunists to exploit societal divisions and sow chaos. While lockdowns and emergency measures by states may have hindered the operations of such groups during the Covid-19 crisis, simultaneously, the fact that governments' attention was diverted toward combating the pandemic inadvertently provided opportunities for these organizations to thrive (Alhashimi et al., 2021).

In the post-Covid-19 era, these dynamics have led to an increase in terrorism and extremism. The disruption caused by the pandemic has exacerbated social and economic grievances, creating fertile ground for

radicalization. Moreover, the heightened vulnerability of youth, coupled with the prolonged disruption of traditional education systems, has made them more susceptible to extremist ideologies. As governments continue to grapple with the aftermath of the pandemic and prioritize recovery efforts, addressing the root causes of terrorism and extremism, including socioeconomic disparities and youth vulnerabilities, will be crucial in mitigating the risks posed by these threats in the post-Covid-19 world.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a deep political crisis, challenging societal values and governance structures within states and on the international stage. Criticism emerged over leaders' and international organizations' handling of scientific advice, institutional effectiveness, and trust in public institutions, sparking debates on democratic resilience and the rule of law (Boin et al., 2021). Overall, the pandemic strained mutual trust, a crucial element for the survival of the highly connected national and international political systems.

Emergency diplomacy is frequently initiated by exogenous events beyond the control of policymakers. However, the policies that countries adopt to manage these initial shocks are shaped by various domestic political factors and can significantly affect society (Lipscy, 2020). In addition to the structural shifts these broad impacts impose on the international system, they may also influence national preferences in conflict.

4. Abandoning Old Commitments and Embracing New Alliances: The Maldives

The Maldives has historically had ties to India but has recently made a dramatic shift towards China. China has been investing in the Maldives as part of its "String of Pearls" strategy to create a network of military and commercial bases in the Indian Ocean. During his presidency, Maldivian President Solih and his government halted many Chinese investments and built frameworks to provide checks and balances to Maldives' relatively weak democratic institutions. He also reiterated an "India-First" policy and received considerable Indian assistance in debt relief. Solih's efforts at democratization were, however, hindered by the impacts of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

At first, the Covid-19 crisis provided another opportunity to strengthen the alliance between the Maldives and India. In 2020, India provided the Maldives with a surveillance plane for medical evacuation from isolated communities on about 200 inhabited islands, which was actually intended to help keep a close eye on the movement of Chinese vessels in regional waters. When Covid-19 started impacting the Maldivian economy, primarily due to a decline in tourist arrivals, India promptly provided assistance, which included a $150 million currency swap aimed at stabilizing the Maldivian economy, along with the delivery of 200,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccine (Thakur, 2023).

As Taneja and Bali (2021) contend, India's assistance to the Maldives should be viewed as part of a broader strategy, where India leveraged its aid to other countries to capitalize on the crisis and assert its leadership in South Asia. However, the impact of this policy was not solely determined by India's regional and global priorities; it was primarily influenced by the international Covid-19-related developments occurring in the Maldives. As time passed, the waves of the global Covid-19 pandemic severely battered the Maldives. Since 2020, the social effects of Covid-19 on the densely populated main island have drawn Maldivians towards fundamentalist rhetoric and actions. This trend heightened the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalists and extremist groups during the pandemic, as evidenced by the May 2021 terrorist attack on Nasheed by Islamic extremists (Bhim, 2024).

Maldivian supporters of the Islamic State and other jihadist factions swiftly seized upon the pandemic as a tool for propaganda. There was a resurgence in efforts to translate and disseminate Islamic State propaganda, with a focus on portraying Covid-19 as a "warrior of jihad," a divine intervention revealing the West's vulnerabilities. Anti-Western sentiments surged, alongside narratives depicting the pandemic as a heavenly retribution for societal sins and the perceived un-Islamic nature of the tourism sector. Messages advocating religious purification and a revival of "pure" Islam were propagated (Ranjan, 2023).

It is against this background that the 2023 presidential elections took place. Under Mohamed Muizzu's leadership, the current Maldivian administration campaigned against former President Ibrahim Soleh's strong relationship with India and his India-First policy. Muizzu advocated for closer relations with China and successfully stirred public discontent towards India's allegedly unnecessary military presence in the Maldives (Rajagopalan, 2024).

During a state visit to Beijing in January, President Muizzu and Chinese officials signed 20 agreements covering various areas such as infrastructure, trade, economy, green development, grants, and other development projects, representing around $127 million in aid. Praising China as one of the Maldives' closest allies and developmental partners, Muizzu emphasized the trip's significance. Subsequently, in March 2024, the Maldivian defense ministry unveiled a military assistance agreement with Beijing to bolster bilateral ties. This strategic move aligns with Muizzu's overarching efforts, initiated since assuming office in November 2023, to cultivate stronger ties with China. This shift follows his campaign promise to remove Indian troops from Maldivian territory and assert national sovereignty. Concurrently, Muizzu announced his government's decision to reassess bilateral agreements with India, including the termination of a hydrographic survey agreement signed in 2019, scheduled to expire in June 2024.

5. Rifts Between Existing Allies: The EU

As mentioned earlier, natural disasters have consequences on various dimensions: social, economic, and often geopolitical. Our goal here is to show how the pandemic altered some of the EU members' preferences. At the onset of the pandemic, even several model democracies of the EU adopted extraordinary measures (Ilyas, 2020), including emergency measures and restrictions on democratic governmental rules. As Ilyas (2020) mentions:

> [A] number of these measures are feared to be dismantling checks and balances vital to the continuity of democratic practices. As has been history, pandemics have provided states the excuse to expand their powers, as fear has made people comply [with] stricter orders. Italy, Spain, Poland, and France are heavily fining people who are out without a reason. Countries have closed their borders to any and all activity, some even leaving their own citizens stranded offshore. (p. 8)

In addition to the significant health and economic crises and democratic backsliding the EU experienced, the global pandemic struck a huge blow to the idea of international cooperation and inter-organizational cooperation. Unlike previous notable EU crises, in which specific governments and leaders could be held responsible for the crisis, the pandemic was considered a symmetrical external initial shock. Therefore, although one might have expected the absence of someone to blame would foster increased solidarity within the EU, even scholars praising the EU's subsequent response to the pandemic acknowledge that the EU initially failed to act (Quaglia & Verdun, 2023).

In particular, one of the most remarkable developments involved Italy, a member of the EU, that, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, surpassed China's number of casualties (Pratiwi & Salamah, 2020). The EU had long maintained a reputation of being an organization whose members exhibit boundless cooperation for well-being beyond the mere economic integration of its member states, and those states that did better in terms of state response and preparedness were expected to extend assistance to other EU states. Instead, amid initial anxiety and varied health impacts across member states, policymakers initially resisted a centralized response. They hoarded personal protective equipment, restricted the movement of essential supplies such as respirators, and sought national control over critical supply chains (Anghel & Jones, 2023). The pandemic exposed its lack of cohesion when none of the member states responded positively to Italy's pleas to the EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre for supplies of medical equipment in general and vaccines in particular (Ilyas, 2020), although no European state had yet suffered as badly as Italy had at that time (Braw, 2020). To Italy's huge disappointment, during the pandemic, the EU hit Italy with a €7.5 million fine in a case that had been running against Italy since 2008 (Fogli & Pastorini, 2021). In yet another inversion of its expected allies or sources of help, Italy received vaccines from China, Cuba, and Russia, furthering the lack of cohesion in the current system of not only Italy but also the Baltic states, "which [felt] abandoned by their closest neighbor, the EU, amid the export restrictions on healthcare supplies" (Ilyas, 2020, p. 12). These intra-organizational frictions, in light of extreme circumstances and in the shadow of a natural disaster, raise concerns about the strength of the alliance and the commitments that tie its members. That is, if the organization acts against its foundational expectations when a crisis arises, then what are members to conclude about future potential disagreements in the realm of security, climate change, and immigration policies—all contentious topics?

In fact, some viewed these surprising developments within the EU, and its response to the global pandemic crisis, as a de-globalization process (Grant, 2020). The pandemic provided extra ammunition to the proponents of greater national self-sufficiency in particular and European self-sufficiency in general (especially given its turn to China for help with the provision of medical supplies).

Contrary to initial reluctance to adopt centralized EU measures, member governments gradually began collaborating on collective responses, notably launching the largest multi-year recovery fund, NextGenerationEU. While hailed as a step forward, NextGenerationEU's implementation has been more complex and incomplete than the initial "Hamiltonian moment" narrative suggests. Its launch led to elite controversies and, as Bauhr and Charron (2023) demonstrate, the extent to which national governments endorsed or opposed the package significantly influenced public support or opposition. Thus, though unprecedented in scale, the financial package represents a more modest expression of European solidarity than initially anticipated (Anghel & Jones, 2023).

The pandemic presented a major challenge to EU solidarity and its coordination policies among its members, and in many ways "reawakened those acute tensions between Northern and Southern member states which had already shattered the EU several times during the 2010s" (Ferrera et al., 2021, p. 1347). This "existential crisis" was averted this time. However, it opened a sufficiently large, albeit temporary, crack within EU cooperation unity that no one can no longer be sure that crises like this will not resurface when natural disasters strike again.

6. Diplomacy and Politics in the Post-Covid-19 Era

In May 2023, media outlets covered an incident involving delegates from Ukraine and Russia in talks on Black Sea cooperation in Ankara, Turkey. A physical altercation ensued in the corridors when the secretary of the Russian delegate forcibly seized a Ukrainian flag that was on display for a photo op. The Ukrainian delegate intervened, reclaiming the flag and engaging in physical confrontation, including punching and slapping his Russian counterpart. Video footage of the scuffle was subsequently posted on the Ukrainian diplomat's Facebook page, where he expressed his indignation with the caption, "Paws off our flag, paws off Ukraine" ("Ukrainian delegate punches Russian rep," 2023). A similar event occurred in October 2020 in Fiji when tensions between China and Taiwan flared into a physical altercation between their diplomats ("China–Taiwan tensions erupt," 2020).

While it is widely known that warring Ukraine and Russia, as well as Taiwan and China, harbor deep animosity towards each other, such unfiltered and aggressive behavior in front of the camera goes against accepted norms of diplomatic conduct, such as professionalism, courtesy, and promotion of peaceful conflict resolution. Moreover, posting the behavior with pride on social networks clearly shows that the involved parties feel no shame regarding their behavior. Is it a coincidence that two such incidents occurred in the Covid-19 and post-pandemic era? We argue that the pandemic has stripped away many formalities and barriers in various dimensions of society, including diplomacy and politics. Diplomats, like everyone else, display more authentic or unfiltered behavior due to the global demand for sincerity. The stress and uncertainty triggered by the pandemic created a preference for more candid expressions of emotions or opinions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably exacerbated the crisis of the liberal international order. The once-dominant role of the US faded as the country shifted its focus inward during the pandemic, leaving its allies behind. Advanced democracies, preoccupied with internal challenges and divisions, have also seen their influence wane (Diamond, 2020). However, neither China, the EU, nor international organizations have proven capable of filling the hegemonic void. During the pandemic, all major powers hesitated to extend assistance to needy countries, while international institutions struggled to take the lead. Without a strong global leader, the diplomatic strategies of many states have become more assertive and aggressive.

The pandemic-induced shift in both global and national priorities has led governments to reassess their diplomatic objectives, priorities, and strategies. Their objectives encompassed not only addressing urgent public health and economic challenges, such as saving lives and limiting contagion, but also pursuing longer-term goals by diplomatic means, such as securing access to potential future vaccines and facilitating quicker recovery from the crisis. It is, therefore, understandable that the pandemic threatened the progress already made in multilateral promises and global agreements, which were consequently postponed or deferred.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries made repatriation of their citizens stranded abroad a top priority. This focus on bringing nationals home underscored a departure from globalization principles, highlighting a resurgence of national interests over global interconnectedness. Diplomatic apparatuses found themselves entrusted with new responsibilities aligned with each country's particular strategies for addressing Covid-19 (Alhashimi et al., 2021). Governments provided assistance to students, tourists, and migrant workers unable to remain overseas due to pandemic-related measures. Embassies and consulates

were allocated resources to support citizens in need, signaling a shift towards nationalist responses to the crisis. This tendency influenced multinational and supranational entities such as the UN and EU, as we have shown above. At the same time, while focusing extensively on domestic pandemic response efforts, governments engaged various sectors beyond their foreign ministries or equivalents. As a result, new types of diplomatic agents, such as celebrities, businesses, and social media influencers, entered diplomacy, altering the established pre-Covid-19 norms of conduct and diplomatic procedures.

The pandemic also transformed diplomats' daily operations, particularly in terms of in-person interactions and traditional diplomatic practices. Many governments were forced to implement efficiency measures in diplomatic missions, reducing staff numbers in embassies and consulates to cut costs, as well as delaying rotations and assignments to minimize expenses associated with staff transfers. For example, diplomatic staff numbers at permanent missions to the UN in New York were reduced to allow diplomats to repatriate and resume their responsibilities through virtual meetings from home.

Social distancing measures and travel restrictions rendered face-to-face meetings and events impossible, prompting a shift towards virtual alternatives such as online receptions and meetings. While these digital platforms have enabled continuity in diplomatic activities, they also had significant repercussions. Diplomacy, especially mediation, is a deeply interpersonal process that relies on a nuanced understanding of individuals and environments (Alhashimi et al., 2021). With social distancing restrictions curbing in-person interactions and online discussions frequently serving as the sole recourse, building trust and fostering the spirit of compromise essential to preventive diplomacy became much more challenging.

In accordance with Diamond's (2020) predictions, the anticipated consequences of ineffective mitigation strategies during the global Covid-19 crisis heightened international instability and insecurity. This environment facilitated the expansion of Islamist and other extremist factions, while animosity towards Western liberal democracies intensified. Since the Covid-19 crisis, international diplomacy has primarily been characterized by three trends: increased regional cooperation, tightening ties among similar governments, and status-seeking (Pedi & Wivel, 2020). The chaotic nature of national and global responses to the pandemic was a clear indicator of the post-Covid-19 international (dis)order (Rudd, 2020).

7. Conclusion and Further Research

The global pandemic has significantly fueled the proliferation of fear, with extremist groups seizing the opportunity to propagate conspiracy theories and exacerbate anxieties. This crisis has been exploited in various ways to promote diverse agendas, including undermining trust in democratic institutions and inciting violence through the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Moreover, the psychological and economic effects of the pandemic are poised to further intensify the politics of fear, while the global economic ramifications of the pandemic are expected to exacerbate exclusionary nationalist tendencies.

The analysis of the two case studies clearly shows how pandemic politics, more optimally understood with the help of a disaster diplomacy perspective, can have far-reaching geopolitical implications, in addition to economic and social consequences. These cases exemplify the shift in foreign policy priorities induced by the pandemic, altering existing alliances and forging new collaborations.

Looking ahead for promising paths for exploration, one can envision several avenues. The first is investigating how various natural disasters might affect the prospects for peaceful relations or rapprochement between belligerents. Moreover, there is a broad variation between states' resilience, but few studies have attempted to identify its underlying causes.

Many states face crises originating from large numbers of migrants, who contribute to domestic unrest and governmental instability, as well as to the rise of populist leaders and far-right parties. An interesting study would look at those countries and examine how the level of democracy and governance affects their preparedness for and management of natural disasters.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a tremendous challenge to the democratic quality and survival of many governments worldwide. The scholarly literature postulates that in countries with weak state-of-emergency regulation, major crises, such as natural disasters in general and pandemics such as Covid-19 in particular, pose a dramatic risk of democratic backsliding (Cassani, 2023). The case of the Maldives exemplifies this process precisely, with democratization processes obstructed and reversed due to the Covid-19 crisis. The case of Italy is, however, less clear. Although its democratic measures remain relatively constant, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, coupled with demographic shifts and high unemployment, have fostered the rise of nationalist, right-wing populism in Italy. Fratelli d'Italia and its leader, Giorgia Meloni, exemplify this trend, with the party tempering extreme stances on EU withdrawal and immigration while Meloni's espousal of homophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric, alongside alignment with Putin's Russia, signal democratic regression. Cultural clashes over abortion rights, surrogacy, and LGBTQ+ rights highlight this government's authoritarian tendencies.

Relatively little is known about the links between the strength of state-of-emergency regulation and the propensity of democratic backsliding in the shadow of major crises, and it is worth exploring this further. A final potential direction of future research can look at levels of aid countries provide to allies following natural disasters—as opposed to assistance to countries with which relations are tense. The motives for providing aid are diverse and can serve various interests (Lutmar & Mandler, 2019; Mandler & Lutmar, 2020, 2021). Therefore, a study of cases in which assistance is offered for various reasons, some for humanitarian aid and others in which the "masks are down," may offer important insights that might also be relevant to policymakers when they allocate resources from a fixed pie. Moreover, such research might provide valuable insights into institutional resilience and inter-organizational alliances.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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