How Wars, Sanctions, and Militarism Made the Coronavirus Crisis Worse

As we take steps to control the virus, these devastating U.S. foreign policies need to be immediately reversed.

Governments around the world are offering a tragic lesson in how denial, incompetence, and inequity have exacerbated the unfolding coronavirus pandemic. That is just as true in the United States, where President Trump's lies, denials, and half measures — as well as our woefully underprepared health system — are making the virus deadlier.

But there are also tremendously impactful foreign policy decisions that are magnifying the pandemic's toll. As we take steps to resolve the crisis, reversing this damage is every bit as critical as other aspects of our response.

Wars. The various wars that the United States has carried since 2001 have set the stage for an incendiary spread of disease in countries around the world.

Consider Yemen, where an ongoing cholera epidemic that began in 2016 became the fastest growing disease outbreak in modern history. The crisis is directly related to the war that Saudi Arabia has been prosecuting there since 2015 with critical U.S. assistance.

Aid agencies like UNICEF and the WHO have pointed to the war — which has displaced millions and devastated public sanitation and medical facilities — as the primary cause of the outbreak. Yemen's cholera outbreak is a tragic harbinger of coronavirus' potential impact in that country and others where the U.S. has waged the "War on Terror."

The commitment to war has had consequences for this country too. Decades of rising military spending — we now spend 53 cents of every discretionary tax dollar on the military — have starved the U.S. of the resources to build a better public health system or take other preventative measures.

Sanctions and blockades. Every ten minutes, someone in Iran dies of COVID-19. The crisis is made far worse by the fact that U.S. sanctions have prevented the country from accessing medical supplies and critical materials for manufacturing medicines. Targeting a country's medical industry for political purposes is always indefensible, but during a pandemic it's unconscionably dangerous.

Similarly, the U.S. has supported Israel and Egypt's blockade of Gaza since 2007. Medical supplies are among the many civilian items that embargo has kept out of the Palestinian enclave. With limited access to food, drinkable water, and medicine, the trapped people in densely populated Gaza are facing disaster as coronavirus hits.

| 1

UN officials have [warned](#) that similar catastrophes could unfold in North Korea or Venezuela as a result of U.S. sanctions as well.

Militarizing borders. The Trump administration's hardline stance against asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border has led to [makeshift camps of thousands on the Mexican side](#). This approach is inhumane and illegal, [violating international and U.S. laws](#) protecting asylum seekers. It has also produced a public health crisis, concentrating large numbers of malnourished people in squalid conditions, exposed to the elements, with no running water and limited access to medicine.

Tragically, the U.S. has exported this inhumane approach all over the world.

Jordan, for example, has received assistance from U.S. taxpayers and [contractors](#) to fortify its borders with war-torn Iraq and Syria since 2015. As a result, sprawling camps on the Syrian side of the border at [Rukban and Hadalat](#) have swelled to between 70,000 and 80,000 people. The UN has warned of a looming disaster once coronavirus hits these encampments, already characterized by abject desperation and abandonment.

Blaming China. President Trump, [sharing](#) talking points with far-right groups, for weeks mislabeled coronavirus as "the Chinese virus." The function of this xenophobia is to deflect attention away from the U.S. government's own mismanagement of the crisis, pointing to a foreign power — or worse, people who aren't white — instead.

Trump is not the first president to blame China for U.S. problems, but he's taken it to dangerous new levels. Beyond the current crisis, making China into an enemy is just the latest step in a long-term competition that's already led to trade wars and, in the background, an ongoing [gearing up](#) for military confrontation.

The impact will be disastrous. Already, racists have taken license to [attack](#) Asians and Asian-Americans in public. And stoking division on a world scale will undermine one of the most important keys to our collective survival of this crisis: cooperation across borders.

If there is one thing that a pandemic makes clear, it's that no country is an island unto itself.

The promise that we could wall off the country from the world and wage wars to "keep America great" was always a deadly lie. Now the cost is even greater, as anything we do that stokes infection abroad — from wars to sanctions to border militarization — ultimately creates more wellsprings for the disease here and abroad.

Nationalism will only make a global pandemic worse. We are all in this together, and our foreign policies should reflect that.

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