



Will Trump's Decision to Cut WHO Funding Accomplish Anything?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

April 17, 2020

Matt Kroenig: Hi, Emma! After a month in lockdown, I have become a Zoom master and I am finally finding a quarantine routine that works for me.

Emma Ashford: I can't do Zoom video calls any more, not since I did my own quarantine haircut on Saturday. It's OK, I'm sure it will grow out in a few weeks. For now, I just put up a "This is fine" background where the room is entirely on fire.

MK: Speaking of fires, a few weeks ago the Democratic Party seemed to be suffering from a giant self-inflicted dumpster fire, but now it appears to be getting its act together. The old joke is that Democrats fall in love and Republicans fall in line, but now it is the Democrats who have fallen in line behind Joe Biden.

EA: You're right about the Democratic Party. Every talking head said they'd be in chaos until June or August, but within the span of a few days, Bernie Sanders dropped out of the presidential race, and his heartfelt endorsement of Joe Biden was followed up by Barack Obama's endorsement the next day. Seems like they've got their act together for sure. Were you surprised?

MK: A bit. But in hindsight, Sanders had no real path to the nomination, so this was the right move for him and the party, to line up behind the person with the best chance of defeating Donald Trump in November.

EA: I was pleased to see that the Biden campaign also invited staffers from the Sanders campaign to join and work with them on key issues, including foreign policy. I think that bodes well for the future of Democratic foreign policy, which is undergoing a generational shift.

MK: True, that is a healthy sign. The rift between Hillary Clinton and Obama lasted throughout the Obama administration, and the Never Trump movement continues to divide Republicans.

EA: Well, he did make her his secretary of state! One of his worst decisions, I think. I have no doubt that we'd be in a better place on foreign policy today if Clinton wasn't in the Obama administration advocating her brand of hawkish internationalism. No intervention in Libya, for a start.

MK: I meant more the rift between the staffs. Obama aides weren't happy to see their jobs go to Clinton's people at State. And I was reassured that Robert Gates at the Pentagon and Clinton were present to stiffen the spine of the Obama White House on Iran sanctions, the Osama bin Laden raid, and a host of other issues.

But Democratic unity might not be enough. The election will be a referendum on Trump's handling of the coronavirus, and I think Democrats are too confident that the public's judgement will go in their favor in November.

EA: Except he's handling the coronavirus about as well as he handles criticism. The president spends his time ranting at governors about what they can and can't do, while his administration steals supplies out from under hard-hit states to send them to places like Florida that he thinks will win him reelection.

And I doubt even that will work. An incumbent's reelection chances have so much to do with the economy, and we're staring down the barrel of a double-digit recession here.

An incumbent's reelection chances have so much to do with the economy, and we're staring down the barrel of a double-digit recession here.

Unemployment claims continue to grow, with another 5 million this week. Actually, I think a lot of Democrats—particularly a lot of Sanders supporters—are going to see this as a vindication of their worldview.

MK: How so?

EA: Well, we've had Sanders and others advocating for Medicare for All, for example, in an era where millions of Americans are about to lose their jobs—and by extension, their health care. And universal basic income was a fringe idea when Andrew Yang raised it in the campaign a few months ago, but the same idea basically turned into the stimulus package that Congress passed recently with Republican support. I'm still not convinced that this is a vindication of Sanders's ideas as much as an acknowledgement that an unprecedented situation has required unprecedented solutions, but his supporters won't think that.

MK: Interesting point. But I think there is a difference in the need for an outside government role in the middle of a crisis compared to normal political times. And despite the criticisms of the White House briefings, the U.S. government has been the single most important global actor in this crisis.

Jerome Powell and the Federal Reserve have taken remarkable steps to try to keep the global economy afloat. And although it hasn't gotten much attention, USAID has provided half a billion dollars in aid to the developing world. Like much of the Trump administration's foreign policy and Wagner's music, the U.S. response to COVID-19 has been better than it sounds.

EA: Ha! Last I checked, though, the Fed was meant to be independent of the White House. I still don't think it's going to matter all that much. There's been some positive movement from the federal government, but there's still a lot of dysfunction and no obvious plan for testing ramp-up.

And finally starting to make progress isn't going to help Trump come November, when a thousand attack ads will surely point out that intelligence reports were clear on the risks of the

coronavirus spreading as early as January, when Trump was saying the virus was completely under control.

Starting to make progress now isn't going to help Trump come November, when a thousand attack ads will surely point out that intelligence reports were clear on the risks of the coronavirus spreading as early as January

MK: We disagreed on this last week. This issue has moved fast, and there was not an obvious need, or political support, for drastic measures that early. Trump restricted air traffic from China in January and was criticized for it. After all, it is hard to believe now, but [our March 7 column](#) did not even mention coronavirus! And I'm sure it would have gone over really well if Trump had ordered a nationwide lockdown in the middle of January and February's impeachment hearings. Hindsight is 20/20.

EA: True. And I can admit that I was probably too skeptical of Trump's travel ban, assuming at the time that it was just another attempt to shut the border from an administration that has cried wolf far too many times. If only the administration had done something with that time: stockpile equipment or ramp up testing, maybe.

MK: Well, the U.S. response wasn't helped by China's dissembling, aided and abetted by the WHO. What do you make of Trump's decision to halt U.S. funding to the organization?

EA: I'm honestly fascinated by the decision to cut WHO funding. On the one hand, it's pretty dumb to cut funding for global health and vaccinations during a pandemic. It's also very clearly another attempt by the Trump administration to shift blame. But equally, there are serious problems with the U.N. system and with the WHO. There may need to be a serious discussion about it after all this is over.

A major outbreak and looming recession in the United States has transformed the 2020 campaign—and could have major consequences for the future of great power politics.

MK: This crisis has surfaced all of the greatest fears of global public health experts on the international health system. We have all of these international agreements that look nice on paper (the WHO, the International Health Regulations, the Nagoya Protocol, etc.), but would they function in a pandemic? What we learned is that they were all thrown out the window in a crisis, and no one blinked. It reminds me of the old joke about arms control: When it is needed it doesn't work, and when it works, it wasn't needed.

EA: Isn't that just a fancy way of saying that international institutions are just paper tigers? It seems to me that the controversy over the WHO boils down to two camps in the United States: those who thought it genuinely was exempt from power politics and those who just think the Chinese now have too much influence. Seems like something we'll see in a lot of international institutions going forward.

MK: Yes. I hope the Trump decision to cut aid isn't about abandoning the institution, but a first step toward reasserting U.S. authority within it. We are entering a new era of competitive multilateralism in which these institutions will become arenas for U.S.-Chinese competition. This might also be an opportunity to create new global public health institutions that work better. The G-20 started holding summits and expanded its profile after the 2008 financial crisis.

Perhaps the United States and its allies can come together to create a new institution for public health.

EA: The Taiwan issue is concerning too. The Taiwanese government had a pretty effective response to the virus—especially given its location—and it was all ignored by the WHO.

The Taiwanese government had a pretty effective response to the virus—especially given its location—and it was all ignored by the WHO.

I just don't think it's going to be possible to create an organization that ignores the power political issues in the way you hope. Either you include China, and have problems like Taiwan, or leave them out, and the organization can't really be effective.

MK: I think greater coordination among the United States and leading democracies could accomplish quite a bit even without China. Speaking of leading democracies, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson fell ill to coronavirus. Experts are debating whether this pandemic will be as transformational for global politics as 9/11 or the Great Recession, but this is one area where it is clearly more significant: Every single individual on Earth from the leaders of G-7 countries on down is vulnerable and will be personally affected. I suspect a personal brush with death might instill in him greater resolve to tackle the crisis in Britain, which is now worsening.

EA: That's true. I'm glad Boris is out of hospital, but he's not even back to work yet as he continues to recover. The U.K. has been hit almost as hard as the United States by the pandemic; most of my British friends and family are under lockdowns that are far stricter than what we're experiencing here. Still not clear what any of this will mean for Brexit, though I have a sneaking suspicion there will be at least a year's delay in negotiations.

And Europe isn't nearly as united as it was even a few months ago. Brexit pushed European countries together in opposition, but the coronavirus seems to be dividing them. That might be to Britain's advantage in negotiations.

Brexit pushed European countries together in opposition, but the coronavirus seems to be dividing them. That might be to Britain's advantage in negotiations.

MK: This is a huge uncertainty for the post-COVID world. We saw that the 2008 financial crisis nearly tore Europe apart, and the economic impact of this crisis alone is likely to hit much harder. We already see major divisions in Europe over Eurobonds and other recovery measures. I very much hope that we can maintain European and trans-Atlantic unity at a time when Russia and China are doing their best to divide the free world.

EA: Only time will tell. But look, there was one last thing I wanted to talk about before we wrap up here. I've been fascinated by the emerging civil-military relations problems we're seeing here in the United States. On the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, a sailor has now died of COVID-19 after the captain on the ship was fired for calling attention to an outbreak.

MK: I am interested in the civil-military dimension of this episode, but I think there is an even bigger implication for U.S. defense policy. There are sick U.S. sailors. We are cancelling major military exercises. The Pentagon has halted troop movements. How do you recruit, train, or deploy forces when you can't gather large groups?

EA: There are readiness issues for sure. But as Capt. Brett Crozier noted in his leaked letter, we're not at war. It is foolhardy and pointless to risk the lives of sailors and soldiers during this pandemic just to sustain presence missions around the world. Plus, surely maintaining these deployments at the cost of mass illness would be worse if we did end up in a conflict; the French just announced that 700 sailors on the *Charles de Gaulle*, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, are now sick.

Or are you talking about something longer-term?

MK: Defense budgets are going to take a hit. It will be even harder for European allies to meet their burden-sharing requirements. And what if this crisis lasts not for weeks, but for two to three years, as some believe is possible? I worry that Putin or Xi will miscalculate and think that this is their chance. God forbid that China attacks Taiwan on the day the U.S. Pacific Fleet calls in sick.

I worry that Putin or Xi will miscalculate and think that this is their chance. God forbid that China attacks Taiwan on the day the U.S. Pacific Fleet calls in sick.

EA: Well, there are two ways to get to the NATO target of 2 percent of GDP in defense spending. One: increase spending. Two: decrease GDP a lot. We might manage No. 2! It's not exactly good news, though. But I think you're right that we're going to see falling defense budgets across the world. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing—perhaps a topic for our next debate?

MK: You're on. In the meantime, I'll work on coming up with a better Zoom background.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy at the CATO Institute.