

# **COVID-19 Pandemic from the Perspective of Realist Theory and Constructivist Theory in International Relations**

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## **Abstract**

Covid-19 pandemic represents one of the biggest challenges facing the international system, due to the effects and repercussions it has had on various aspects of life (political, economic, etc.), and the impact of all of this on the shape that the world may look like after the pandemic, just as not all countries were Ready to deal with this pandemic efficiently, which led to reactions that ranged between isolationism and cooperation, which resulted in tension in international politics in light of the current international system, and thus the discussion escalated between theories of international relations. Constructivists believe that the international system is a social structure based on the language and discourse prevailing during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, realist theory, constructivist theory.

## **1. Introduction**

Throughout history, the world has witnessed many deadly diseases and epidemics, some of which were epidemics confined to countries or a specific geographical area, and others were global epidemics or what is called a "pandemic", which claimed the lives of tens or even hundreds of millions of people, the last of which was the Covid-19 pandemic, Which appeared at the end of 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan and then quickly spread to all countries of the world and continues to this day, as Covid-19 pandemic is one of the major events that the world has witnessed, as it had a great reality among all components of the international system, as it left The spread of the virus has negative effects on all areas of life, economic, social, political, and security. The theories of international relations (realism and constructivism) were able to explain the behavior of countries prevailing during the pandemic. The realistic theory and its hypotheses were able to explain the conflict and competition prevailing during the pandemic. Constructivism and its hypotheses were able to explain the language and discourse prevailing during the pandemic.

## **2. COVID-19 Pandemic from the Perspective of Realist Theory in International Relations**

Realists believe that epidemics negatively affect the power of the state, so controlling infectious diseases must be of great importance. Infectious diseases can impact the economic system, and then undermine the production of the national economy, which in turn will affect its military strength and capabilities in international politics.

This pushes countries to pay more attention to their domestic policy than to foreign

policy in an environment full of chaos, competition and conflict, which can lose their position (Brakman et al., 2021). As for the Covid-19 pandemic, the hypotheses of the realistic theory of various streams could explain the behavior of countries in light of the epidemic crisis.

### **2.1. *Classic Realism***

Classical realism emphasizes the role of the state as a unitary actor in international relations, and this has been proven by the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, by restoring the central role of the national state after it had retreated in the era preceding the emergence of the virus in favor of non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations, multinational companies, armed groups and other actors (Layne, 2009). The state played a central role, in light of the escalation of the precautionary measures adopted by countries, and the policy of quarantine and isolation adopted by governments (Dajani et al., 2021), as the pandemic demonstrated the failure of global organizations in the beginning to contain the negative repercussions of the pandemic in exchange for the increasing role of the national state in taking precautionary measures in order to reduce the risk of infection. The repercussions of the pandemic and the protection of the citizen, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has proven that the state is capable of facing risks and crises, including epidemics, and the best example of this is the success achieved by the Chinese model in light of the epidemiological crisis versus the decline of the Western model, due to the weakness of the state in it, and one of the most important features of the state's return during the Covid-19 pandemic were represented in the direction of each country to work individually in order to limit the spread of the virus (Al \_ Qaralleh & Al-Majali, 2021), and the state played a central role in developing a vaccine for the disease, whether in partnership with the private sector or through government research centers (Ben-Zeev, 2020).

Stephen Walt believes that the Covid-19 virus will contribute to strengthening the concept of the state, strengthening nationalism and consolidating the grip of governments that have imposed a set of measures to control the virus, as he believes that these governments cannot give up their new authority easily after the end of the crisis (Leonardelli et al., 2021). It is worth noting that the Covid-19 pandemic has restored trust between the citizen and the state after the state proved that it is best able to deal with crises that threaten the survival of people, and the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states did not face any difficulty in implementing the policies it took during the epidemic crisis such as (imposing quarantine, Isolate the injured), and as for democratic and semi-democratic countries, the form and nature of the intervention opened new horizons about the nature of the state's role in the future, as well as the controls and limits of its intervention (Hasan, n.d.). The classical realist theory considers that competition, conflict and chaos are the features of international relations (Burchill et al., 2022), and this is what we have noticed in the light of the epidemic crisis, as competition and conflict between the active international powers (the United States of America and China) have increased, and Stephen Walt believes that epidemics in the past did not end the competition between The great powers, and did not lead to a new era of cooperation and that this situation will be repeated with the Covid-19 pandemic (Khorram-Manesh et al., 2022).

Classical realism sees that human nature is characterized by evil and selfishness (Bercovitch & Regan, 2004), and this is what we find in epidemiological crises. The tendency of selfishness has dominated the majority of countries, and this was evident in the absence of international solidarity, as every country closed in on its interests (Brands & Gavin, 2020). An example of this is the position of the European Union countries towards Italy, which is one of the founding countries of the European Union, as the member states of the European Union left Italy facing its fate in light of the failure of the health system in it due to the increasingly high number of injuries (Kostagiolas & Katsani, 2021), as well as the tendency of selfishness to

control international relations with regard to the distribution of vaccines. The policy of distributing them was characterized by a catastrophic moral failure, which is what Dr Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organization, alluded to, and considered the policy of distributing vaccines unfair because vaccine doses were distributed to rich countries at the expense of poor countries (Khorram-Manesh et al., 2022).

## 2.2. *Structural Realism*

Structural realism emphasizes that suspicion and mistrust are rooted in the international community (Sakai & Marfleet, n.d.), and this is what we find in the epidemiological crisis, as the active countries in the international arena (the United States of America, China) exchanged accusations, one to the other, regarding the origin of the Covid-19 virus, so Joseph Nye went to say that the mutual accusations between China and the United States of America about the source of the virus represent an obstacle to international cooperation and have a major role in the decline of the concept of international cooperation and the retreat of countries into themselves (Leonardelli et al., 2021), so international cooperation will continue to face many obstacles due to the lack of guarantees that make every country have confidence in the state other (Kostagiolas & Katsani, 2021). Mearsmeier believes that international cooperation is hindered by two factors, the first being considerations of relative gains, and the second being a fraud in the case of cooperation (Sylvester, 2013). In the epidemiological crisis, we find that some countries have adopted crude behavior even with friendly countries, for example, France contracted to buy protective masks from China, so the United States of America established purchasing the protective masks that France contracted while at the airport to change its destination from France to the United States of America after its value had tripled to four times (Ben-Zeev, 2020). Structural realism emphasizes the principle of self-help. Kenneth Waltz's book "The Theory of International Politics" has given a deeper dimension to the realist theory, as he sees that the biggest difference between the internal system and the international system lies in the structure of the system. In the internal system, citizens cannot defend themselves, but in the international system there is no supreme authority that prevents the use of force, and accordingly, security can only be achieved with self-help and self-reliance (Brakman et al., 2021).

Referring to the Covid-19 pandemic, we find that countries dealt with the virus according to their policies and health programs, as well as crisis management programs and the development of health emergency plans according to the emerging developments of the virus (Atere et al., 2020) because the virus is a global phenomenon that has caused countries to isolate themselves from others. Suffering and facing economic difficulties and chaos caused by the virus have led to the leaders of countries abandoning international cooperation, closing their borders, and relying on their resources to confront this crisis and recover from it (Zakaria, 2020). For example, some countries have relied on their military institutions in the epidemiological crisis, as the spread of the virus has led many countries to rely on their armed forces to confront the biological threat (Covid-19), and the dependence of countries on employing their armies in the face of the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic is due to their extensive experience to confront risks. One of the most prominent roles played by the military institution in the epidemiological crisis is the application of quarantine, as some countries have worked to declare a state emergency and deploy their forces in various cities and streets to implement the measures imposed by the ruling authorities. The military also worked to support the health sector because of its technical expertise and logistical capabilities to manage crises and emergencies (Matei et al., 2021).

Offensive realists such as Mearsmeier believe that countries seek to maximize their strength in order to survive (Sakai & Marfleet, n.d.), as we see that the Covid-19 crisis has

increased conflicts between the United States of America and China, and in discounting the accusations that we are addressing by both sides about the origin of the Covid-19 virus, we find that each party has worked to weaken The other side, as the United States of America believes that it must take measures that would weaken China because China's success in containing the virus, as well as providing aid to countries that have been infected with the virus, would put the position of the United States of America at risk (Lanteigne, 2020), so it is clear that the behavior of Former US President Donald Trump against China and accusing it of spreading the virus aimed at limiting Chinese influence and maintaining its place, the United States of America at the top of the regime's pyramid politically, economically, and militarily (Hua & Shaw, 2020), while Joseph Nye believes that epidemics and diseases historically have not led to changes in the international system, but that Who changes the international system are wars (Leonardelli et al., 2021).

Kenneth Waltz, who is considered the pioneer of defensive realism, believes that the security of the citizen at home has become one of the most important tasks of the state at present (Smith, 2004). The security of individuals may sometimes exceed the threats to the national security of countries, and by reference to the Covid-19 pandemic, the threat of this pandemic to the security and life of the individual may be a greater threat than military threats (Ben-Zeev, 2020), as the statements of many leaders of Western countries revealed that the threat of the Covid-19 virus is no less important than military threats (Matei et al., 2021).

### **2.3. Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical realism sees that domestic policy is an extension of foreign policy, that is, foreign policy is only a result of internal influences and variables and in the epidemic crisis (Omar, 2013). We find that China has succeeded internally with the will of the Covid-19 crisis thanks to its strict system and the ability to manage society and state institutions. China has achieved this success to enhance its influence externally as well as improve its image internationally, as China adopted a policy of generosity with countries to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. In the European Union, and the preoccupation of every country in how to manage the crisis, this crisis highlighted the extent to which countries depend on China not only for medical aid, but also from the administrative side (Perthes, 2021), and thus China has worked to employ its internal success in managing Covid-19 crisis externally. It is worth noting that China's behaviour towards the Covid-19 pandemic explains its adherence to the broad lines of its foreign policy, which was crystallized during the era of Xi Jinping, represented in deepening its participation in the international system and multilateral international cooperation, and its great openness to the World Health Organization and expression of its willingness to increase its funding for the organization's activities after The position of former President Donald Trump towards the organization and his withdrawal from it, is the best embodiment of the new face desired by the Chinese leadership, as its ambition is not limited to the commercial expediency dimension in its foreign relations, but also to improve its relations with countries (Ye, 2021).

## **3. COVID-19 Pandemic from a Constructivist Viewpoint**

The constructivist theory focuses on the role of ideas, values and culture in shaping international relations. It analyzes issues of identities, interests, ideals, and preferences. It also attempts to explain patterns of power and forms of its continuity (Acharya, 2014). The collapse of the Soviet Union was due to the shift in its identity from a federation to a state and this was followed by a similar transformation in the identity of its republics to independent sovereign states (Watson, 2019). Constructivism emphasizes the importance of the power of discourse, as it may be possible through language to manipulate discourse to produce a specific



interpretation against another interpretation of the same material given, and this means that interpretations are not included in what is material but can be built and reconstructed by employing the power of discourse, and by reference to Covid-19 pandemic. We find that the sharp populist rhetoric adopted by former US President Donald Trump was based on the policy of blaming China. Donald Trump considered the Covid-19 virus to be a "Chinese virus", as he considered the World Health Organization to be complicit with China (Hemchi, 2021). The speeches of leaders around the world were related to the quest for the popular mobilization to confront the virus, follow health instructions, and convey a sense of threat to the masses to accept exceptional measures to preserve survival (Hänninen & Sools, 2022).

Therefore, we find most security leaders in their political speeches stressing security language and concepts when they talk about issues that do not have security content. And they present it as representing a real threat to specific goals related to the national security of the state and security in its general sense, and this is evident in most political discourses across countries and governments during the pandemic, as the pandemic was presented as a real threat to development and stability in addition to a threat to the life of the citizen (Xu et al., 2021).

As we find the phrase "we are at war" was repeated in the speeches of many state leaders, and the (Covid-19 pandemic) was described as the "invisible enemy" and "the most dangerous health crisis in an entire generation." However, these speeches were criticized for spreading fear and panic among citizens (Xu et al., 2021). Although the speeches of some leaders at the beginning of the pandemic reassured the masses, their rhetoric changed later, for example, in President Donald Trump's speech on January 22, 2020, in which he said, "The situation is under control and the crisis is not serious," but in his second speech in April of the same year, he said, "Today we are facing the most serious crisis, and the coming days are difficult" (Darwich et al., 2021). As for the speech of British Prime Minister (Boris Johnson) on March 3, 2020, he confirms, "I am not concerned about shaking hands with people." On April 6 of the same year, Johnson was transferred to intensive care due to his infection with the virus, while Britain ranked fifth in the number of deaths (Darwich et al., 2021). It is clear from the foregoing that the language of discourse played a major role in implementing exceptional measures in light of the epidemic crisis, as closure and social distancing became the prominent language in the speeches of state leaders. Constructivism emphasizes the importance of identity in shaping the interests and actions of states, as actors do not have interests independent of the social context, but define their interests in the process of social interactions and practices (Darwich et al., 2021). Expressing it and then cherishing it and defending it, and concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused the closure of borders and the suspension of flights. This caused a problem for citizens, as they became stuck in airports between different countries, and their repeated appeals to their governments to evacuate them in various ways (O'Sullivan, 2014). This case has proven that the person who roams the world and moves across continents, in the end, remains belongs to a country that holds its passport, which bears his responsibility. National identity and the decline of post-national identities, and this will enhance belonging to the state, according to Stephen Walt, "The pandemic will strengthen the state's position, and it will enhance national belonging, and it is expected that there will be a decline in the level of globalization and that it will begin citizens rally around the governments of their countries to protect them (Kühnhardt, 2021).

The Italian case is a good example of the return of national identity and the decline of post-national identities. The Italians worked to burn the flag of the European Union, an expression of a real crisis between them and Europe, as they repeated the saying "We will save ourselves." And that reflects the redefinition of Italian identity, the growth of national identity at the expense of European identity, as well as the elevation of individual and self-value over

the values of European solidarity, and also Italy's abandonment of its European identity, and the substitution of self-reliance instead of interdependence (Kertcher, 2021). In addition to the foregoing, the Covid pandemic expanded the concept of civilizational conflicts to include competition and conflict to control nature and confront the threats resulting from it using modern technologies and technology after the conflict was based on ideas and domination, and this is what emerged in the Chinese model in confronting the virus.

As the pandemic re-established identities Between a Western identity and its vaccines in America, Britain and Germany, and a Confucian identity to restore a clash between civilizations in the light of competition and conflict in providing vaccines to reach the hierarchy of the international system.

#### **4. Conclusions**

1. The realist theory based on power and interest was able to explain the conflicting and competitive behaviour of countries during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the pandemic proved the shortcomings of international leadership, as the United States of America, did not act as a leading country in the international system, the pandemic showed the weakness of the liberal system in the face of unforeseen crises. The traditional versus the success of the authoritarian regime in the face of such crises, and the conflicts between the active international powers increased during the period of the pandemic, such as China, the United States of America, Iran and the United States of America, as the parties exchanged accusations with one another about the origin of the virus and its source, and the pandemic restored the pivotal role of the state after the outbreak of the virus. It declined in previous years in favour of non-state actors, as the state played a central role, in light of the escalation of precautionary measures adopted by states, and the policy of stone and isolation adopted by governments.
2. The constructivist theory that sees the system as a social structure was able to explain the Covid-19 pandemic based on the language and discourse prevailing during the pandemic, as the pandemic proved to enhance the role of national identity and the decline of post-national identities, and the pandemic also expanded the concept of civilizations conflicts to include competition and struggle to control nature. Confronting the threats resulting from it by using modern technology, and the language of discourse played a major role in implementing exceptional measures in light of the epidemic crisis, as closure and social distancing became the prominent language in the speeches of state leaders.

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