

## **Corona-induced Opportunities for Cooperation: Looking Through the Lens of Disaster Diplomacy**

Jason A. Silverman \*

The spread of COVID-19 has succeeded in sending a shockwave throughout the international system, spurring changes in international relations that are likely to remain beyond the current crisis. One area that has the potential of being dramatically impacted is international cooperation. In collective fashion, rival states throughout the world such as India and Pakistan and Israel and the Palestinian Authority are teaming up for collaboration efforts in combating Coronavirus. How will this impact future cooperation between them if at all? It is possible that such cooperation currently taking place in times of crisis sets a precedent likely to enable future cooperative opportunities as well.

Much can be learned from the disaster diplomacy academic literature in order to analyze how the pandemic is likely to impact cooperation between rival states. This literature deals mostly with natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes, but is also relevant for global health crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic. It mostly examines [cases](#) such as [Turkish and Greek collaboration](#) following the devastating 1999 earthquakes that hit the region; increasing cooperation between Pakistan and India following the 2001 earthquake; and the context of cooperation after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and its effects on the conflicts in Sri Lanka and Aceh, Indonesia.

Drawing on disaster diplomacy scholarship, I propose that states have within their power the ability to hinder or promote opportunities for continued post-Corona cooperation. In an instance in which Coronavirus diplomacy is used for national political gain—for the

---

\* The author is a PhD Candidate in the Hebrew University's International Relations Department and the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations.

purpose of improving one's own international status and prestige—it is likely that long-term cooperation will not occur.

On the other hand, collaboration during the Corona crisis without further expectations and strings attached is able to build trust, giving rival states the confidence to pursue collaborations in areas beyond crises. The adoption of the latter policy by decision-makers is crucial for promoting a cooperative future.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have [tightened](#) their cooperation efforts concerning the Coronavirus. The move has drawn the praise of several world powers and international organizations such as the United States and the [United Nations Security Council](#) and has been seen as a possible “blueprint” for renewed peace negotiations in the future. Interestingly, Israel and the PA's cooperation efforts have extended into [many domains](#) that are affected by the virus, including work permits and the transferring of withheld funds. In this context, instead of engaging one another through the prism of rivals or even enemies, Israel and the PA have come to recognize that they have a common enemy to defeat. This fight can be waged together and produce new precedents of positive interaction between the two, thereby building trust for future collaboration.

However, disasters are also known to have been weaponized in order to worsen relations between countries. This is when disaster diplomacy fails to fulfill its cooperative potential and a golden opportunity is missed. A clear illustration of this unfortunate occurrence can be found in the current interaction between China and the US regarding taking cooperative measures for addressing the crisis.

In the past, the United States and China have proven capable of boosting cooperation on global health by setting such a precedent during the SARS crisis. As a result of this response, the two competitors demonstrated [increasing willingness](#) to collaborate on issues of stability and economic growth in the context of other global health crises that emerged later such as Ebola and the H1N1 influenza strain.

Currently, it appears that the highly competitive, zero-sum nature of US-China relations is blinding each party's vision from seeing the opportunity for cooperation instead of competition. This comes as a result of seeking to take advantage of the crisis as a way of improving international status and prestige at the expense of their competitor. In terms of China's behavior, it is possible that a lack of willingness to cooperate stems from a general distrust of the US and President Trump as well as because it might limit their control of information. On the other hand, many influential voices in the United States have utilized the opportunity to outbid China vis-à-vis the global crisis and demonstrate that Beijing is to blame and that a ["decoupling"](#) from the country should be implemented in order to prevent its desire to become the premier manufacturing center in the world. Thus, the sudden opportunity for a turn in events in the US-China relationship in the form of humanitarian cooperation that is likely to influence future collaboration efforts as well, seems unlikely.

In the meantime, people's lives are at stake and US citizens are paying a hefty price for their government's increased competitive worldview at the expense of opportunities for cooperation amidst the global struggle against COVID-19. The future of these countries' cooperation is dependent on how they handle collaborative efforts now, during this crisis.