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Apr 03, 2020 by *Sohaela Amiri*

How COVID-19 Makes International Affairs More Humanly Decent ^[1]

Yes, we are in a crisis. This is serious. There is so much to mourn. There is much to prepare for. But one silver lining is that while our physical distance is growing, our hearts seem to be getting closer. We are witnessing more humanity, empathy and compassion. This is an opportunity for a fundamental transformation of our interactions with each other, our values, and our assessment of power, authority and governance.

From the people of Wuhan who were the first to experience quarantine, to the people of Milan, Tehran and New York, human nature is the same. We, the people, have much more in common with each other than we acknowledge. It is during times like these that we realize how much our fears, pains and struggles are mutual.

By the time we overcome this pandemic, we will have had the opportunity to grow as a society and as human beings toward a higher value system. This socio-cultural growth, global

solidarity and the antecedent empathy create an environment in which nations need to become more attractive on the global stage, thereby more secure. This is a time when the health and vigor of a nation matters just as much, if not more, than its military arsenal.

Celebrating Cross-National Dialogue Between People

I would like to see a more orchestrated effort to establish dialogue, a genuine exchange of thoughts, experiences and feelings between the people who are going through the same struggles, like between those who have to redesign their profession and business models. And also between those sharing the same joyful experiences, despite challenges: a family that is spending more time with their children, healthier folks who go out of their way to help the more vulnerable, etc. There is so much they can learn from each other. Regardless of their ethnicity, culture or religion, there is so much they can share that will bring their hearts and minds closer and strengthen solidarity.

Think of the Shared Studios projects, where people come 'face to face' with their counterparts abroad. The cities of New York and Tehran created a portal where “people in either city can walk into a scale-replica of a shipping container outfitted with an AV connection to the other city and have a live impromptu chat with a stranger partway around the globe.” Newer technologies such as video chats and augmented reality apps are being used to connect homes together as we physically distance, but as we become more accustomed to these devices they can be used for cultural diplomacy and revolutionize language teaching and learning.

Boosting the Value System

Feelings of solidarity, sympathy and respect don't require cultural assimilation. What we perhaps need is not an increase in physical travel, nor to buy Starbucks coffee in Vienna, nor to wear the same brand. COVID-19 has shown we are already similar to each other because of the very physical features, feelings and emotions that make us human. That, combined with communication technologies, are enough to develop mutual understanding and respect. Perhaps this fight is not as much about globalization versus isolation as it is about humanity versus barbarism.

Perhaps we need to reevaluate the culture of individualism and American Exceptionalism that have contributed to the situation we are in today.

The United States of America, the wealthiest nation on Earth, leads in terms of numbers of Coronavirus-infected individuals. There is a leadership crisis, but the president's approval ratings are high. There is little regard for science, fact-based analysis or expert opinion, and not just in the White House. This is a bipartisan problem because policymaking affects everyone. It should not be treated like a game, because in this we either all lose or we all win. If we see half of the society as winners or losers, we have a systematic problem. And that is value-based.

Perhaps by establishing dialogue between people around the world, we come to understand

ourselves better, and decide on the national image and a value system that we can unite behind. We can adjust our policies accordingly, to first and foremost serve domestic constituents while standing united with others around the world, showing goodwill and solidarity. This will give us true power: the power to attract, inspire and lead. This is what Joseph S. Nye calls soft power.

Accelerating Responsible Statecraft

Attraction power or soft power allows us to have foreign policies that are better balanced between coercion and peaceful persuasion. Coercive power is activated through mechanisms such as military operations or economic sanctions. Attraction power is activated through mechanisms such as public diplomacy, issue-specific cooperations, diplomatic negotiations, nation branding or humanitarian aid. But for these mechanisms to function as expected, contextual factors such as a nation's health, wealth and vigor matter among other things.

Even if the U.S. won the attractiveness contest during the Cold War era, there is still an important lesson that is worth highlighting again today. In the Long Telegram and the [X article](#) that George Kennan, former U.S. diplomat, wrote to the White House in 1946, he outlined our problem as such:

“Much depends on [the] health and vigor of our own society...This is [the] point at which domestic and foreign policies meet. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale, and community spirit of our own people is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués. [We must] formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture [of us and our worldview].”

That “picture” needs to be a reality today.

An improved grand strategy designed for the success of a nation has to include two things: genuine dialogue with foreign publics in the digital age; and domestic actions aimed at ensuring the “health and vigor of our society” and our values at home. The two feed off of each other and grow hand-in-hand. I have hope that as we overcome this crisis, we move toward realizing the beautiful picture of this nation as one that lives in harmony and solidarity with itself and with other nations.

I look forward to a future where human decency, goodwill and the integrity of a nation count—just as much as its GDP counts—in building global influence. All these factors are crucial for generating attraction power.

I look forward to seeing a shift in our value system such that we value facts and science, but equally empathy, compassion and human decency. This will affect our metrics for assessing and electing good leadership across public offices as well. This might also increase resiliency against disinformation.

I look forward to a future where we do not equate security with military power. To be secure, we need attraction power. Global engagement and cross-national dialogue are crucial today. We need to do better storytelling, but we also need to do better listening. We need to keep up our productivity, innovation and a strong military, but we also need to have an attractive value system, human decency and solidarity.

Photo: Screenshot of video taken near Azadi Tower in Tehran, Iran displaying messages of global solidarity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
