

The global (in)action against coronavirus has made the pandemic worse.

The coronavirus outbreak which according to the United States(US) President Donald Trump was [less dangerous than common flu](#), can now be safely called a deadly pandemic. China has faced severe backlash for withholding information about the virus and clamping down on Beijing doctors who warned about the severity of the outbreak. [A recent study](#) claimed that if China had imposed a shutdown in Wuhan three weeks earlier, the number of cases would have been reduced by 95%. As the virus spreads across the countries killing thousands and rattling the world economy, many people across the world are blaming China for this crisis. China deserves its share of criticism, but solely focusing on its failures gives us a myopic picture of the world's incompetence in dealing with the outbreak.

[“We have it totally under control. It’s just going to be fine”](#), said Trump in January when journalists raised concerns about the coronavirus outbreak becoming a pandemic. Two months post this statement, the US has become the worst affected state with more than 400,000 cases by April 9. In late January, the World Health Organisation(WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak as a [“public health emergency of international concern”](#), and called for strict action by member countries to restrict the virulence of the epidemic.



Graffiti in São Paulo, Brazil

Despite this, several world leaders continued to play down the early warning signs, dismissed the risk attached to the spread of the virus and prioritised their political/economic interests in the face of adversity. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro [falsely asserted](#) that Brazilian blood is immune to coronavirus and instructed people to live 'normally', in spite of several warnings given by his fellow ministers and the opposition. Brazil, where authoritarianism has trumped public safety, currently has more than 10,000 cases. In Mexico, President Obrador prioritised economics over public health and [urged](#) people to go out shopping to support the economy. Spain, which is one of the worst-hit states, saw a similar pattern of political neglect by its Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who [allowed](#) large public gatherings including football games and political rallies, despite several warnings by the WHO.

Read: [COVID-19: Creating a New World Order](#)

A commonality in all these countries is that political leaders chose to talk down the pathogenic risks even though their fellow ministers, opposition parties, medical-research thinktanks, the WHO, and the civil society continued to voice their concerns against the outbreak. It is reasonable to understand that some politicians might prioritise politics/economics according to the situation in their countries, however, it doesn't justify their inertness to develop and implement a proper response mechanism against the virus. Political negligence has delayed action against the outbreak, allowing the virus to spread across countries, causing fatalities. As a result, the world has been shut down, people have been rendered jobless and the virus is showing no signs of slowing down. Even in March, when the virus was wreaking havoc across the globe, Trump called it a "[democratic hoax](#)". On the contrary, [South Korea](#) took action early on, correctly identifying the gravity of the situation and has been successful in restricting the number of cases and [flattening the curve of new infections](#) without imposing a draconian lockdown or shutting down its economy. This tells us that an early, well-planned, coordinated response could have helped in saving lives and restricting the outbreak to a large extent. The bandwagon which solely blames Beijing for the current situation only helps the case of political leaders who first neglected the risks associated with the virus and now wish to cover up their shortcomings.



Soaring demand for respiratory masks and plastic gloves pushed for a global shortage/
Image: WSJ

The pandemic has exposed the lack of preparedness of public healthcare systems to deal with such emergency situations. Inadequacy in medical equipment is a major problem facing the world. The [global demand](#) for personal protective equipment (PPE) has surged by over 40%. Most affected countries in [Europe](#), the [US](#), [India](#), [Brazil](#) and many other countries are facing an acute shortage of protective equipment like masks, gowns, gloves, and sanitisers. This has affected the efficacy of preventive measures and handicapped governments trying to restrict the number of active cases, which has led to disastrous consequences, for example, the death of [60 healthcare professionals](#) in Italy. The fact that doctors face risks to their lives due to lack of equipment while treating patients raises several serious questions about the ability and viability of the public healthcare systems.

Another glaring issue which the worst-hit states have in common is the inability of healthcare services to accommodate a large number of ill patients. This can be linked to the significant budget cuts in the healthcare sector, the National Health Services of Italy have witnessed a reduction of [\\$40 billion](#) over the last decade. While in Spain, waves of privatisation and reduction in healthcare expenditure worth [\\$10 billion](#) were undertaken in recent years. Similarly, in the US, the Department of Health and Human Services suffered budget cuts of over [\\$7 billion](#) since 2018. This pattern of budget-cut clearly indicates a deprioritisation of public healthcare as compared to other issues of national importance. Pandemics create a surge in demand for medical equipment and facilities since they tend to affect a large number of people within a short time span. “You can’t have surge capacity if you’ve already been cut to the bone”, says [Scott Burris](#), director of the Centre of Public Health Law Research at Temple University. We can conclude that major countries of the world, including those which boast excellent healthcare services, weren’t simply ready to cope up with the coronavirus pandemic. Some political leaders are acing the blame-game targeted at China, but they can’t run away from the fact that their repressive policies, wrongful prioritisation of issues centred around their self-interest and negligence have worsened the situation which could have been possibly contained.



Italy has a world-class health system. The coronavirus has pushed it to the breaking point/Image: NBC

After the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak of 2002, the world adopted the International Health Regulations(IHR) in 2005 to provide a public health response to the international spread of pathogens in ways that would minimise fatalities and restrict its spread. China has been, rightfully so, criticised for violating the IHR. However, if we take a look at the larger picture, the IHR has been of little help in controlling the pandemic. It calls upon all member states to strengthen national capacity to tackle pathogenic outbreaks, which includes better preparedness for rapid detection and monitoring of a possible outbreak. The current situation reveals that the countries have not done enough and we require well planned precautionary and early warning systems to identify and tackle viral-outbreaks head-on. International agreements are rendered meaningless if they're not followed by systematic implementation. While the Chinese administration must be held accountable for its actions, the world cannot afford to turn a blind eye towards the multitude of human-made factors which have catalysed the spread of the virus, otherwise, we shall be worse off in fighting a future pandemic.

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