



# Cooperation in the Post-Pandemic World

A Report on European and International Cooperation  
Following the Spread of Covid-19



Björn Fägersten & Mark Rhinard (eds.)



Swedish Civil  
Contingencies  
Agency





**This report has been produced in cooperation with the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency**





## Content

Content .....	3
Foreword by Dan Eliasson .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Reshaping European and International cooperation in the Post-pandemic world - Summary of the roundtable discussion .....	5
Reflection Note - Crisis Management and International Cooperation in a Covid-19 World.....	9



## Foreword

**Dan Eliasson, Director-General, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency**

As the initial shock of Covid-19 fades into a realisation of long-term effects, a range of issues takes the stage. Easing restrictions, finding vaccines, restarting economies, addressing inequalities, improving resilience, tackling debt, and strengthening health systems are just a glimpse of the challenges ahead us. All of these challenges rely on strong and purposeful international cooperation.

In order to explore the challenges and possibilities for European and International cooperation ahead, The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) together with the Swedish Institute for International Affairs (UI), invited leading thinkers from Europe and beyond to a roundtable discussion on June 11, 2020 on the topic of “Reshaping European and International cooperation in the Post-pandemic world”. This is the second international roundtable organized by MSB on the long-term consequences from the Covid-19 pandemic.

MSB has been tasked by the Swedish government to build crisis resilience and reduce vulnerabilities in a whole-of-society perspective. The Covid-19 crisis is truly a transboundary crisis, affecting all sectors and all levels - from the individual citizen to our global and international institutions. The long-term impacts and consequences are also transboundary. As we move forward, our ability to cooperate across all borders, administrative, organizational and geographical will be essential.

In this report UI captures some of the main trends, shaping the future needs of cooperation. Among other aspects they point to the key role of trust and confidence between states and citizens in “bouncing back” from this crisis, as well as the importance of promoting trust-based international norms between governments and institutions in emerging risk areas, such as hybrid threats.

The results from the two seminars will help us direct our attention as we continue to strengthen crisis resilience in cooperation with stakeholders and partners. I hope that the report can be useful for others, both within Sweden and internationally and contribute to the important debate on how we can all be better prepared to face future transboundary crises.



## Introduction

This two-part report stems from the ‘Reshaping European and International cooperation in the post-pandemic world’ conference held on June 11, 2020. The first part summarizes the contents of the conference, including the central insights of its high-level speakers. The discussion was organized around three central questions. What trends promise to shape future cooperation? How well-suited are existing institutions for future tasks? How can national authorities ensure value added from European and international cooperation?

The second part draws inspiration from the event and adds extra analysis. It considers the opportunities likely to emerge at the European and international levels and outlines how national authorities can facilitate and reap the benefits of those cooperation opportunities. This ‘reflection note’ offers a pointed set of recommendations regarding how to improve cooperation for more effective crisis management and resilience in the years ahead.

Both parts of the report aim to provide a resource for crisis and resilience management officials moving forward, with an emphasis on cross-border cooperation. While national authorities bear the primary responsibility for first response during crises, regional and international cooperation is vital for improved planning, preparedness and future response support. We hope this report will help draw early lessons on the successes and failures of international cooperation on Covid-19 – and outline key measures for improvement.

## Reshaping European and International cooperation in the Post-pandemic world - Summary of the roundtable discussion

**Alina Engström & August Danielsson**

On June 11, 2020, the **Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI)**, in collaboration with the **Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)**, hosted an online high level roundtable discussion with the aim of identifying future trends and needs of international cooperation in the “post-pandemic world”. The roundtable focused on three overarching questions:

1. What are the main trends shaping the future needs of cooperation?
2. How do existing institutions and platforms for international cooperation cater for these new cooperative needs as well as for policy coherence?
3. How can national agencies and actors adapt in order to draw on the added-value of European and International cooperation?

MSB Director General Dan Eliasson delivered introductory remarks. His comments were followed by presentations from seven speakers. The invited speakers each focused on specific issues related to the effects of the Covid-19 crisis, including the geopolitical consequences of the crisis, how the EU, UN and NATO have responded to it, the growing impact of hybrid threats and how we can identify similar types of crises in the future.

The speakers included:

Alexander Stubb, Director of the School of Transnational Governance. Former Prime Minister of Finland, former Minister of





Foreign Affairs, former Minister of Finance, former Vice-President of European Investment Bank

Ulrika Modéer, Assistant Secretary General UNDP, former State Secretary to the Minister for International Development Cooperation and Climate

Dan Smith, Director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI

Yves Daccord, Affiliate at Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Harvard University, Seasoned Executive, Former Director General ICRC

Claus Sørensen, Senior Advisor on European Union, Humanitarian and Development Policy, former Director General for DG ECHO and DG Communication

Mark Rhinard, Senior Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, and Professor of International Relations at Stockholm University

Teija Tiilikainen, Director of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE)

The discussion was moderated by Björn Fägersten, Head of the Europe Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

In the following, we summarize the main points brought up in the discussion and the subsequent Q&A session.<sup>1</sup>

### **What are the main trends shaping the future needs of cooperation?**

1. **The need to manage nationalist/protectionist tendencies** as a first resort during

crises. While the appetite for international cooperation seems to decrease, the need for international cooperation has never been higher. We also need to learn how to best reply to crisis management that includes authoritarian responses.

2. **The increasing role of trust and confidence between states and citizens**, both in terms of input legitimacy (transparency, impartiality and trust) and output legitimacy (efficiency).
3. **International norms and the role of trust between states**. This includes both explicit international laws, such as the right to use force in self-defense of hybrid threats, as well as unstated norms regarding how governments are expected to treat each other.
4. **Interdependence**. Health, mobility, global supply chains, recessions, information exchange – most aspects of international politics depend on interdependencies between states. Future crises will likely affect the majority of the world's states and will thus require common solutions.
5. **The paradox of an increasing number of global challenges while the appetite for international cooperation seems to decrease**. This is most clearly exemplified by the US gradually backing away from the structure it created post-WWII.
6. **“Not a post-pandemic world, but a world with pandemics”**. Pandemics will not simply go away in the future

<sup>1</sup> Since the roundtable discussion was held under the Chatham House rule, none of the

following comments are attributed to a specific participant.



– we will need to learn how to live with them and shape cooperation “on the go”.

7. **The need to focus on causes instead of symptoms of crises.** Paradoxically, we now both live with and stimulate the conditions that fuel future crises. For this reason, sustainable societies (i.e. freedoms and social welfare nets) are needed in order to counter so called “creeping crises” that are based on fundamental societal conditions such as inequality, climate change etc.
8. **The changing geography and face of vulnerability.** Developed countries might be more vulnerable than developing countries in the future. This highlights the vulnerabilities of today’s societies and the need to foster sustainable societies. Future collaboration also needs to be driven by identifying where the most vulnerable places and people are located.
9. **The changing relation between hard and soft security.** Future military spending might chase false security and in turn undermine the work needed to reduce threat posed by domestic threats. If future crises are creeping in nature (pandemic, environment, migration, cyber realm etc.) traditional military spending may become less salient.
10. **Future power-shifts.** The power-centers of the future will be based on how they deal with the crisis in regard to death counts, economic recovery and how sustainable the societies are in the aftermath of the crisis. In addition, cities and the corporate world will likely play an

important role in future crises. Cities are increasingly becoming international collaborators on issues such as climate change and migration – thereby challenging both their nation states and the EU – while businesses will have a huge influence on issues such as public health and data in the future.

**How do existing institutions and platforms for international cooperation cater for these new cooperative needs as well as for policy coherence?**

**The European Union (EU)**

1. The EU has become **more rapid and flexible** in its crisis response compared to former crises. Whereas the setting up of a financial assistance plan took four years during the financial crisis, it now took them less than four weeks. In addition, it has also become more flexible in its response by adapting available instruments, for example the use of the ESM for health-related issues. The challenge is to develop this response into something more resilient and durable.
2. The internal market and euro area need mutualization and solidarity to be upheld. There is a **need for fiscal stimulus** as the ECB alone cannot cope with the economic crisis.
3. **The EU’s crisis management approach could be made more central to the EU machinery.** This can be done by bringing in the political class of Brussels on decision making on crises to build on the notion of solidarity enshrined in EU law.



4. **EU crisis management needs to be improved**, not only for health crises, but also for natural catastrophes. In addition, the ECDC needs a better mandate and review, as well as be strengthened for contingency planning.
5. The imposed lockdowns might have negative effects on societal trust. In order to counteract this, the EU needs to focus on upholding **democratic governance and the rule of law**.
6. **The geopolitical Commission can be more strategic** in thinking about how partners can be beneficial for the security and safety of Europe. We need to rethink how third countries can help us and not only how we can help them.

#### The United Nations (UN)

1. **A crisis of multilateralism could eventually strengthen multilateralism.** The crisis, and the subsequent increased need for international cooperation, could strengthen institutions that have long been dormant, such as the WHO and the WTO. This is not least exemplified by the global leadership of the UN and the WHO. The WHO came in at an early stage in the Covid-19 crisis, took lead and did well.
2. **Funding.** Discussions regarding the funding of the UN needs to be held. In the future, it cannot solely be funded by projects. Future ODA will also be challenged as it is currently tied to OECD economies (and thus would be negatively affected by a recession).

3. **Investments.** We are in the current crisis because we have not made the right investments, for instance on health infrastructure. Economic recovery plans should also focus on combatting climate change and gender inequality.

#### North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

##### **Combatting hybrid threats by strengthening the rules-based system.**

Hybrid threats (activities that aim to influence the target country to take sub-optimal decisions) are nowadays a natural part of great power competition. Aggression no longer needs to be military, and the instruments and crisis management that we have in place are insufficient. To combat this, there is a need to strengthen international rules and common understandings between states, for instance by creating a common definition of aggression and attack. If no agreement can be found on the international level, then NATO and EU member states should at least aim to find agreement amongst themselves.

1. **State vulnerabilities have increased as a result of disunity, nationalism and protectionism.** This provides fertile ground for hybrid threats and further highlights the need for increased international cooperation.
2. **The EU and NATO can play a role in strengthening societal resilience to hybrid threats.** The EU and NATO need to further enhance mutual cooperation as it will be harder to address hybrid threats at the global level. Some new instruments to counter hybrid action are already in place, but ideally they would complement each other even better.





**How can national agencies and actors adapt in order to draw on the added-value of European and International cooperation?**

1. **Civil contingencies agencies will have to be better prepared.** We can no longer trust global value chains as we have done before. For instance, civil contingencies agencies will likely have to build up their national emergency stockpiles of key medical equipment, and even the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) and pharmaceutical drugs may have to be renationalized. It will be difficult to rely on the import of equipment and drugs from other countries when the world is hit by a global crisis.
2. **The need for coordination between civil contingencies agencies.** To avoid a 'survival-of-the-fittest' situation in the future, there is a need for coordinated exit plans. We should therefore consider Europe-wide civil contingency plans in the future. In addition, there is a need to avoid of measures that are inward-looking and protectionist in order to effectively deal with hybrid threats.
3. **The changing relation between hard and soft security.** States may thus have to re-focus their defense spending towards well-being and non-military security, not least to counteract hybrid threats and future (creeping) crises.
4. **The importance of helping the most vulnerable.** Crises only exacerbate social and economic inequality, and if we are facing a social-economic crisis, we need to focus on

supporting the most vulnerable. We may otherwise risk both their well-being and a loss of trust among citizens.

5. **The need to invest money and resources in thinking about how to handle hybrid threats.**

Counteracting foreign influence is an important part of the EU crisis management system, and future international cooperation will be essential in order to strengthen national resilience against such threats.

**Reflection Note - Crisis Management and International Cooperation in a Covid-19 World**

**Björn Fägersten & Mark Rhinard**

The current debate over the future of the world post-Covid-19 is one of extremes. On the one hand, 'everything has changed'. There will be power shifts, new state-society agreements, and a renewed interest in cooperation to protect citizens. These arguments contrast with those that counsel caution and continuity. Political tensions will persist, populist parties will remain, and international cooperation will be problematic.

This reflection note charts a middle path. It argues that while the state of the world will most likely revert to the mean, every crisis affords a window of opportunity for change. We write here on *opportunities to improve international cooperation on crisis management and resilience building*. We focus on ongoing global trends that present national crisis management agencies with both opportunities – and needs – for action to improve collective crisis management for the protection of citizens.



Our analysis is informed by previous MSB funded research projects as well as the online high-level roundtable discussion jointly organised by MSB and UI on June 11, 2020. This is not a full review of the arguments recorded in Part I, above. It is an elaboration on a select number of issues that arise for international cooperation post-Covid-19. The views and opinions expressed in this text are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions of MSB or the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

### Challenges Ahead

The Covid-19 pandemic laid bare the costs of *not* cooperating across borders to control and address its effects. Especially in the early stages, countries withheld information and impaired others' views on the extent of the problem. Essential medical supplies were hoarded, often without logic. Supply chains dried up, even though some countries had excess resources. Key personnel were stopped at hastily closed borders. Citizens asked tough questions not only about a perceived lack of solidarity, but also about their own governments: how efficiently are they connected to broader systems of crisis management? These failures featured in newspaper headlines and prompted Greta Thunberg's trenchant observation that the world clearly lacks resilience. Public trust in government – including crisis managers – suffered.

Still, the prospects for improved international cooperation post-Covid-19 are not promising. Much has been said of the *economic slowdown* already underway. The spread of the corona virus shut down major industries and global trade slowed to a crawl. Transport shutdowns did not help, and employees across the economy were laid off work. Not only has GDP taken a hit, but national tax revenues will decline significantly. All of this comes at a time

when additional governmental spending is needed more than ever. The result, of course, is growing amounts of public debt. Under these conditions – unemployment, economic depression, and rising debt – governments will be under pressure to tighten belts and prioritise spending. For crisis managers, it remains to be seen whether future preparedness and resilience building is seen as part of national recovery plans.

Economic difficulties will play into global politics. Some researchers herald the *spread of geopolitical competition* from the traditional diplomatic and military realms to less obvious areas. Trade, investment, innovation, standards, and even development have become arenas for power politics. Commercial interests and even data flows are being weaponised in the drive to secure influence. This holds not only for the 'great powers', but also small and medium sized countries, who are now incentivized to think competitively first, and cooperatively later. For Europe, a drive towards strategic autonomy is underway, which may prove beneficial for solidarity in the long run. But an expansion of power politics does not always bode well for cooperation.

Covid-19 is unlikely to erase another obstacle to cooperation: *nationalism and populism*. A stuttering global economy drives unemployment, which in turn is fertile ground for economic nationalism. We have already seen how nationalist parties capitalise on governmental mistakes in the Covid-19 response. At the moment, it seems that Covid-19 does not play directly into the hands of nationalists nor populists intent on attacking governmental elites. But few would deny that the stakes are high: how each government handles the Covid-19 crisis (and equally important, the quality of accountability processes post-crisis) will shape political dynamics for the foreseeable



future. For crisis managers in the spotlight, the result of accountability processes will be crucial for their future standing in society.

Covid-19 *will* bring a shift in priorities to the international agenda, for better or worse. The history of crisis management is a history of fighting the previous battle. We might cheer the movement of prevention, preparedness and resilience-building to the centre of agendas in the UN, EU and NATO. But that will mean pushing aside agendas on climate change, gender equality, and development aid. For crisis managers, the movement of ‘their’ issues to the front of international agendas will bring challenges, both positive and negative. And while getting an issue on the agenda is one thing, finding effective solutions amongst squabbling, self-interested countries is another.

### **Forging International Cooperation**

Not all signs point to depressing conclusions. The nature of the corona virus outbreak sent a strong message to the political class that we are more interdependent than we like to admit. Cooperation in Europe, while initially halting, improved within days rather than months. And for the first time in memory, citizens’ attention has turned to the effectiveness of crisis management cooperation, especially in Europe. The collective aspects of crisis management have come to light. Instead of objecting to transfers of power to ‘Brussels’, citizens may be turning their anger on their own national governments. Journalists and citizen interest groups have condemned national foot-dragging when it comes to devising efficient and effective *collective* crisis management.

So, with both obstacles and opportunities to international crisis management, what ways forward? We divide the discussion into two parts. Here we showcase what research can bring to the table. In the next section, we

extract practical implications for national agencies.

Research on international cooperation takes many forms. One variant identifies what it takes to forge cooperation when states are particularly competitive and sovereignty sensitive. This approach – called rational choice institutionalism – assumes states will not cooperate for idealistic reasons but rather to extract individual gains (an accurate assumption in today’s international environment). Under such conditions, three factors determine the ***success of cooperation***.

First, can clear gains be identified? Can convincing arguments be marshalled to show the damage done by acting alone? Such arguments must be based on clear-headed thinking rather than normative claims about solidarity, for instance. Second, does a shared threat perception exist? Without a common cause (or ‘enemy’), states tend to discount the importance of acting collectively. This requires a clear view of what is at stake, and supports arguments that alliances and coalitions are the only way to protect citizens. Third, do the benefits outweigh the costs? All collective actions come with costs, and for a rational state contemplating cooperation, those costs and benefits must be quantified. Clear analysis of that question enhances the likelihood that states will join together.

The arguments above, however, cover just the act of getting cooperation started. Ensuring that cooperation produces ***effective outcomes*** is another question. Much cooperation at the international level is predicated on a certain kind of outcome: regulations that can be constructed over long periods of time through consensus building (think of the Bretton Woods institutions). Today’s institutions like the EU, NATO and UN are increasingly asked to act quickly, with little information, on questions



of life-and-death. Here we draw upon the literature on institutional design to shed light on how crisis management arrangements can be optimised. Attention must be placed on the qualities of the problem to be solved – and not just the motivations of the states involved.

By way of example, resilience building – and the treatment of ‘creeping crises’ – requires an ability to mainstream safety and security concerns into all policy areas. Decision procedures must reflect this. The urgency surrounding crisis situations means the ability to marshal information quickly must be built into administrative support systems. Complex problems require flexible decision structures that allow different voices to express opinions and propose solutions. These are just some of the insights to be considered when designing – or reforming – international crisis management systems.

One last academic agenda focuses on **crisis governance**, a term once considered rather benign. It traditionally reflected just the panoply of actors, tools and levels involved in modern crisis management. More recently the citizen perspective has gained ground. Since messy forms of ‘governance’ now characterise most of how modern decisions are made, tough questions are being asked about authority, legitimacy and social justice. Who is making international decisions that, far from being confined to obscure trade decisions or banal agriculture subsidies, now are a matter of life and death?

The EU is one example of an organisation that thrived on messiness: blurry lines between national and supranational competences, for example, or many diverse players flowing in and out of decision-making. The initial ‘blame game’ after the Covid-19 outbreak suggested that the average citizen wants to know where crisis decisions are taking place. Is coordination of

medical equipment distribution a European competence? Can nations close borders unilaterally? The literature raises red flags on the vague division of labour between the EU and its member states. Citizens will demand clarity on who, and at what level, they can expect protection.

### Implications for the national level

What does all this connote for EU member states and their national agencies? First and foremost, it demands a genuine understanding not just within national agencies but across governments that **national crisis management systems are part of a European and international system**. It means taking the lead in driving a new form of cooperation that accounts for national jealousies but also realises our dependence on others. National agencies rarely have a political role at the international level, but they can work closely with their governments to identify areas for improvement.

- A place to start is to urge a **recast of the EU’s crisis management system**, from a focus mainly on blue-light disasters towards societal-wide crises. Research on ‘Creeping Crises’ finds today’s crises less about single sector events and more about transboundary problems that clearly exist – but fly beneath the political radar. Treating crisis management as a whole-of-government responsibility also means shifting Brussels’ crisis arrangements more central to the EU’s machinery. This can also help mobilise both the EU’s array of hard and soft security tools.
- Such a strategy must start by **clarifying what belongs in national hands and what requires supranational cooperation**. The immediate Covid-19 response witnessed finger-pointing between governments, and between



governments and Brussels. A clear line has never been drawn – in all areas of European cooperation – regarding national versus EU competences. This reluctance stems from the political risk of doing so – no government wants to publicize those facts openly – and because unique, untested policy challenges are constantly arising, needing new solutions. Yet some discussion of ‘who does what’ will go a long way to clarifying authority structures in European crisis management. That will enhance perceptions of responsibility, in turn building citizen trust.

- Extra attention can be placed on evaluating **the new management demands of today’s creeping, even permanent, crises**. We must look more carefully at how the effects of one crisis shape the next. Few understood how austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis would undermine both the resilience of future health care systems and increase the vulnerability to foreign take-overs of critical infrastructure. Similarly, the systemic origins and impacts of major shocks needs attention. Crisis managers tend to focus on symptoms of problems – chasing after fires, figuratively speaking – rather than tackling the source of the problem. Many of the problems encountered in modern societies stem from ‘modernity’ itself: thin supply chains, resource depletion, overuse of anti-microbials, data accumulation, information technology use. These are not the traditional preserve of civil contingency agencies but signal broader societal issues that must be addressed – and must be addressed at the international level.
- Prepare to **place crisis management in geopolitical-strategic terms**. Europe

strives for ‘strategic autonomy’. Member states will be asked to secure national infrastructures from a European perspective. This is not only in obvious ‘crisis’ areas such as vaccine production, but also in 5G networks, development aid, commercial subsidies and industrial policy. More emphasis will be placed in the years ahead in identifying European vulnerabilities in the face of pandemics, disasters, and attacks. These threats are increasingly becoming part of a geopolitical calculus being considered in higher policy circles.

These measures encourage national crisis agencies to think and act more strategically in their approaches to European and international cooperation. Tomorrow’s crises will continue striking at the heart of societies and spreading damage across sectors and government levels. More proactive and long-term approaches to cooperation are needed to avoid the pitfalls of the Covid-19 response and to make societies more resilient as a whole. We hope this reflection note prompts thinking in this more strategic direction.





## About UI

Established in 1938, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent research institute on foreign affairs and international relations. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. All manuscripts are reviewed. Copyright of this publication is held by UI. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of UI.