

# The New Normal: Trauma Informed International Practices During COVID-19

Written by Ian Edgerly

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## The New Normal: Trauma Informed International Practices During COVID-19

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IAN EDGERLY, MAY 2 2020

The “new normal” is a phrase that has garnered much press and interest in the past few weeks as the world attempts to come to grips with how things have changed, and what is to come. At a sub-state level, this is largely the case. Stay at home orders, restaurant and store closures, all unheard of in many Northern hemisphere countries. At the international level, it is less certain that the globalized world is heading into uncertain times, a “new normal” if you will. The premise of this article is that the globe has in fact been in the “new normal” for the better part of twenty years. The United States has reacted, from a position of global power, to threats against its homeland in such a way that many countries across the globe now respond in similar way which have in turn perpetuated a shift from multilateralism to unilateralism.

There are a few necessary contexts for this claim: 1) The United States as the hegemonic power after the Cold War, 2) States as the main actors, 3) And a deep understanding of United States’ power and influence around the globe and how that has been impacted by these three distinct events. It is from these contexts that this article will discuss a series of distinct phase transitions, to use a physics methodology, in order to illustrate how the United States has shaped the world from a position of trauma, pushing it towards unilateralism. The three events, and subsequent crises that have shifted the world into this new normal are the attacks in New York on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001; the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession; and the current COVID-19 pandemic. These events have traumatized the global hegemon to such an extent that the country has self-structured in such a way to immediately react against trauma as it now understands that it is not invincible. These reactions will take certain forms to be discussed below, however, trends towards Habermas’ ideas on system disequilibrium and game theoretical spiral models tied with relative deprivation at a national inform the subsequent crises. Overall, the United States has greatly impacted the globe with its reaction to events that impact its equilibrium, which have in turn created a new global order of reactionary policies that indeed shape the core and meaning of the international system.

This article is not designed to critique the global response to a truly horrifying and easily transmittable virus, rather, there are certain characteristics to the response that bear similarity to actions that have been taken in the past under similar crisis circumstances. It is from this Weberian Nation State, International Relations and Security Studies lens that the contexts will be analyzed, versus an epidemiological angle. With that in mind, it is important to first understand the epistemology of a crisis. A crisis is a point in which the equilibrium of conflict and responses within a complex system surpass the status quo of the given context, and where the participants, or in this case states, can no longer successfully control the situation (Fuentes, 2020). A keen observer will note that it is the response that is the paradigm in question, not necessarily the precipitant. Although a slightly pedantic argument, it is none-the-less critical for a paradigmatic understanding of the discussion points below.

Trauma is a very complex topic that had occupied both psychologists and conflict analysts/resolutionists for some time. It is not lightly that it is invoked as a catalyzing principle of the global reactions within the three phase transition focal points mentioned above. There are different types of trauma that are applicable towards the argument at hand: Collective Trauma and Re-Traumatization. Collective trauma, according to Vamik Volkan (Volkan, 1997), is an experience that becomes part of your collective group identity due to its cause being coupled to the nature of your group, essentially because of who you are. The traumatic event need not happen to you personally for it to impact

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your psyche due to several factors including identity, belonging, and social exchange theories. For example, the terrorist attacks in New York affected relatively few around the world in a physical manner, but emotionally most related to, and grieved for New Yorkers during that time through empathetic modalities. Americans especially connected with New York as it was a smite upon the country, even though only a tiny percentage in the United States felt any physical impact from the terrorist attacks. Emotional connections prove stronger in this case than physical ones and nationalism concepts as well as imagined communities via Benedict Anderson help us to better understand this complex driver.

Further, Re-Traumatization is an important concept, also championed by Vamik Volkan and others (Zelizer, 2008), that essentially describes a time collapse within a person's, or a society's consciousness that brings old traumas to the fore, making them appear to have just happened again. September 11<sup>th</sup> is an extremely traumatic event for the United States. Volumes have been written on the subject (Garfin, 2017), thus this argument will move forward with the understanding that a society was traumatized on the day and the immediate aftermath. Critically, it is this trauma that becomes activated after the 2008 economic crisis, where immigrants are largely blamed for American lost jobs (Hoban, 2017). Indeed, it is also the trauma from 9-11 that comes roaring back to the minds of policy makers and large swaths of American society when the United States finds itself being "attacked" by a virus that originated from a foreign country (Kola, 2020; Mills, 2020).

A cogent discussion on the proposed phase transitions that indicate the "new normal" cannot begin with the transitions themselves. The process largely begins following the fall of the Soviet Union and its aftermath in the early 1990's. Out of that process the United States rose largely uncontested as the global hegemon. This status placed the world power in a unique position to largely dictate terms of the relatively liberalized world order. Humanitarian relief and military expeditions to secure the humanitarian space necessary to achieve said goals began to multiply. Not all was as it appeared, however, and a mounting series of incidents, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo began to raise causes for concern within the United States. This concern came in the form of drawing ire from small groups throughout the world who avidly protested the hegemon's involvement in their affairs, as well as questioning from the United States population as to the utility of those interventions. Somalia was a wake-up call signaling that elite military forces were not unbeatable, nor were populations willing to arrive hat in hand for aid. Bosnia and Kosovo signal a slight break from the multilateralism norms that had been the hallmark of the "new era," and then came the terrorist attacks at the turn of the century.

Phase Transition One comes in the form of the actions and policy shifts of the United States after the events on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It is largely agreed that the war in Afghanistan was a war of necessity and that it fit largely within the global juridical norms. Following the start of the conflict there were countless other events that occurred in rapid succession around the globe. These came in the form of the invasion of Iraq, and many smaller counter-terrorism operations under the strategic goals of the Global War on Terror primarily centered in the Asian Pacific as well as within the African continent.

As with the attacks on 9/11, there are countless books and pieces describing the acts around the globe that coincided with the Global War on Terror, and the world has only recently shifted slightly away from the ubiquity of the terror groups due to a statist shift towards near-peer threats (Vergun, 2020). However, it is not the events themselves that identify the phase transition, it is the essence of the reasoning and logic behind those decisions that highlight the decision making through a trauma informed lens. Within this argument, the policies and creation of governmental bodies that were designed in reaction to the attacks and the ensuing trauma will be categorized as the new "plague treatise" as described by Phillip Bobbitt in his master work on *Terror and Consent* (Bobbitt, 2008). States, primarily the United States, have lashed out at the symptoms of deeper structural conflicts in the form of policies such as the Patriot Act, the Coalition of the Willing, and catch phrases such as "you're either with us or against us," to name only a few. These acts are clearly, and justifiably from a point of trauma, much as the bubonic plague treatise were purely acts of lashing out against perceived threats, cats in the case of the plagues, versus the root causes.

With this new normalization via the United States towards a global War on Terror, the nature of warfare shifted. Ideas such as the Fungibility of Force began to appear more frequently, entire militaries were transitioned into new formations to better conduct counter insurgency, and greater numbers of extremist organization were correlated to

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have arisen due to the tactics utilized in many countries. Although always present in most military alliances, the United States started to build joint task forces around the globe to better protect the homeland from extremist threats via countering them or assisting host countries in contesting them within their own sovereign borders. On social grounds, there were increases in anti-Muslim sentiment around the globe, but especially in the United States. Fear of the other began to take hold, often spurred on via political means as the lack of foreign terrorist incidents within the United States provided an air of legitimacy to the continued response to the initial trauma. This shift set the groundwork within U.S. government circles, and the familiarity amongst the citizenry and global community with strategic reactions from a position of trauma.

Phase Transition Two presents itself in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession felt around the globe. Critical to this is that the phenomenon has its origins in the United States which will link back into the central premise of leadership from a position of trauma, whether real or perceived. This process was much slower to materialize, but symptoms of the shift were evident via political leveraging starting in early 2010 through to the 2016 election period in the United States. After the 2008 recession began, large swaths of societies around the globe faced unemployment, foreclosures on homes, and many other detrimental occurrences. In the United States these symptoms were acutely felt with some of the highest unemployment numbers since the Great Depression and entire industries teetering on the verge of collapse, such as facets of the U.S. steel industry (Mount, 2009). Shortly after these contexts started to emerge, much of the blame for the inability to find work was placed upon immigrants or refugees “stealing” the jobs that should be made available to Americans.

The phase transition becomes noticeable once political activism started to leverage the already divisive contexts. This “stealing” of the American jobs brought out the air of victimization that had been utilized after the tragedy on 9/11, further exacerbated by the labeling of the 2008 crash as a Black Swan Event, ensuring that the narrative maintained the lack of predictability with the traumatic event (Taleb, 2007). With this victimization narrative being espoused by political party’s fear of the outsider grew. As part of this context the world also began to experience the rise of populism, one of the largest events being the election of President Trump in 2016. Populism itself was nothing new to the world political scene, but with the 2015 migrant crisis at its height and many European countries feeling the pressure from their populations to limit the amount of refugees taken in, populism felt a resurgence in many democratic countries. Although the individual experiences of each country should be taken into account via post-modern, relativistic methodologies, it is the meta experience of trauma that allows the phase transition to be pulled from the complex informational and epistemic environment.

The correlates to the rise of populism can shed light on the trauma informed policies and actions that are the focus of this argument. Within this post 2008 context, certain schema were activated around the globe (OECD, 2010), but most critically within the United States (Lowrey, 2017). The trauma inflicted by perceived job loss to the ethnic other led to calls for increased safety, greater power structures to allow for the United States to “reclaim its greatness,” and new military strategies that involved withdrawing from the corners of the globe so as to respond to issues on the home front. This proposed change in military strategy can be correlated to far reaching effects around the globe, from an increase in Taliban violence, to large impacts on the Syrian conflict, to an increase in surgical strikes in countries like Somalia. Finally, there were massive social construct upheavals within the United States with regards to the struggle for agency within minority and ethnic communities now that many of them were under the moniker of the ethnic other by default, and the fight for voice within an increasingly litigious and suspicion driven climate.

External actors began to be labelled as the enemy within these transforming systems. China became the predator economically, NATO was blamed for not taking up their fair share of the organizational costs, Russia was used on and off as a villainous figure, Mexico was the key instigator in allowing the vast sea of migrants across the Southern border, and countless other scenarios. The “phantom enemy” had gained in portfolio size, now including terrorism and black swan events that were deemed to have been precipitated by others. Key to this is the re-traumatization felt by the United States and the push towards populism due to the perception that the country and its way of life was under duress on several fronts. This then led to trauma informed interactions with the global community which has a proposed correlation to a measured reduction in multilateralism primarily from the U.S. lens (Gowan, 2018), the perceived acceptability of the rise of populist governments due to the United States’ example, and changing global dynamics with regards to declining acceptance of immigrants and other societal constructs. Understand that these

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contexts have been reduced slightly for the scope of this article, this is an extremely complex topic.

This dynamic persisted for many years, with some signs of returns to global norms as the international system's tendency towards equilibrium made an attempt to gravitationally pull populist governments back towards center. Enter December 2019. This begins the start of the third phase transition towards a perpetual context within which the United States, from a position of global leadership, makes policy decisions from a trauma informed position which has served to further shift global dynamics. As was mentioned prior, the following is from an international norms perspective, not an epidemiological one. With that, once the United States instituted the travel ban, with a few exceptions, to and from the continent of Europe, the large swaths of the world again reacted in a similar trauma informed practice regardless of their own internal social situations.

Once again, the United States was made to feel vulnerable. With the contexts from the 2008 financial crisis still impacting everyday life within the U.S. and around the globe, as well as the continued discussion over mass migrations, the environment within the U.S. was extremely vulnerable to further shocks. Under fortuitous circumstances, a trade war with China and a shift back towards great power competition, the COVID-19 virus' rapid spread throughout Asia and Europe was deemed to be a further threat to the United States, and the response was in keeping with trauma informed practices that are in kind with the past two phase transitions.

A symptom of the phase transition is seen in the closure dates for many countries who enacted stay-at-home orders or societal wide social distancing measures. The U.S. implemented its ban on travel from Europe on 14 March 2020, following that, most European countries implemented lockdown measures, coinciding generally with 20 March (BBC, 2020), with Italy being the outlier at 8 March. Latin American countries that implemented similar measures also fell around the same date of initiation. The discerning reader will of course throw up some objections to this as models for the epidemic were only coming into policy circles at that point, and per John Stuart Mills, this may have been a purely utilitarian or pragmatic reaction in order to protect lives. Although a likely scenario, the argument made by this paper is that there needs to be a sound understanding of the natural disaster which is the COVID-19 virus, and the crisis, which is the reaction of and by states.

The crisis in the form of reactions carries certain narrative traits that link it to the prior two phase transitions via enacted policies without end-state or exit strategies, the vilification of the ethnic or nationalistic other, and the voiced distrust of the international system. The look towards China as the direct culprit behind the pandemic and ensuing crisis is a somewhat puzzling, albeit understood choice. If the same logic holds true, why was Europe not equally to blame for allowing the disease to pass borders? Although continuing to develop as the months go on, this new phase transition into continued global leadership from a position of trauma is accentuated by fear, anger, uncertainty, likely economic collapse, draw downs in exporting key commodities / goods, and a continued manipulation of the foundational causes of the crisis.

If the current trend of lashing out from a perceived position of victimization and trauma via the United States is upheld throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the globe is truly living in the new norm. A new norm of reactionary policies elicited from world leaders that follow along with the contemporary global hegemon's populist perception of the world. If these transitions are to be stymied and directed back towards globalization, a deeper understanding of these narrative constructs and the trauma informed precipitants of crisis must be developed (Tuckett, et al., 2020).

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