

COVID-19 and International Relations Theory: A Comparative Analysis of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical juncture in global politics, exposing the strengths and limitations of dominant international relations (IR) theories in explaining complex and transnational crises. This study examines the explanatory capacity of realism, liberalism, and constructivism in interpreting the political and systemic implications of the pandemic. Adopting a qualitative and comparative analytical approach, the research draws on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, policy reports, and institutional data, to assess state behavior, patterns of international cooperation, and the role of norms and identities during the crisis. The findings indicate that realism effectively explains the resurgence of state-centric policies, strategic competition, and the prioritization of national interests, particularly in border control and vaccine distribution. Liberalism highlights the significance of interdependence, international institutions, and cooperation, yet its assumptions are challenged by the limited effectiveness of collective responses. Constructivism provides valuable insights into how ideas, identities, and norms shape state behavior and public responses, although it offers limited predictive precision. The study concludes that no single theoretical framework adequately captures the multifaceted nature of the COVID-19 crisis. It therefore advocates for a synthesized and pluralist approach that integrates material, institutional, and ideational dimensions. Such an approach enhances the analytical relevance of IR theory and contributes to ongoing debates on adapting theoretical frameworks to address non-traditional security challenges in an increasingly interconnected global system.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, International Relations Theory, Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Global Governance, Non-Traditional Security

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most profound global disruptions of the twenty-first century, transcending its initial characterization as a public health crisis to become a multidimensional phenomenon with far-reaching political, economic, and social consequences. Historically, pandemics and infectious diseases have played a significant role in shaping political orders, state capacities, and international relations. From the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe, which contributed to the transformation of feudal structures, to the Spanish influenza at the end of World War I, which highlighted the centrality of public health in state governance, epidemics have repeatedly exposed the vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of political systems. In a similar vein, COVID-19 has not only strained national healthcare systems but has also tested the resilience of international institutions, disrupted global supply chains, intensified geopolitical rivalries, and reconfigured the hierarchy of global priorities. As such, the pandemic provides a unique empirical context through which the explanatory and predictive capacities of international relations (IR) theories can be critically examined.¹

Despite the extensive body of literature in international relations theory, the capacity of dominant theoretical paradigms—namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism—to adequately interpret and anticipate the political implications of global pandemics remains contested. Realism, with its emphasis on state sovereignty, power competition, and security dilemmas, has traditionally prioritized military threats and geopolitical rivalries, often marginalizing non-traditional security challenges such as pandemics. Liberalism, on the other hand, foregrounds interdependence, international cooperation, and institutional governance, suggesting that global crises should foster collaborative responses among states and international organizations. Meanwhile, constructivism offers a distinct perspective by focusing on the role of ideas, identities, and social norms in shaping state behavior and international outcomes. However, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed tensions and contradictions within each of these theoretical frameworks. The resurgence of state-centric policies, border closures, and competition over medical resources appears to validate realist assumptions, while the limited effectiveness of international cooperation challenges liberal expectations. At the same time, the pandemic has underscored the importance of discourse, identity, and normative frameworks, lending partial support to constructivist interpretations.²

The central problem addressed in this study lies in the apparent mismatch between theoretical expectations and empirical realities during the COVID-19 pandemic. While existing IR theories provide valuable analytical tools, they exhibit significant limitations in capturing the complexity of global health crises and their political ramifications. For instance, realism struggles to account for the significance of human security and transnational threats that do not originate from state actors, whereas liberalism appears overly optimistic in its assumptions about cooperation and institutional effectiveness. Constructivism, although more flexible in addressing ideational factors, often lacks precise predictive capacity and may face challenges in explaining material constraints and power asymmetries. This gap between theory

¹ Yenilmez, M. I., & Kantar, G. (2026). Is it virtual or real? An empirical study on the US-China tension index. *Journal of Economic Integration*, 41(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.11130/jei.2026.41.1.1>

² Troiani, L. (2026). How pandemics affect states' affairs and international relations: The case of COVID-19. *Forum Italicum*.

and practice raises critical questions regarding the adequacy of traditional IR frameworks in an era increasingly characterized by non-traditional security threats. Consequently, there is a need for a comprehensive reassessment of these theories in light of the empirical evidence provided by the COVID-19 pandemic.³

This article seeks to address this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of realism, liberalism, and constructivism in the context of COVID-19. It aims to evaluate the extent to which each theoretical paradigm can explain state behavior, international cooperation, and systemic transformations during the pandemic. The study is guided by several key research questions: To what extent did realist assumptions about state behavior manifest during the COVID-19 crisis? How effective were liberal mechanisms of international cooperation and institutional governance in mitigating the pandemic's global impact? And how does constructivism contribute to understanding the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping pandemic responses? By systematically examining these questions, the article not only assesses the explanatory strengths and weaknesses of each theory but also explores the possibility of theoretical integration or adaptation to better account for contemporary global challenges. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates the evolution of international relations theory in the face of emerging transnational threats.⁴

The significance of this study extends beyond theoretical inquiry, as it also offers practical insights into the future of global governance and international cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated existing trends such as the reassertion of state authority, the questioning of globalization, and the transformation of international institutions. It has also highlighted the growing importance of non-traditional security issues, including public health, economic resilience, and technological infrastructure. By critically evaluating the performance of major IR theories during the pandemic, this research provides a foundation for rethinking policy approaches and institutional frameworks. Ultimately, this study aspires to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a more nuanced understanding of international relations in an increasingly uncertain and interconnected world.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a comparative analytical approach to examine the explanatory capacity of major international relations theories—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the theoretical nature of the inquiry, the research relies primarily on secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official documents from international organizations (such as the World Health Organization and the World Bank), and relevant academic literature in the field of international relations. This allows for a comprehensive and systematic evaluation of how each theoretical framework interprets state behavior, international cooperation, and systemic transformations during the pandemic.

The methodological approach is based on theory-driven analysis, where each paradigm is treated as an analytical lens through which empirical developments related to COVID-19 are interpreted. The study employs a comparative framework to identify similarities, differences, strengths, and limitations across the three theories. Key variables examined include state responses (e.g., border closures, national policies), patterns of international

³ Xu, M., Vincent, M., & Sallam, M. H. (2026). China's digital diplomacy agenda and public engagement: An analysis in Africa on Twitter (X). *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 23(2), 172–188.

⁴ Spandler, K., Söderbaum, F., & Cadenas Delascio, G. (2025). Problem-solving by low-authority international organizations: ECOWAS' COVID-19 response. *Global Policy*, 16(5), 885–897.

cooperation or competition, and the role of norms, identities, and discourse in shaping global responses to the pandemic. By mapping these variables against theoretical expectations, the study assesses the degree of alignment or divergence between theory and practice.

Furthermore, the research utilizes elements of interpretive analysis to capture the discursive and ideational dimensions emphasized by constructivism, while also incorporating explanatory insights from realism and liberalism. This triangulation enhances the robustness of the analysis. The study does not aim to test hypotheses quantitatively but rather to provide a critical and contextualized understanding of theoretical performance. Overall, the methodology ensures analytical rigor while remaining consistent with the exploratory and evaluative objectives of the research.

Realism and COVID-19: State Survival, Power Politics, and Strategic Competition

From a realist perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed the centrality of the state as the primary actor in international relations. Realism, rooted in assumptions of anarchy, self-help, and power competition, interprets global crises through the lens of national interest and survival. During the pandemic, states overwhelmingly prioritized domestic stability over international cooperation, implementing border closures, export restrictions on medical supplies, and vaccine nationalism. These actions align closely with realist expectations that, in times of crisis, states revert to self-help mechanisms to secure their own survival. The pandemic also intensified geopolitical competition, particularly among major powers. The rivalry between the United States and China became more pronounced, with mutual accusations regarding the origin and management of the virus, as well as competition over global influence through medical aid and vaccine diplomacy. From a realist standpoint, such behavior reflects the enduring struggle for relative gains, where states seek to enhance their position vis-à-vis others even in the context of a global health crisis. The concept of “medical diplomacy” can thus be interpreted as an extension of traditional power politics, where humanitarian assistance serves strategic interests.⁵

Moreover, realism helps explain the marginalization of international institutions during the pandemic. Despite the presence of organizations such as the World Health Organization, states often acted unilaterally, undermining coordinated global responses. The withdrawal of funding, politicization of health governance, and selective compliance with international guidelines demonstrate the limits of institutional authority in an anarchic system. Realists would argue that such institutions merely reflect the interests of powerful states rather than operate as independent actors. However, the pandemic also exposes certain limitations of realism. While the theory effectively explains competitive and state-centric behaviors, it struggles to account for the significance of non-traditional security threats such as public health crises, which transcend borders and require collective action. Furthermore, realism underestimates the role of scientific cooperation, transnational networks, and non-state actors

⁵ Geiger, C., Scalzini, S., & Bossi, L. (2025). Time to (finally) reinstall the author in EU copyright law: From contractual protection to remuneration rights. *IIC - International Review of Intellectual Property and Competition Law*, 56(10), 1866–1913.

in managing the pandemic. Thus, while realism provides a robust framework for understanding power dynamics and state behavior, it offers only a partial explanation of the multifaceted nature of the COVID-19 crisis.⁶

Liberalism and COVID-19: Interdependence, Institutions, and the Crisis of Cooperation

Liberalism offers a contrasting perspective by emphasizing the importance of international cooperation, economic interdependence, and institutional governance. According to liberal theory, the interconnected nature of the global system should incentivize states to collaborate in addressing common challenges such as pandemics. COVID-19, in theory, represented an ideal case for liberal cooperation, as the virus posed a shared threat that could not be effectively managed by any single state acting alone. In practice, however, the pandemic revealed significant shortcomings in liberal expectations. While there were instances of cooperation—such as information sharing, joint research efforts, and initiatives like COVAX—these efforts were often overshadowed by competitive behaviors. Vaccine nationalism emerged as a major challenge, with wealthier countries securing large quantities of vaccines while developing nations faced severe shortages. This uneven distribution highlights the tension between collective welfare and national interest, raising questions about the effectiveness of liberal mechanisms in times of crisis. International institutions, a cornerstone of liberal theory, also faced criticism during the pandemic. The World Health Organization played a central role in coordinating responses and disseminating information, yet it was criticized for delays, lack of enforcement power, and susceptibility to political pressure. Similarly, regional organizations such as the European Union struggled to present a unified response in the early stages of the crisis, as member states prioritized national policies over collective strategies. These developments suggest that institutional frameworks, while important, may lack the authority and capacity to enforce cooperation under conditions of uncertainty and urgency.⁷

Nevertheless, liberalism retains explanatory value in certain areas. The rapid development of vaccines through international scientific collaboration, the role of global supply chains in distributing medical resources, and the continued relevance of multilateral platforms all underscore the enduring importance of interdependence. Liberalism also highlights the potential for learning and adaptation, as states and institutions may strengthen cooperative mechanisms in response to the failures observed during the pandemic. Despite these contributions, the COVID-19 crisis exposes the normative and practical limits of liberalism. The assumption that interdependence naturally leads to cooperation is challenged by the persistence of inequality, power asymmetries, and strategic behavior. Consequently, liberalism requires refinement to better account for the conditions under which cooperation can be sustained in the face of global crises.⁸

⁶ Mujib, M. M., Kurniawan, S., Basuki, U., Iswanto, & Arfaizar, J. (2025). Pandemic on the ship: Emergency legality and human rights security of the floating isolation policy in Indonesia. *Volksgeist Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Konstitusi*, 8(2), 595–617.

⁷ reenthalgh, T., Nishio, A. A., Clarke, A., Wieringa, S., & Wherton, J. (2025). Remote and digital services in UK general practice 2021–2023: The Remote by Default 2 study. *Health and Social Care Delivery Research*, 13(31), 1–50.

⁸ Inchi, L., Shimoni, B., Madjar, B., & Bord, S. (2025). Encounters between fields: Integrating military forces into health epidemiological efforts during COVID-19 in Israel. *Social Science & Medicine*, 379, 118139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.118139>

Constructivism and COVID-19: Ideas, Identities, and the Social Construction of Crisis

Constructivism provides a distinct analytical lens by focusing on the role of ideas, identities, norms, and discourse in shaping international relations. Unlike realism and liberalism, which prioritize material factors, constructivism emphasizes the social construction of reality and the ways in which shared meanings influence state behavior. In the context of COVID-19, constructivism offers valuable insights into how the pandemic was interpreted, communicated, and managed across different societies. One of the key contributions of constructivism is its ability to explain variation in state responses. Different countries adopted diverse strategies based not only on material capabilities but also on cultural norms, political identities, and public perceptions. For instance, some states emphasized collective responsibility and compliance with public health measures, while others prioritized individual freedoms and economic considerations. These differences reflect underlying normative frameworks that shape policy choices and public behavior.⁹

Constructivism also highlights the importance of discourse in framing the pandemic. Political leaders and media narratives played a crucial role in defining the nature of the crisis, assigning blame, and mobilizing public support. Terms such as “war against the virus” or “invisible enemy” illustrate how language influences perceptions and legitimizes certain policy responses. Additionally, the stigmatization of specific countries or groups demonstrates how identity politics can affect international relations during a global crisis.¹⁰

Furthermore, constructivism sheds light on the evolution of global norms related to public health. Practices such as social distancing, mask-wearing, and digital surveillance became widely accepted, reflecting the emergence of new normative standards. International organizations and epistemic communities contributed to the diffusion of these norms, reinforcing their legitimacy across different contexts. However, constructivism is not without limitations. Its emphasis on ideational factors may overlook the constraints imposed by material realities, such as resource availability and institutional capacity. Additionally, while constructivism excels in explaining how meanings are constructed, it may lack predictive precision, making it less effective in anticipating specific outcomes. Nonetheless, its focus on the social dimensions of international relations provides a crucial complement to more materialist approaches.¹¹

Comparative Evaluation: Convergences, Divergences, and Theoretical Limitations

A systematic comparative analysis of realism, liberalism, and constructivism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a complex pattern of convergence and divergence in how these paradigms interpret global crises, state behavior, and systemic transformation.

⁹ Zhang, Y., Sánchez Arnau, E., & Sánchez Pérez, E. A. (2025). Impact of geopolitical and international trade dynamics on corporate vulnerability and insolvency risk. *Information*, 16(7), 525. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info16070525>

¹⁰ Hedling, E., & Ördén, H. (2025). Disinformation, deterrence and the politics of attribution. *International Affairs*, 101(3), 967–986.

¹¹ Shepherd, A. V. (2025). Seeking asylum during a pandemic: A postcolonial media discourse analysis. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 66(2), 195–214.

At a foundational level, both realism and liberalism converge in their recognition of the centrality of the state as the primary unit of analysis in international relations, albeit with sharply contrasting assumptions about its behavior and motivations. Realism conceptualizes the state as a rational, self-interested actor operating within an anarchic international system, where survival and relative power remain the dominant concerns. In contrast, liberalism envisions the state as embedded within a network of interdependence, institutions, and cooperative arrangements that can mitigate anarchy and foster collective outcomes.¹² The COVID-19 pandemic provides empirical evidence supporting elements of both perspectives. On the one hand, the rapid closure of borders, competition over scarce medical resources, and the prioritization of national vaccination campaigns reflect realist expectations of self-help and strategic behavior. On the other hand, the persistence of international scientific collaboration, multilateral initiatives such as vaccine-sharing mechanisms, and continued engagement with global health institutions indicate that cooperative dynamics—central to liberal theory—remain operative even under crisis conditions. Constructivism introduces a distinct layer of analysis by shifting attention from material capabilities and institutional arrangements to the role of ideas, norms, identities, and discourse in shaping international outcomes. Unlike realism and liberalism, which tend to treat state interests as given, constructivism interrogates how those interests are socially constructed and transformed through interaction. The pandemic highlights this dimension in several ways. Variations in national responses cannot be fully explained by material capacity alone; they are also influenced by cultural norms, political ideologies, and societal values. For example, differences in public compliance with health measures, trust in government, and acceptance of surveillance technologies reflect deeper normative and identity-based factors. Moreover, the framing of the pandemic—as a security threat, a public health emergency, or an economic disruption—has varied across contexts, shaping policy choices and international engagement. Thus, while realism and liberalism provide structural and institutional explanations, constructivism enriches the analysis by illuminating the ideational processes through which meaning and legitimacy are constructed.¹³

In terms of explanatory power, realism appears particularly effective in accounting for the resurgence of state-centric policies and geopolitical competition during the pandemic. The intensification of rivalry among major powers, the politicization of global health governance, and the emphasis on national resilience all align closely with realist assumptions about the persistence of power politics in an anarchic system. Realism also offers a compelling explanation for the limited effectiveness of international institutions, which, from this perspective, largely reflect the interests and power distributions of dominant states rather than functioning as fully autonomous actors. However, realism's explanatory strength is accompanied by notable limitations. Its traditional focus on military and strategic threats constrains its ability to fully account for non-traditional security challenges such as pandemics, which transcend borders and cannot be effectively managed through unilateral action alone. Additionally, realism tends to marginalize the role of non-state actors—including international

¹² Abugri, B. A., & Osah, T. T. (2025). US bank lending to small businesses: An analysis of COVID-19 and the Paycheck Protection Program. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 18(5), 231. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jrfm18050231>

¹³ Davies, G., de Alba-Ulloa, J., Ghosn, F., Milner, H., & Solingen, E. (2023). Challenges to scholarship and policy during crises. *International Studies Review*, 25(2), viad017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad017>

Mujiono, & Ticalu, C. (2025). Emerging trends in law and social sciences: Global perspectives on policy, ethics, justice, and institutional reform. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 40–60. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.6>

organizations, scientific communities, and private sector entities—that proved essential in addressing the pandemic.¹⁴

Liberalism, in turn, provides valuable insights into the significance of interdependence and the potential for cooperation in confronting global crises. The interconnected nature of the global economy, the rapid exchange of scientific knowledge, and the collaborative development of vaccines all underscore the relevance of liberal assumptions regarding mutual dependence and shared interests. Liberalism also highlights the role of international institutions in facilitating coordination, reducing uncertainty, and enabling collective action. Nevertheless, the pandemic exposes the limits of liberal expectations. The unequal distribution of vaccines, the fragmentation of global responses, and the inconsistent commitment to multilateral solutions demonstrate that cooperation is neither automatic nor assured, even in the face of a common threat. Liberalism may underestimate the persistence of power asymmetries, domestic political constraints, and strategic calculations that impede effective collaboration. As such, while it captures important dimensions of global interdependence, it requires refinement to better explain instances of institutional failure and selective cooperation.¹⁵

Constructivism's contribution lies in its ability to explain variation in international behavior through non-material factors, including norms, identities, and discursive practices. It accounts for why states with similar material capabilities may adopt different strategies and why global responses are shaped by competing narratives and perceptions. The pandemic has demonstrated how language, symbolism, and framing influence both domestic and international politics, from the labeling of the virus to the politicization of public health measures.¹⁶ Constructivism also sheds light on the emergence and diffusion of new global norms, such as mask-wearing and social distancing, and the role of epistemic communities in shaping policy responses. However, constructivism faces limitations in terms of analytical precision and predictive capacity. Its emphasis on social construction can make it difficult to generate clear, testable predictions, and it may underemphasize the constraints imposed by material resources and institutional structures. In rapidly evolving crisis situations, this lack of predictive clarity may limit its direct applicability to policy formulation. The comparative evaluation thus reveals that each theory captures an important dimension of reality but fails to provide a comprehensive explanation when applied in isolation. Realism excels in explaining competition and state behavior under conditions of anarchy, liberalism illuminates the dynamics of cooperation and institutional engagement, and constructivism offers insight into the ideational and normative foundations of international relations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a multifaceted global crisis, involves simultaneous interactions among power, cooperation, identity, and knowledge, rendering single-theory explanations

¹⁴ Rösler, F., Kreyenschmidt, J., & Ritter, G. (2025). Discussing food waste online: Current trends in the food processing industry and future directions. *Sustainability*, 17(3), 835. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17030835>

¹⁵ Malakouti, M., Abdallah, A. K., & Alkaabi, A. (2025). A path to resilience and social integration: Motivations of international student volunteers during COVID-19 lockdown in Wuhan. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1579781. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1579781>

¹⁶ Qiu, X., & Yan, L. (2025). Navigating audience costs of humanitarian aid for rising states: India's COVID-19 response. *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, 24(1), 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.17477/jcea.2025.24.1.082>

insufficient. These limitations highlight the necessity of adopting a more integrative and pluralistic analytical approach.¹⁷

Such an approach does not aim to eliminate theoretical distinctions but rather to combine their complementary strengths in order to enhance explanatory depth and analytical flexibility. By integrating realist insights on power and security, liberal perspectives on institutions and interdependence, and constructivist understandings of norms and identities, scholars can develop a more comprehensive framework for analyzing complex global phenomena. This synthesis is particularly important in addressing contemporary challenges that transcend traditional boundaries, including pandemics, climate change, and technological transformation.¹⁸

Toward Theoretical Synthesis: Rethinking IR Theory in the Post-Pandemic World

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgent necessity of rethinking the epistemological and analytical foundations of international relations (IR) theory in light of increasingly complex, transnational, and multidimensional global challenges. Rather than treating realism, liberalism, and constructivism as mutually exclusive and competing paradigms, the empirical realities exposed by the pandemic point toward the growing relevance of theoretical pluralism as a more effective approach for understanding and interpreting contemporary international dynamics. Each of these theories captures an important dimension of global politics—realism emphasizes power, security, and state-centric behavior; liberalism highlights interdependence, cooperation, and institutional frameworks; and constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, identities, and norms—but none, in isolation, provides a sufficiently comprehensive account of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic revealed that global phenomena of this magnitude cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical lens, as they simultaneously involve material capabilities (such as healthcare infrastructure and economic resources), institutional mechanisms (including international organizations and regimes), and ideational factors (such as public trust, political narratives, and social norms). Consequently, a synthesized theoretical approach that integrates these dimensions offers a more robust and nuanced framework for analysis. Such a synthesis does not imply the dissolution of theoretical boundaries or the abandonment of established paradigms; rather, it calls for a strategic and context-sensitive integration of their core insights. From a realist perspective, the pandemic reaffirmed the enduring .¹⁹At the same time, liberal insights remain indispensable for understanding the role of international cooperation, scientific collaboration, and global governance mechanisms, as evidenced by initiatives related to vaccine development, information sharing, and multilateral coordination, even if such efforts were uneven or contested. Constructivism, for its part, provides critical tools for

¹⁷ Huguet-Feixa, A., Ahmed, W., Artigues-Barberà, E., Godoy, P., & Bravo, M. O. (2025). Vaccination conversations on X in Spanish and Catalan: A qualitative content analysis. *JMIR Infodemiology*, 5(1), e67942. <https://doi.org/10.2196/67942>

¹⁸ Borzova, A. Y., Borzov, A. R., & Piven, E. A. (2025). The role of international cooperation in implementing SDG 3 in Latin America. *Vestnik RUDN International Relations*, 25(4), 610–623. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2025-25-4-610-623>

¹⁹ Lee, B. T. F., Darke, W., & Schubert, J.-N. F. (2024). China's global governance as a tool for accelerating international sustainable development and pandemic security. *China Report*, 60(4), 378–397.

Azhari, A. M., Azhari, S., & Yaqooq, M. I. (2025). Global transformations in law, justice, and society: Comparative perspectives on governance, rights, and legal reform. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 60–90. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.7>

analyzing how different societies interpreted the pandemic, how political discourse shaped public responses, and how new norms—such as social distancing and digital surveillance—emerged and diffused across borders. By combining these perspectives, a pluralist framework can better account for the interplay between competition and cooperation, structure and agency, and material and ideational factors.²⁰

Moreover, the pandemic highlights the Traditional IR theories have historically privileged military and geopolitical threats, often relegating issues such as public health, environmental degradation, and technological risks to the margins of analysis. However, COVID-19 demonstrated that such non-traditional threats can have consequences as severe—if not more so—than conventional security challenges, disrupting economies, destabilizing societies, and altering power relations at both domestic and international levels. This shift necessitates not only theoretical adaptation but also methodological innovation, including the incorporation of interdisciplinary approaches that draw on insights from public health, economics, sociology, and data science. In this context, IR theory must evolve beyond its Furthermore, adopting a synthesized approach enhances the predictive and policy-relevant capacities of IR theory.²¹ While realism provides valuable caution regarding the persistence of competition and self-interest, liberalism offers normative and institutional pathways for fostering cooperation, and constructivism illuminates the processes through which shared understandings and collective identities can be constructed. Together, these perspectives can inform more balanced and effective policy responses to global crises, emphasizing both . For example, future pandemic preparedness strategies may require states to invest in national resilience (a realist concern), strengthen international health institutions (a liberal priority), and promote global norms of transparency and solidarity (a constructivist emphasis). By integrating these elements, policymakers can develop more comprehensive strategies that address both immediate threats and long-term systemic vulnerabilities.²²

Conclusion

This study has examined the explanatory capacity of realism, liberalism, and constructivism in interpreting the political and systemic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that while each theoretical framework offers valuable insights, none is sufficient on its own to fully capture the complexity of the crisis. Realism effectively explains the resurgence of state-centric behavior, strategic competition, and the prioritization of national interests, particularly in areas such as border control and vaccine distribution. Liberalism highlights the importance of interdependence, international institutions, and cooperation, yet its assumptions are challenged by the limited effectiveness of collective responses during the pandemic. Constructivism, meanwhile, provides a nuanced understanding of the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior and public

²⁰ Worsnop, C. Z., & Marion, S. (2024). Foreign policy and global health. In *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis* (pp. 651–669). Oxford University Press.

²¹ Galetsi, P., Katsaliaki, K., & Kumar, S. (2024). Realizing resilient global market opportunities and societal benefits through innovative digital technologies in the post COVID-19 era. *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, 71, 10650–10666.

²² Guo, H., Chen, C.-T., Khan, A., Tsao, C.-C., & Chen, S.-C. (2024). Extending dramaturgical theory to evaluate revisit intention of international tourism: COVID-19 recovery context. *Journal of Infrastructure Policy and Development*, 8(5), 3071. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i5.3071>

responses, though it may lack predictive precision. The comparative analysis reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic exposes both the strengths and limitations of dominant international relations theories, particularly in addressing non-traditional security threats such as global health crises. It underscores the Such an approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of global challenges that transcend traditional boundaries and require coordinated responses at multiple levels. Ultimately, the pandemic serves as a critical turning point for the field of international relations, emphasizing the need for theoretical adaptation and methodological innovation. It calls for greater engagement with interdisciplinary perspectives and a renewed focus on human security as a central. As future global crises are likely to be similarly complex and interconnected, the development of more flexible and integrative theoretical frameworks will be essential for both academic advancement and effective policy formulation.

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