



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
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A War Plan to Fight the Pandemic

by Barbara Martin
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

A WAR PLAN TO FIGHT THE PANDEMIC

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This work was written on March 30, 2020. Due to the rapid evolution of the situation, some numbers might no longer reflect those at the time of reading.



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What to do? This is the fundamental question facing global leaders as a devastating COVID-19 pandemic spreads at exponential rates around the globe. UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, says the world is at war with a virus, with 100,000 cases after three months, 200,000 in the next 12 days, 400,000 in the next four days, and 500,000 in the next day and a half.¹ At time of writing, identified cases had topped 690,000. There is urgency to finding common ground on the measures and approaches that work to treat those infected, to slow the spread of disease, and to mitigate the impact on global economies and global well-being. Our international networks and institutions have never been so vital as they are now.

G7 and G20 leaders held virtual meetings on March 16 and March 26 respectively, issuing statements each replete with promises to act together to strengthen health systems, coordinate research, increase availability of medical equipment, and address the economic impact of the crisis. But promises mean little until they are translated into an agreed strategic approach, comprising commitments to undertake specific actions with timelines and firm funding commitments. The UN Secretary urged G20 leaders to adopt a war time plan to tackle the pandemic, a coordinated strategy to suppress the virus.² So, how will the world come together on such a plan?

Canada has a reputation for coming up with bold ideas, from peacekeeping to the ban on landmines to the International Criminal Court. Canada knows how to negotiate, to identify what is essential, to compromise and to build the bridges needed to reach agreement. And, we can do that from the backseat, even if we are not the leader of the G7 or the G20 at this time. Good ideas and strategies win support. Canada should lean in.

While the U.S. leadership of the G7 in 2020 creates some challenges in reaching agreement on a coherent approach, G7 countries remain a powerful economic and intellectual force in the world today, working together and within the larger G20. The conversations within G7 can serve as a valuable core towards building a wider consensus within the G20, where all the world's major economies come together. Over nearly 50 years, the G7 has shared similar perspectives on global challenges and its members have demonstrated a readiness to take coordinated action on both economic and security issues. The structures of both the G7 and G20 include ministerial meetings and working groups that can hammer out granular strategies across policy fields. And, both the G7 and G20 engage regularly with key international organizations – in particular the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – to seek expert advice, coordinate strategies and implement programs.

The UN Secretary General's call for a war plan underscores that agreement is needed – and soon – on a broad strategic policy framework and an accompanying action plan that can energize and

¹ UN Secretary General, "This war needs a war-time plan to fight it," Statement to G20 Leaders' Summit, (United Nations, 26 Mar 2020), <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/war-needs-war-time-plan-fight-it>

² UN Secretary General, Letter from UN Secretary General to G20 Leaders (United Nations, 23 March 2020), <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2020-03-24/note-correspondents-letter-the-secretary-general-g-20-members>



bring cohesion to the multiplicity of efforts underway. The recent discussions within the G7 and G20 are a beginning, but more is clearly needed.

In their statement, the G7 leaders agreed to:

- 1) Coordinate on necessary public health measures to protect people at risk from COVID-19;
- 2) Restore confidence, growth and protect jobs;
- 3) Support global trade and investment; and
- 4) Encourage science, research and technology cooperation.³

While there is mention of “appropriate border measures,” “enhancing efforts to strengthen health systems in our countries and globally,” and making “efforts to increase the availability of medical equipment where it is needed most;” there is little specificity. The language is vague: “We will work hard;” “We stress the value of ...” There is only passing reference to the needs of countries outside the G7, with emerging and developing economies added almost as an afterthought to the call for G7 finance ministers to work with the IMF and World Bank to provide international financial assistance. There are no hard commitments, and, most particularly, there is no shared message to G7 publics about what they need to do to limit the spread of the virus. Containment depends on individual action. It is time to overcome the disagreement between advocates for a strategy of herd immunity and the experts arguing for social distancing. Apparently, it was a study by Imperial College London that caused a change of direction in the U.K., and for a while in the U.S..⁴ Clarity is needed, especially in the light of the disinformation spreading on the internet.

With the advantage of an additional 10 days to prepare, the G20 on March 26 was able to develop a somewhat more comprehensive and inclusive statement focussed on three priorities:

- 1) Fighting the pandemic;
- 2) Safeguarding the global economy;
- 3) Addressing international trade disruptions; and
- 4) Enhancing global cooperation.

The G20 uses the language of commitment: “We commit to take all necessary health measures...” and “We will expand manufacturing capacity to meet the increasing needs for medical supplies.” Importantly, the G20 has tasked their health ministers to share national best practises and develop a set of urgent actions on jointly combatting the pandemic by the time of their ministerial meeting in April. The G20 has also said it will work quickly to close the financing gap in the WHO

³ “G7 Leaders’ Statement,” Website of the Prime Minister of Canada (March 26 2020) <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2020/03/16/g7-leaders-statement>

⁴ COVID 19 Response Team, “The Global Impact of COVID-19 and Strategies for Mitigation and Suppression,” Imperial College London (26 March 2020), <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-Global-Impact-26-03-2020.pdf>



Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan and provide resources to the WHO COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness, and Innovation and to GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance.⁵ These are concrete actions that will provide essential support to some key institutions that are on the front lines fighting the pandemic. And, the G20 leaders have said that they “commit to do whatever it takes and to use all available policy tools to minimize the economic and social damage from the pandemic, restore global growth, maintain market stability and strengthen resilience.” These are strong words. But, like the G7 statement, there is no common message to the public – to individuals - about what they should be doing to fight the spread of the virus: that to slow down its spread, social distancing, self-isolation, or quarantine are necessary in any comprehensive strategy.

As to the developing world, while the G7 was clearly focussed on itself, the G20 at least acknowledged the need to help, especially the countries in Africa, and made passing reference to refugees and displaced persons, saying it “stands ready” to mobilize financing. However, the message lacks the conviction and commitment to action that the G20 gives to those things that most affect their own countries. This despite the launch by the UN, on March 25 – the day before the G20 leaders’ virtual meeting – of an appeal for \$2 billion for its global humanitarian response plan to fight COVID-19. At the launch, the UN top official for humanitarian affairs, Mark Lowcock, said that “countries battling the pandemic at home are rightly prioritizing people living in their own communities. But the hard truth is they will be failing to protect their own people if they do not act now to help the poorest countries protect themselves.”⁶ Further, neither the G7 nor the G20 directly address conflict areas, such as Syria (especially Idlib) and Yemen. Both these conflicts have created serious human vulnerabilities from displacement, congestion in refugee camps and poverty, as well as dysfunctional health systems – conditions ripe for the spread of the virus across Northern Africa, the Middle East, and into Europe.⁷

So, what could Canada do to help the G7 and the G20 work towards a clear and comprehensive action plan – a war plan?

- a) **First, Canada can advocate for a clear, succinct statement on what individuals should do to protect themselves and constrain the spread of the virus.** The virus is spread by individuals, and individuals are the first line of defence. They need to know what they should do. The message needs to be firm and clear to everyone around the globe. Canada could propose that the G7 and the G20 adopt a single message regarding social distancing/ self-isolation/ quarantine and hygiene (hand washing, coughing into a tissue and not touching eyes, nose, or mouth). The WHO website contains comprehensive advice in multiple formats. It could be asked to provide a succinct and easy to grasp statement to

⁵ “G20 Leader’s Statement,” Extraordinary G20 Leader’s Statement, Statement on COVID-19 (March 26 2020)

[https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20_Extraordinary%20G20%20Leaders%E2%80%99%20Summit_Statement_EN%20\(3\).pdf](https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20_Extraordinary%20G20%20Leaders%E2%80%99%20Summit_Statement_EN%20(3).pdf)

⁶ UN OCHA, “UN Issues \$2 billion appeal to combat COVID-19” (25 March 2020), <https://www.unocha.org/story/un-issues-2-billion-appeal-combat-covid-19>

⁷ Pinar Dost, “Coronavirus is exacerbating the precarious situation of Syrian refugees and IDPs”, Atlantic Council (27 Mar 2020),

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/coronavirus-is-exacerbating-the-precarious-situation-of-syrian-refugees-and-idps/>; Stephen A.

Cook, “Syria’s Revenge on the World Will Be a Second Wave of Coronavirus,” Foreign Policy, (26 March 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/syrias-revenge-on-the-world-will-be-a-second-wave-of-coronavirus/>



get the message out in both developed and developing countries. The statement needs to embody the best practises, not the lowest common denominator. The statement needs to be endorsed by both the G7 and G20 and disseminated across their countries, as well as all others through the UN.

- b) **Second, Canada could work actively within the G7 and G20 to “unpack” the general commitments in the leaders’ statement, and develop a document setting out strategic direction, concrete actions, funding needs, and timelines.** The categories in the G20 statement can form the structure for the action plan: a) Fighting the Pandemic; b) Safeguarding the Global Economy; c) Addressing International Trade Disruptions; d) Enhancing Global Cooperation. This work should be undertaken in time to be endorsed at the G7 leaders’ virtual meeting June 10-12, and through the G20 health ministers meeting in April and leaders’ meeting November 21-22. It will take behind the scenes work by experts from departments of health, finance, trade, development, and foreign affairs to negotiate and fine tune the text. Canadian officials could use their diplomatic skills to gather a ‘friends of the chair’ group in the G20 to spearhead this work. They can lean in. The World Health Organization, which is the key international body able to lead the response effort, should be actively engaged.
- c) **Third, Canada could engage in diplomacy to press for an end to hostilities – even if only temporary – in Syria and Yemen in order to focus on humanitarian assistance to fight the pandemic.** It is a credit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority that they are cooperating to combat the virus. It is time for others to also lay down their weapons, particularly in Syria (including Iran and Russia) and in Yemen (including Iran and Saudi Arabia).

Canada has a long and proud history of being an effective multilateral player. It is time to put those skills forward, to work closely with others in the international community – to persuade, cajole, and press others – in order to build a consensus on the war plan that the UN Secretary General rightly believes is essential to protect lives and rebuild the global economy.

▶ **About the Author**

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► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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