

COVID-19 and Trust in International Cooperation

Karina Gerlach and Robert Kang

June 2020

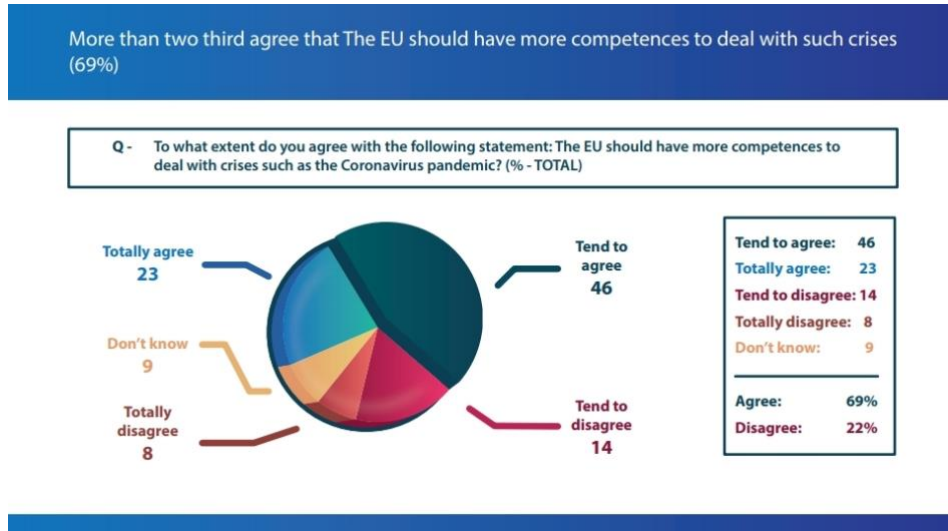
2020 is the 75th anniversary year of the United Nations (UN), and it has already shaped up to be a year of unprecedented international shocks and potential for transformation, from COVID-19's impact to the current mobilization for racial justice in many areas of the world. In two previous analyses we examined the changing dynamics of trust between state and citizens during the pandemic; in this piece, we look at what global polling reveals about trust in international cooperation. Polling data on this topic is more available for developed countries than for the global south: the results should therefore be interpreted with those limitations in mind.

Demand for international cooperation

We would expect demand for international cooperation to be high during an international pandemic, as people around the world face in a very immediate way the realization that we are indeed interconnected, and that it is impossible for any state to address this challenge alone. This is indeed what we see in polling figures, with some caveats. An online survey conducted by the UN75 initiative captured people's views of the most basic question about multilateralism: how important it is for countries to work together. Because this was an online survey, the respondents are self-selecting rather than representative of the global population—but the results can still provide some interesting insights. 95 percent of respondents said that it is either “essential” or “very important” for countries to work together. After a downturn at the end of February, the numbers of those agreeing with that statement increased sharply in March. Older respondents and those with more education were more likely to agree, suggesting that there may be a need for more outreach to the young and the most marginalized.

Specific polling on demand for the UN's multilateral role since the COVID-19 pandemic began is not yet available, but there are results for the European Union (EU). These show (Figure 1) that more than two thirds of EU citizens believe that the EU should have more power to deal with crises such as COVID-19. We would speculate that this finding—of increased demand for international cooperation—is likely to be repeated in other regions, although polls are not available.

Figure 1: Percentage who want the EU to be better able to deal with crises

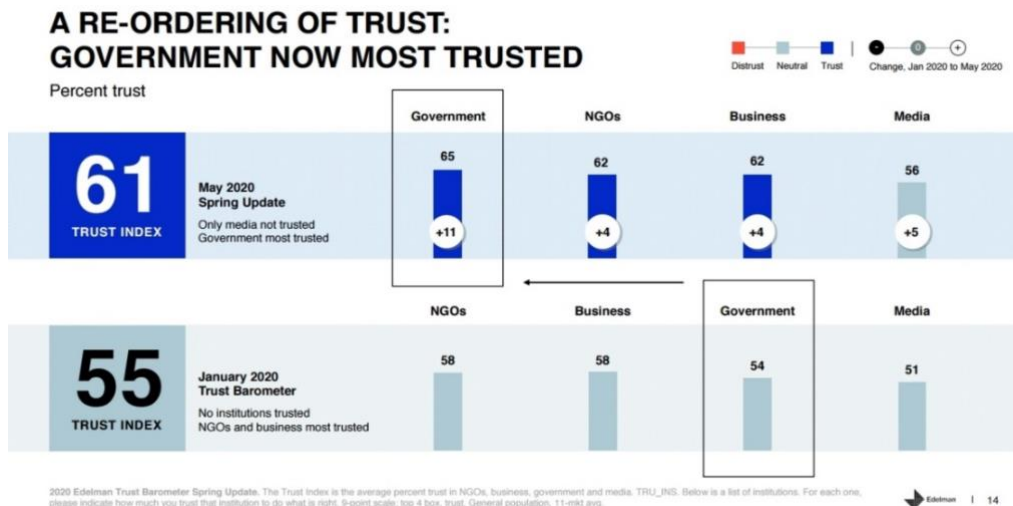


Source: Kantar

Trust in international institutions to provide the necessary response

The picture is less rosy when we look at trust in international institutions to play a role in the response to COVID-19. Globally, people appear to place much higher trust in national governments and health services, at present, than in the international response. Recent findings by the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer based on responses from 11 countries—the United States (US), the United Kingdom, Canada, France, China, Germany, India, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Mexico—indicate that 65 percent of respondents report trust in government in May 2020, which is a 11 percent increase from January.

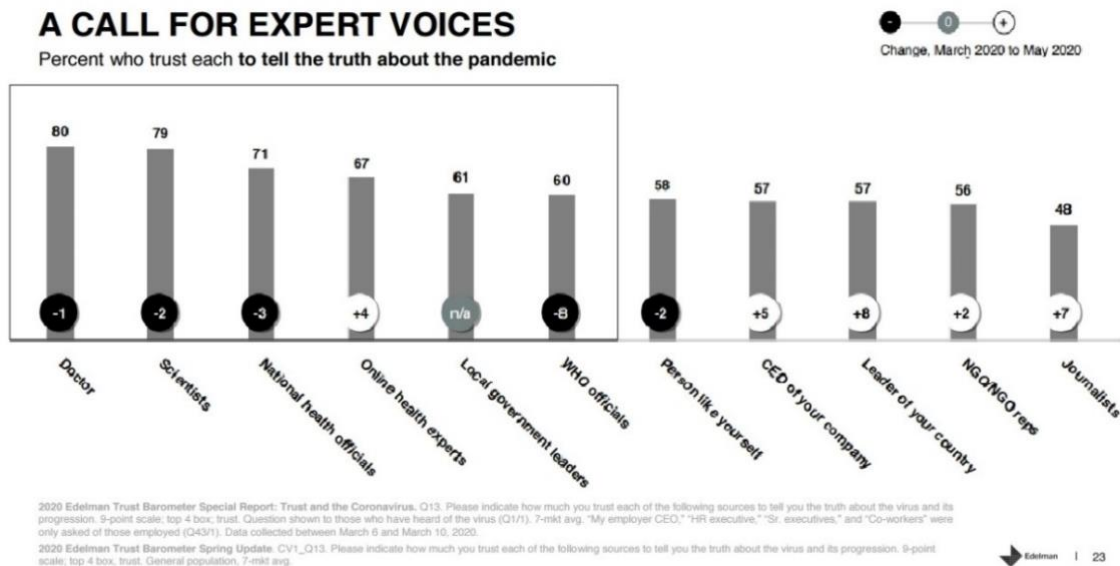
Figure 2: Level of trust in different actors (Jan-May 2020)



Source: Edelman

In contrast, the same Edelman study found the approval ratings for global actors in decline. While the rate of trust in health officials at all levels has decreased in general, respondents report a higher level of trust in their national health officials, at 71 percent, in comparison to 60 percent for World Health Organization (WHO) officials. Despite WHO’s ongoing efforts to respond to the pandemic, the change in approval ratings has been the greatest for WHO officials, with a drop of 8 percent between March and May 2020.

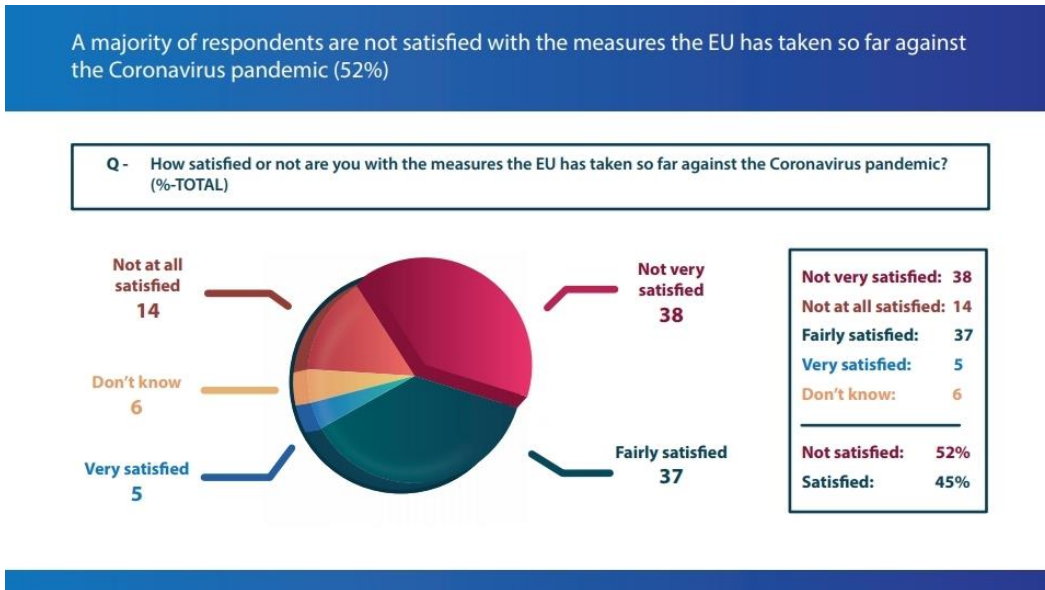
Figure 3: Level of Trust for Experts on Information on the Pandemic (Mar-May 2020)



Source: [Edelman](#)

The disparity in the demand for international cooperation and the approval of the multilateral response to date is far greater in the case of the EU, as a recent Kantar [survey](#) of the 21 member states of the EU shows. It found that while 69 percent of citizens believe that their regional body should be better equipped to deal with crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, only 34 percent expressed satisfaction with the level of solidarity demonstrated by EU members in their responses to COVID-19. In the same [survey](#), 74 percent of the respondents indicated that they heard about measures initiated by the EU in response to the pandemic—most notably the recent proposal by the European Commission to set up [a recovery fund worth EUR 750 billion](#)—but only 42 percent of the respondents expressed satisfaction with these measures (Figure 4).

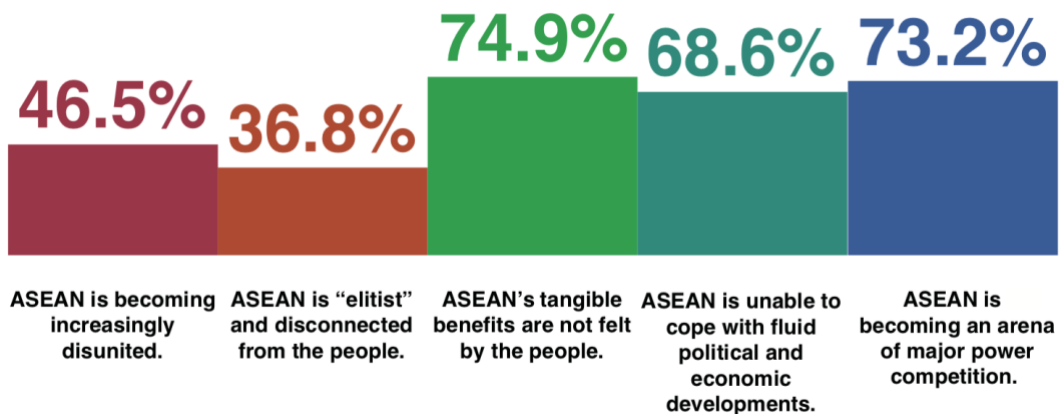
Figure 4: Level of satisfaction on the EU's COVID-19 response



Source: [Kantar](#)

These results accord with the dissatisfactions with multilateral institutions that existed prior to COVID-19. A [survey](#) by the ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute asked a total of 1,308 respondents from 10 different member states of ASEAN to identify their major concerns with their regional organization. A lack of tangible benefits felt by the people topped the list at 74.9 percent, followed by concerns about ASEAN becoming an arena of major power competition and the organization's inability to cope with fluid political and economic developments, each at 73.2 percent and 68.6 percent.

Figure 5: Top concerns about ASEAN



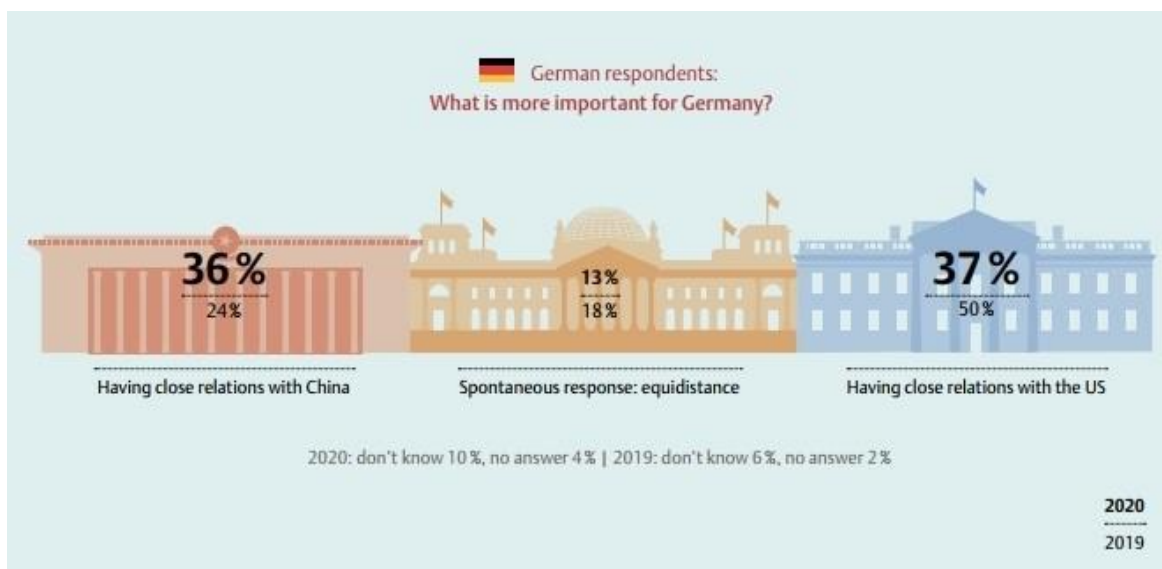
Source: [ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute](#)

Member-state leadership in the international system

Behind public opinion of international institutions lie some tectonic shifts in member-state leadership. Since the foundation of the UN, the US has always had a leadership role in responding to multilateral crises. More recently, the US has stepped back from multilateralism and international leadership, announcing its withdrawal from the Paris Climate treaty, UNESCO, the Human Rights Council, and most recently, the World Health Organization—moves that have been strongly criticized by its traditional allies around the world. The US is currently engaged in a battle over [the direction of the African Development Bank](#) that also demonstrates its disconnect from traditional understandings of its interest and alliances.

The gaps left by US leadership are illustrated in the results of two polls in very different parts of the world. [A poll of ASEAN policymakers in 2020](#) noted that 77 percent of respondents believed that US engagement in Southeast Asia had declined under the Trump administration compared to the Obama administration. A survey by Körber-Stiftung and the Pew Research Center in May 2020 found that Germans are demonstrating significant changes in their attitudes toward both the US and China. In effect, Germans now see the value in improving diplomatic relations with China as the US continues to withdraw from its position as a leader in multilateral systems. This withdrawal had led to a [freefall](#) in German attitudes toward the US well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 6: Changes in German perceptions of relations with the US and China (2019-20)

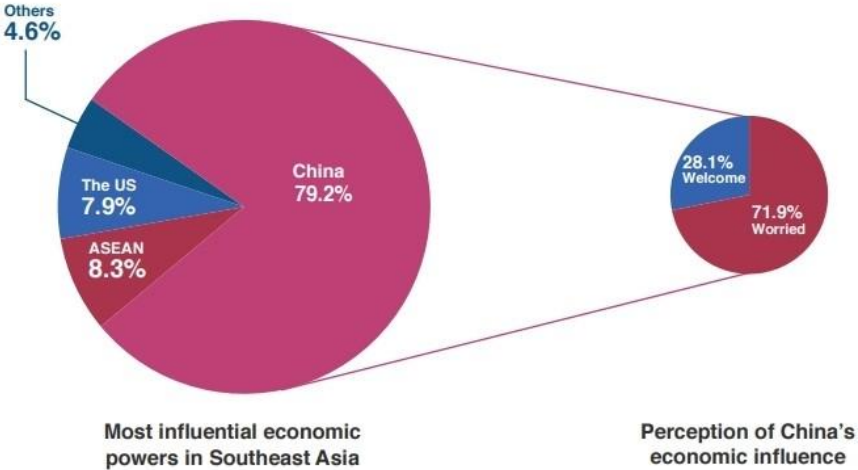


Source: [Körber-Stiftung](#)

As the US has stepped back, China has stepped forward. China garnered much political support worldwide in the 2000s without taking a prominent leadership role, due to rapidly rising external investments and a “win-win” doctrine of international solidarity. But like the US, China’s current leadership is more combative than previous administrations. It too has seen pushback from states with

which it had previously cultivated alliances. The same ASEAN poll shows the percentage of respondents who identify China as the most important economic power in the region increasing from 72 to 79 percent, and those who identify it as the most important political and strategic power increasing from 45 percent to 52 percent (in comparison, the US stands at only 26 percent). But tensions around China’s role have also increased: 72 percent of South East Asians say they are worried by China’s economic role, and 85 percent that they are worried by its political and strategic role (see Figure 7). Similar dynamics have occurred in China’s relationship with other regions: for example, a recent fraying of diplomatic ties with a number of African states after reports of racism towards African migrants in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a rebuke from the AU.

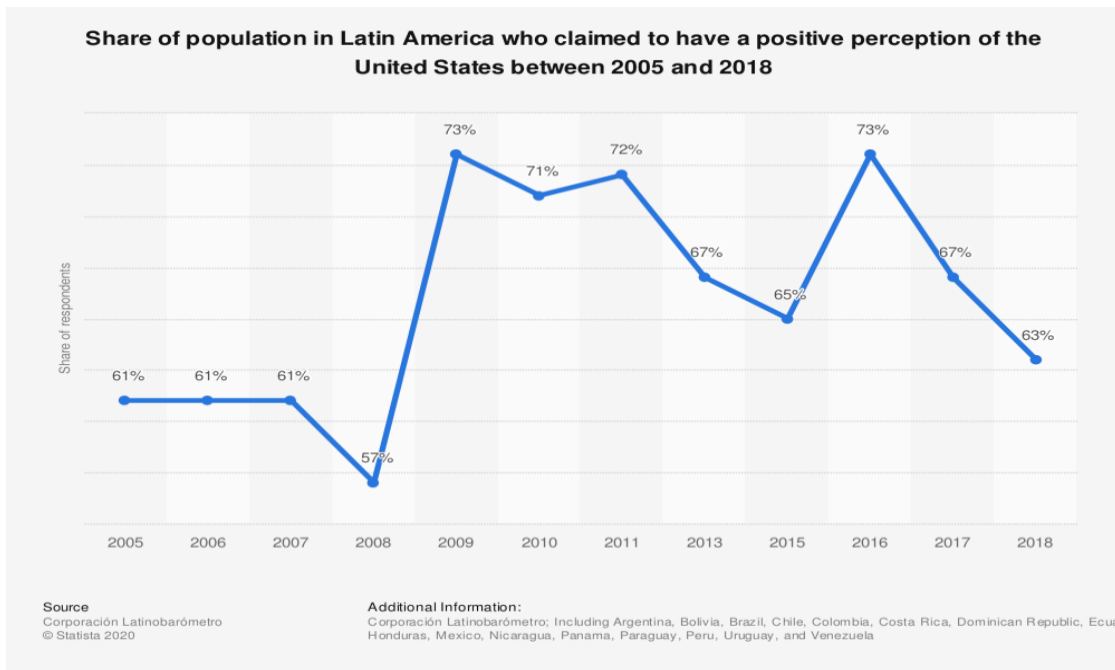
Figure 7: ASEAN Perception of China as a Major Power in the Region



Source: [ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute](#)

In Latin America, the situation is similar. A Pew Research [poll](#) found that approval of the United States in the region fell precipitously from 2005 to 2018 (see figure 8). While the US gradually withdrew much of its engagement over the past decade, China stepped up its profile in the region. But lately, COVID-19 seems to have provoked more anti-Chinese rhetoric, as an April report in [The Diplomat](#) suggests.

Figure 8: Latin American Perception of the United States 2005-2018



Source: [Pew Research](#)

The Ways Forward

Martin Wolff, in the *Financial Times*, has argued that the tensions between the US and China, exacerbated by blame-laying around the COVID-19 pandemic, now resembles the rivalry between Germany and Britain in the nineteenth century. As he notes, “both rivalries took place in an era of economic globalization and rapid technological innovation. Both featured a rising autocracy with a state-protected economy challenging an established democracy with a free-market system. Moreover, both rivalries featured countries enmeshed in profound interdependence wielding tariff threats, standard-setting, technology theft, financial power and infrastructure investment for advantage.” The parallel is an ominous one.

For those hoping the world can avoid repeating the conflicts of the past, there are some signs of hope. In the short term, these are:

- **Middle-power alliances.** On 25 March, the leaders of Ecuador, Ethiopia, Germany, Jordan and Singapore published an op-ed titled “[No time for geopolitical turf battles](#)” in the *Financial Times*. In it, they noted that a global solution to the pandemic is in everyone’s self-interest and that a COVID-19 vaccine is a global public good, arguing that “we must assemble a truly global alliance to mobilize learning, ingenuity and solidarity” to fight the virus. In another example, and in view of the inability in the UN Security Council to agree on a statement on the pandemic, six member states (Singapore, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, Indonesia, and Ghana) promoted a resolution in the General Assembly ([A/RES/74/270](#)) calling for global cooperation in the

response to the virus. Just as the US was deciding to withdraw from the WHO, numerous world leaders, including the presidents and prime ministers of South Africa, Costa Rica, Malaysia, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, came together to support the organization and its search for a globally and freely available vaccine via the ACT Accelerator initiative. Australia has spearheaded a call for an independent investigation into the origins of the virus, which is now backed by 120 countries. Like-minded middle powers have come together in the recent past to deal with problems such as global health, internet governance, and international migration, in a trend now known as “plurilateralism.” The question remains however as to whether these alliances can galvanize action at the scale needed to cope with the global crises we face.

- **Regional organization and networks.** COVID-19 has also laid bare the perils of relying on global supply chains for medical equipment—for example, Chinese producers account for nearly [80 percent of the U.S. supply of antibiotics](#), while the country’s share of worldwide face mask manufacturing is [expected to climb to 85 percent](#) this year. Many political parties in different countries are now calling for efforts to reduce dependence on such concentrated sources of supply. This shift could lead to the pulling up of national drawbridges on trade, but it could also lead to more productive regional links in supply trains, and hence strategic interests—for example, within the Americas, or between Europe and Africa. In one case, nine South American nations who make up a regional group called PROSUR recently [agreed to work together](#) to request aid from multilateral institutions, share information on health strategies, and procure medical supplies and equipment.

The management of COVID-19 is proving to be a test run for the international system’s ability to manage other transnational threats, such as climate change and the increased number of disasters that are likely to accompany it, and cybersecurity. The effects of the pandemic reveal the deleterious consequences of current G-2 competition. But there is still time for both China and the US to recognize the need for calmer and long-term cooperation in their own interests, although it is rapidly running out. The current crisis is a test for international action in the absence of great power leadership, for a world that will need to rely on middle-power and regional initiatives. It remains to be seen what the repercussions of this shift in the forms of multilateral cooperation will be for the international community and the UN system.