

The pandemic needs a global response

That is why we need the United Nations Security Council to take action. And the Dominican Republic plays a crucial role.

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As the coronavirus crisis erupts worldwide, the world's most powerful international institution, the UN Security Council (UNSC), is reeling.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has called for a global ceasefire and has described the pandemic as the most important test the United Nations has faced since its inception. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a coordinated multilateral response and the World Health Organization (WHO) is saving lives by mobilizing scientists, coordinating research and providing urgent information and attention to populations at risk. Created in the 1940s, the UNSC is the body that centralizes all the efforts of the United Nations on international peace and security and addresses global crises like the one we are experiencing. But today, when the world faces the greatest threat of our time, the Security Council is missing.

Many of us work in organizations and we know that if the boss does not support us, he makes us more vulnerable and ineffective. On UN peace and security issues, the UNSC is the boss and, if it does not act, it undermines global efforts to combat the pandemic.

It is time for the Security Council to rise to this crisis. The Dominican Republic, which currently holds the presidency of the UNSC, has a historic opportunity to lead global efforts against the coronavirus and mitigate its repercussions on world peace and security.

In some past crises, the great powers were able to rise above their national interests and take a global leadership role, as they did with previous health challenges, such as when Ebola and AIDS emerged. But now, faced with a much more imminent global threat, the most influential countries cannot agree: China has wanted to minimize the problem, Russia seems to support China, and the United States is absent. On other occasions, the United States has urged the Security Council to take action but US President Donald Trump has chosen to try to blame everything on China. But the time for accusation politics is over and profoundly counterproductive. This is why the Security Council must act urgently to unify the world and manage a collaborative response to the pandemic.

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Of the permanent members of the Council, only France has proposed a resolution to address the pandemic. But it has not had an echo: the countries seem more concerned with accusing themselves than dealing with the crisis together. That is why the ten non-permanent or elected Council members are filling that gap and have taken the lead alongside France. Last week, nine of the ten elected members organized a meeting where the UNSC, for the first time, addressed the issue of the coronavirus, but the members did not agree on what had to be done.

As the current President of the Council, the Dominican Republic can lead this effort. As a first step, the Caribbean country must use its position to unify the Council around a joint declaration calling for a coordinated global response. If the president's statement is made with a view to the future, and not pointing out guilty parties, perhaps he can get the permanent members to join, which would allow for more energetic and more hasty action.

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This statement would support the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire on all conflicts on the planet. The coronavirus hit the developed world first, but it can wreak even more havoc in regions torn by war, violence, or organized crime (like many areas of Latin America). A real and effective global disruption of conflict can help ensure that medical personnel have safe and unhindered access to patients in those areas. Civil society groups and even some of the warring parties are responding positively to Guterres's proposal, but so far, the Security Council has not spoken. Without that support, some conflicting groups may not collaborate.

The statement should focus on holding the UN accountable for overseeing global cooperation. To date, national responses to the pandemic have been incredibly uncoordinated, sometimes pitting one country against another while struggling to secure medical equipment.

The Security Council could order greater coordination and cooperation among member states and between UN organizations. A forceful statement should insist that the actions of the world's governments fully respect international law, including international human rights law, and ensure that care is extended to all people without discrimination and always considering the inhabitants of occupied areas, refugees and migrants, and protecting press freedom.

The UN Charter gives the Security Council the authority to respond to any international security threat, including a pandemic. The statements of the Dominican Republic are crucial in this regard, because they reflect the consensus opinion of the members of the Council.

A decisive statement calling for working together can make all the difference: it would legitimize recent General Assembly decisions, reinforce the authority of the secretary-general, and strengthen the efforts of specialized UN agencies to save lives. And it is not all: a clear and strong signal from the Security Council would persuade other actors to collaborate and stop thinking of this crisis as a problem with borders; it is not.

Latin American countries have made a difference at important moments in the Security Council, and must do so again. Diego Arria, a former ambassador from Venezuela, put into practice in 1992 a new type of meetings, outside the rooms of the UNSC, informal but official. In addition to the statement by the President, the Dominican Republic, some of us believe that the "Arria formula" could now also bring new voices and give greater flexibility to the deliberations of the Security Council. The Dominican Republic can follow this Latin American tradition and opt for firm leadership from the margins, as Arria did.

Now more than ever we need unity and leadership from the Security Council. Global security and the legitimacy of the agency depend on the ability of all its members, even the smallest, to take responsibility for our shared future.

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Updated April 11, 2020

• When will this end?

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: "How will we know when to reopen the country?" In an American Enterprise Institute report, Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McClellan, Lauren Silvis and Crystal Watson staked out four goal posts for recovery: Hospitals in the state must be able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization, without resorting to crisis standards of care; the state needs to be able to at least test everyone who has symptoms; the state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases and contacts; and there must be a sustained reduction in cases for at least 14 days.

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