

Global South Health Order and Economics Post US Exit from WHO

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The announcement of the United States' exit from the World Health Organization (WHO) marks a watershed moment in global health governance. While the WHO has long been criticized for bureaucratic inefficiencies, politicization, and uneven responsiveness, its role as the only universal health body remains indispensable. Pandemics do not respect borders, and health crises are inherently global. The withdrawal of the world's largest economy from the WHO further weakens the institution, creating both risks and opportunities. For the Global South, this moment may catalyze a reordering of health leadership. For India, however, it is a double-edged sword: an opening to assert influence, but also a threat as China consolidates its dominance within the WHO's structures.

WHO'S IMPERFECTIONS AND NECESSITY

The WHO is by no means perfect. Its slow response to Ebola, uneven handling of COVID-19, and susceptibility to geopolitical pressures have drawn sharp criticism. Funding structures that rely heavily on voluntary contributions skew priorities toward donor interests rather than universal needs. Senior management positions often reflect political bargaining more than merit. Yet, despite these flaws, the WHO remains the only global body with legitimacy to set health norms, coordinate responses, and provide technical guidance across 194 member states.

Without the WHO, the world risks fragmentation into regional blocs, each pursuing its own health agenda. Such fragmentation would be disastrous in the face of pandemics, antimicrobial resistance, or climate-linked health shocks. The US exit therefore, weakens not just the WHO but the very idea of collective health security.

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE US EXIT

The United States has historically been one of the largest contributors to the WHO, both financially and technically. Its withdrawal carries several implications:

- **Funding Gap:** The US accounted for roughly 15–20% of WHO's budget in recent years. Its exit creates a significant shortfall, forcing the organization to either cut programs or seek alternative donors.
- **Loss of Technical Expertise:** US institutions like the CDC and NIH have been central to WHO's technical guidance. Their absence diminishes the WHO's scientific heft.
- **Geopolitical Vacuum:** The US exit leaves space for other powers—most notably China—to expand influence through funding, leadership positions, and agenda-setting.
- **Erosion of Legitimacy:** The departure of the world's largest economy undermines the WHO's claim to universality, weakening its authority in negotiations and standard-setting.

In short, the US exit is a blow to global health governance, but it also creates an opening for the Global South to step up.

China's Ascendancy in the WHO

China has already been expanding its footprint within the WHO. It has increased voluntary contributions, secured senior management positions, and leveraged its Belt and Road Initiative to align health cooperation with geopolitical strategy. During COVID19, China's influence was evident in the WHO's cautious handling of early outbreak information.

Statistics underscore this dominance: China's assessed contributions have risen steadily, and Chinese nationals occupy influential roles in WHO leadership. This creates a strategic imbalance. For India, which aspires to be a global health leader, China's dominance is both a threat and a wake-up call. If India does not recalibrate its engagement, it risks being sidelined in shaping global health norms.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The US exit, while destabilizing, creates opportunities for the Global South to assume greater leadership:

- **Funding Realignment:** Countries like India, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia can increase contributions, signal commitment, and gain influence.
- **Agenda Setting:** The Global South can push for priorities often neglected - such as equitable access to medicines, strengthening primary health systems, and addressing climate-linked health risks.
- **Coalition Building:** Regional blocs (e.g. African Union, ASEAN, BRICS) can coordinate positions, amplifying collective voice within WHO deliberations.
- **Normative Leadership:** The Global South can champion reforms in WHO governance, demanding transparency, merit-based appointments, and equitable representation.

This moment could mark the beginning of a Global South Health Order, where emerging economies shape the future of global health governance.

India's Strategic Dilemma

For India, the US exit presents both opportunity and threat. On one hand, India can step up its contributions, leverage its pharmaceutical industry, and showcase its digital health innovations. On the other hand, China's entrenched influence poses a challenge. India must therefore rethink its strategic engagement with the WHO along several dimensions:

- **Financial Contributions:** India's assessed contributions remain modest relative to its GDP. Increasing voluntary contributions would signal seriousness and secure bargaining power.
- **Leadership Positions:** India must proactively seek senior management roles within WHO, ensuring representation

at the highest levels.

- **Research and Technical Expertise:** By channelling its scientific institutions into WHO collaborations, India can enhance technical credibility.
- **Coalition Building:** India should lead Global South coalitions, aligning with Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia to push for equitable health agendas.
- **Narrative Building:** India must frame itself as a champion of equity, resilience, and patientcentred health systems, contrasting with China's statecentric model.

This strategic recalibration is essential if India is to avoid being overshadowed in the emerging health order.

Strengthening the WHO: A Global Imperative

The world must also think beyond national interests to strengthen the WHO itself. Several reforms are urgent:

- **Funding Reform:** Shift from voluntary contributions to more predictable assessed contributions, reducing donordriven distortions.
- **Governance Reform:** Ensure transparency in appointments, meritbased recruitment, and equitable regional representation.
- **Technical Independence:** Safeguard WHO's scientific guidance from political interference, reinforcing credibility.
- **Emergency Preparedness:** Build stronger mechanisms for rapid response, data sharing, and accountability during pandemics.
- **Integration with Global South Priorities:** Align WHO programs with the needs of low and middleincome countries, ensuring equity in access to medicines, vaccines, and technologies.

Strengthening the WHO is not optional—it is a global imperative. Without a robust WHO, the world risks repeating the chaos of COVID19, where fragmented responses cost millions of lives.

Economic Dimensions of the Global South Health Order

The reordering of global health governance has economic implications. The Global South can leverage health leadership to:

- **Boost Pharmaceutical Exports:** India's generics industry can position itself as a global supplier of affordable medicines.
- **Expand Medical Tourism:** Countries like India and Thailand can attract patients from across the world, linking health diplomacy with economic growth.

- **Invest in Health Infrastructure:** By prioritizing health in budgets, Global South nations can strengthen resilience and reduce longterm economic shocks.
- **Shape Trade and Intellectual Property Norms:** Leadership in the WHO can influence debates on TRIPS flexibilities, ensuring equitable access to innovations.

The US exit from the WHO is a major blow to global health governance. It weakens funding, legitimacy, and technical capacity. Yet, it also creates an opening for the Global South to

step up and shape a new health order. For India, this moment is both an opportunity and a potential threat. China's dominance within WHO structures underscores the urgency of strategic recalibration. The world is interconnected. Pandemics do not see borders. A weakened WHO is a risk to all. Strengthening this body is essential—not just for health, but for global stability and economic resilience. The US exit should therefore be seen not only as a crisis but as a catalyst: a chance for the Global South to assume leadership, for India to rethink engagement, and for the world to recommit to collective health security.