Outlook on Global Public Health’s COVID-19 Response with Dr. Ashish K. Jha

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FH: Let’s first talk about COVID-19 in the United States. Where has the Trump administration succeeded in its handling of the pandemic, where has it failed, and what should be done differently going forward?

AKJ: COVID-19 has obviously been managed very badly in the United States. And you don’t have to look very hard for the data to support that: more than one million Americans infected, 250,000 Americans dead, and we’re in the surge right now, which is going to lead to probably another 100,000-150,000 Americans dying over the next two or three months. It’s been abysmal largely because we have ignored the science of public health and there’s been a lot of misinformation and disinformation coming out of the White House and from other sources. This has made any kind of an effective public health response very difficult. The one area where the administration has done extraordinarily well is on vaccines... Now we should talk a little bit about vaccines because it’s not that the administration somehow created the vaccine, the scientists have created vaccines. But there are key things that the administration has done that has been helpful in speeding up the process by which these vaccines have become available. But of course, vaccines are still many months away from widespread deployment, so while [a vaccine] will be helpful, it will not completely bail us out and there’s a lot else that can be done between now and then.

So, what can be done? We really do need to push people to start wearing masks much more regularly. There are also a lot of policy interventions around limiting indoor events and gatherings that we can do. And then one area where the [Trump] administration has just failed miserably is in making sure there is widespread availability of testing, which could actually make a very big difference...

FH: The transition of power between President Trump and President-elect Biden has been rocky to say the least. Claiming election fraud, the Trump administration has delayed the formal transition of power for weeks and refused to meet with the Biden team on critical national issues including pandemic response.1 What might the effect of this delayed transition be?

AKJ: There is an old saying, “it’s always bad to have a pandemic during an election year.” It’s particularly bad this year because we are not going to have an effective transition. Many of us have been pushing for the 2008 model when President Bush was heading out the door and President Obama was coming in. We were in the middle of a financial crisis and the two teams worked really effectively together to help the country through that crisis. That would be lovely; I think we all want to see that happen. But I’m skeptical about whether it’s going to happen. And that will mean that the Biden administration will pick up the baton probably in the worst days of the pandemic, with many hundreds of thousands of Americans getting infected every day and probably 2,000-3,000 Americans dying every day by that time. And it will take them a few weeks, a couple of months, to really get up and running. If there is not an effective transition, it also will mean that vaccines will take longer to deploy. And at the end of the day, without being too crude about it, it will mean that probably an additional 30,000-50,000 Americans will die. And that would have been unnecessary had there been an effective transition.

FH: What lessons on pandemic response can the United States learn from countries in Europe and Asia? How might these lessons inform the Biden administration’s strategy?

AKJ: It turns out that if we had had this conversation three months ago, I would have loved to have pointed to a bunch of European countries and said they’ve done this much, much better. But to my surprise, many of those countries have really mismanaged the second wave of the pandemic. So, much of Europe is in trouble. Some European countries have done reason-

1 The formal transition finally began on Monday, November 23, 2020.
ably well but countries in East Asia, as well as places like New Zealand and Australia, have done a very good job of managing the disease.

So, people often say, well, what is the magic formula? How do they do it? And what is interesting is if you look at a place like South Korea, their strategy has been driven really by testing and tracing—they have a fabulous testing infrastructure. And then if you look at a place like Japan, their testing infrastructure is okay, it’s not all that special, but they’ve got universal mask wearing and really good contact tracing. And then you look at a place like New Zealand, they do a bit of both of those things, but they’ve been really aggressive about lockdowns and social distancing. And then Germany, which is probably the best of the major European countries, they’ve done a mix of all three. So, the point is that there isn’t a single formula; what works at the end of the day is taking the virus seriously. If you ignore [the virus], it punishes you. If you take it seriously, you have several tools to your disposal and you can use any of them to keep the virus under control.

FH: Now, let’s talk about international cooperation and coordination in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic, starting with the World Health Organization. What role do you envision WHO playing in future health policy coordination, including vaccine development and distribution?

AKJ: WHO really is the world’s coordinating health agency and... when you specifically think about the vaccine, [WHO] is actually doing quite a good job of bringing countries together. There is something called the COVAX program, which is an effort to try to get vaccines out to the world. Pretty much every major country in the world has signed up to be part of COVAX, the one exception being the United States—but I suspect that will change under the Biden administration.

WHO is not going to be the producer or financier of vaccines, but it will play a central role in coordinating and bringing health ministries along. And this really gets at the heart of a broader question that WHO has: what is its mission? And almost more importantly, what is not part of its mission? At times, WHO gets into trouble because it defines itself too broadly. But in this case, focusing on coordination, focusing on bringing countries together, and focusing on making sure there’s equitable distribution of the vaccine is going to be critical.

FH: You mentioned the incredible performance of Australia and New Zealand in managing the spread of COVID-19. These two countries have contained the virus so well that they are permitting cross-country travel bilaterally. So, here is my question: What advantages or disadvantages does WHO coordination have against such tight bilateral cooperation on health policy?

AKJ: The key in my mind is to understand that multilateralism and bilateralism need not be contradictions. There are always going to be bilateral relationships. The U.S. relationship with Canada, for instance, is not going to be mediated by the United Nations—we’re going to have bilateral relationships with our neighbors or with other countries. The key is for agencies like WHO to understand where there is a gap, where it needs to fill in, and how it can help in situations where bilateral relationships are either not possible or not constructive. When you think about vaccine distribution, we don’t necessarily need every country trying to negotiate a deal with every major mass vaccine manufacturer, that would not be particularly efficient. And that’s why an organization like WHO or Gavi can play a really helpful role.

FH: Now, let’s consider the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. Many groups in the United States, including national security experts and American corporations, harbor a deep mistrust of China. How can we build trust between the United States and China moving forward, especially in terms of bettering the public perception of China in the United States?

AKJ: Let’s think first about how to build trust with companies and with the national security apparatus. First of all, it’s not going to be straightforward and you can’t fake it. There are real problems with intellectual property and there are real problems with China and America having at times competing interests geopolitically. But I have always believed that governments are not islands unto themselves and that they respond to the people that they serve and that they represent. And this is why I’ve called for stronger ties between American universities and Chinese universities and between American civil society institutions and Chinese civil society institutions... [while] being very aware that there are real issues of intellectual property theft and that we have to be careful on these things. But China is also moving into a different phase of its own intellectual growth and development. The amount of real IP coming out of China and the quality of the science coming out of China, is vastly different than where it was 20 years ago. So, again, I think if civil society organizations can build those relationships, I think that will make it easier. I have no simplistic view that somehow our militaries are going to start cooperating quickly or companies are not going to feel threatened by IP issues, those are longer term relationship issues that we have to work through, but my general take is you make a lot more progress through engagement than you do through belligerence. And [the Trump] administration has taken the approach of belligerence, which is a far less successful strategy.

FH: As you know, the incredible mistrust and tension between the two countries has stifled bilateral cooperation on COVID-19. Does this dynamic need to change in order to prevent future pandemics?

AKJ: I found the whole stance of both governments towards each other to be deeply unfortunate and unhelpful. Now the Chinese government has plenty of problems that it has to be held accountable for. It has got a substantial amount of human rights abuses and the way it managed the pandemic initially (e.g. hiding information) was really harmful. It has not been a perfect entity. But I tend to believe two things. One is that the American people and the Chinese people are natural allies. There is a long history of cooperation between America and China and whatever our governments do doesn’t necessarily need to define what people do. And that means we should have more civil society interactions and universities should exchange more people; we should be deeply engaged with China and China should be deeply engaged with us. And that really gets to the second point, which is that America and China, at least for the foreseeable future, are going to be the world’s superpowers. [The two countries] have very different views about how to engage with the world, but I think competing with each other is less useful than cooperating with each other. To the extent that both countries can move towards a more cooperative mode, the world will be better for it.