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**WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
– SCENE OF AMERICAN-CHINESE CONFRONTATIONS**

Abstract:

The activity of the World Health Organization is now becoming a topic in disputes between the big power centres – the USA and China. The role of the WHO is also becoming a research topic not only for researchers in medical sciences, but also for political specialists in international relations. With the COVID-19 crisis, the WHO is becoming a scene of the major challenges – the USA and China. This Article aims to highlight the USA and China relations with reference to the work of the WHO, including the effectiveness of the organization with a global pandemic such as that of the COVID-19.

Keywords:

China, USA, WHO, COVID-19 crisis, pandemics, confrontation.

The role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis is one of the topics that is present not only in disputes between the big power centres – the USA and China, but also in the speech of representatives of the academic community concerns the work and role of international organizations, in particular. The COVID-19 crisis is becoming a subject of deciphering not only of the researchers in medical sciences but also of the political specialists about half a year after the emergence of the biggest

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global crisis that existed after World War II³. Thus, in order to better understand the situation created around the WHO's work, there is a need to take a brief look back on the WHO's appearance and activity, and to submit the triad to the analysis of relations USA and China, USA and WHO, China and WHO.

The World Health Organization has a history of 72 years and functions as a special agency within the United Nations. It was founded on 7 April 1948⁴. Initially, the International Health Bureau was created at the initiative of the US, in 1902 to ensure better health security for the United States of America. The work and existence of the Bureau focused on the philanthropic measures of American billionaires. However, practice has shown the Office's inability to end the diseases and epidemics present on the international arena, over the years. Instead, the work of the Bureau made it conditional, without having too many barriers, on the expansion of USA influence throughout the world into new areas of the world. The specific diseases have been selected to develop vaccines, so diseases are the most problematic ones can be defeated or mitigated without costly social programs and without calling into question the privileges of the rich. One of the Bureau's aims was not to create a truly healthy world, but simply to prevent or mitigate pandemics, as they expand, have a fairly damaging effect on profits and social stability. The International Health Office is thus replaced by the World Health Organization (WHO) which has officially become the coordinating authority in the field of global health since 1948⁵.

After World War II, the WHO had found its supremacy. The WHO's efforts to vaccinate the world against pox in 1979 have led to the epidemic being cleared. The 80 clashes between the USA and the USSR contributed to the decline of the WHO's activity on the international arena. In line with the position of the then President of the United States Ronald Reagan, the United Nations and the post-war order retained the 'development' of the United States and thus reduced the financing of the United Nations, which in turn reduced the WHO budget. Therefore, in the years 1980s and 1990s the WHO activity became more irrelevant and unable to organize efforts to combat diseases.

Today the organization brings together 192 Member States, which it supports in developing health and strengthening health services. It also lays down the international standards and norms, conducts staff training, promotes research and supervises pandemics. In the latter area, the WHO Member States adopted the International Health Regulations (IHR) in 1951. Under this

³ D. Morley, *L'impotenza dell'OMS e le relazioni tra Cina e Stati Uniti*, <<https://www.rivoluzione.red/limpotenza-delloms-e-le-relazioni-tra-cina-e-stati-uniti/>> (15.06.2020).

⁴ N. Ronzitti, *Le istituzioni internazionali di fronte all'emergenza*, <<https://www.affair-internazionali.it/2020/04/COVID-19-e-istituzioni-internazionali/>> (11.06.2020).

⁵ *Cine finanțează Organizația Mondială a Sănătății, cea mai populară instituție a crizei COVID-19: OMS are mai mulți bani decât Crucea Roșie și Medici Fără Frontiere la un loc*, <<https://www.zf.ro/business-international/cine-finanteaza-organizatia-mondiala-a-sanatatii-cea-mai-populara>> (12.06.2020).

Regulation, States have undertaken to “prevent the international spread of diseases [...] and respond to them with proportionate public health action [...], avoiding the creation of unnecessary barriers to international trade and trafficking”⁶.

According to the provisions of the Regulation, the organization has the right to declare an international public health emergency (which was declared on 30 January 2020, requiring the States to take measures to combat coronavirus). For the first time the Regulation was revised in 1969, but, given the evolution of infectious diseases and epidemic crises which have been increasing since the end of the 20th century, it proved to be inadequate to the WHO work. After ten years of crisis and epidemic-driven reflections (particularly the SARS epidemic), the text of the Regulation was reviewed in 2005. The new amendments were introduced in the text of the Regulation allow the WHO General Directorate to declare an international health emergency, which allows it to take action, make recommendations and call for the mobilization of the international community as a whole. The WHO General Directorate may also convene the Emergency Committee composed of experts, whose opinion shall be purely advisory. In 2009, during the H1N1 pandemic, the decision to keep the identity of the 16 members of the secret Committee in order to protect them from external influences actually contributed to the suspected collision between the WHO and the pharmaceutical industry. It also requires the States to develop means to ensure the control of ‘public health events’ on their territory. The epidemic situation demonstrated in autumn 2019 that only 57% of countries developed the minimum capacities needed to cope with an exceptional state. The Ebola epidemic recalled the need to support fragile States in West Africa in 2014 in advance to strengthen their health systems and to intervene rapidly when an epidemic occurs on their territory. For this reason, in 2016, the WHO implemented a health emergency program with its own budget, and which develops operational response capacities more quickly, in particular in fragile States (who, for example, sent test packages on the African continent?)⁷.

Although the Regulation is a legal document, there are no special enforcement mechanisms for a country that the WHO can exercise. Its work is supported by the Member States, including the USA. This legislation requires countries to alert the international Community through the body when they have problems with the presence of certain diseases. The first test was the H1N1 influenza pandemic for this Regulation since 2009. In the case of this, the WHO was accused of rapid and exaggerated action at a time of economic crisis. A few years later, in 2014, the position was opposed of the criticism concerning the WHO activity: it is considered that the WHO has belatedly

⁶ F. Forni, *EE.UU. y suspensión de pagos a la OMS: Líderes mundiales se lanzan en picada contra Trump*, <<https://www.latercera.com/la-tercera-pm/noticia/eeuu-y-suspension-de-pagos-a-la-oms-lideres-mundiales-se-lanzan-en-picada-contra-trump/>> (29.05.2020).

⁷ M. Louis, *¿Para qué sirve la Organización Mundial de la Salud?* <<https://nuso.org/articulo/para-que-sirve-la-organizacion-mundial-de-la-salud/>> (12.06.2020).

reconfirmed the outbreak of Ebola in Western Africa (the disease has claimed more than 11.300 lives)⁸.

As a result, the states should establish national surveillance mechanisms and report 'public health events' (such as the detection of infectious diseases such as COVID-19) to the WHO. The Ebola epidemic stressed in West Africa in 2014 that it needed well-organized and well-funded health systems. The WHO is then responsible for disseminating information to other Member States and for coordinating the international response⁹.

Thus, the World Health Organization does not have autonomous investigative powers in the Member States, which is clearly the leading institution in the health field, but relies on the reports that has to send in accordance with the provisions of the international health regulations, revised in 2005 after the SARS epidemic. According to the provisions of the official documents, the WHO may declare the existence of a pandemic¹⁰.

Established in Geneva, the organization employs over 7.000 people from 150 countries and has an income of \$4,4 billion in 2019. The organization's money is used on programs for access to medical services, but also on projects in cases of medical emergency. The organization's biggest financiers are the United States, the United Kingdom and the foundation funded by the founder of Microsoft its giant Bill Gates and his wife Melinda. "The functioning of the WHO is based on two major sources of income. One is the contributions that the 192 Member States make each year, and other contributions from donations and sponsorships coming to the organization. The USA side is the largest contribution to the Organization's budget, ranging from 200 to 450 million USD annually, which corresponds to 15% of the organization's total funding. This value depends on year-on-year basis and is the highest contribution provided by the WHO States, as opposed to the contribution of China which is around 40 million USD annually"¹¹. China's input was mostly close to 76 million USD in 2018 and 2019, according to the WHO website. The WHO also has a significantly more significant budget than the Red cross and borderless doctors put together. The WHO budget is 60% higher than the Red cross budget and three times higher than the budget of doctors without Borders¹².

If we look at the funding, only for the period February-April 2020, the WHO needed money: a total of 675 million USD, including 61,5 million USD for despite emergency situations, the WHO received up to 29,5 million USD

⁸ I. Gutiérrez, *La OMS, un órgano sin poder ejecutivo atrapado en el fuego cruzado entre EEUU y China en plena pandemia*, <<https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/oms-ejecutivo-eeuu-china-coronavirus.html>> (12.05.2020).

⁹ A. Guilbaud, *Que peuvent les organisations internationales face au coronavirus?* <<https://www.latribune.fr/opinions/tribunes/que-peuvent-les-organisations-internationales-face-au-coronavirus.html>> (11.06.2020).

¹⁰ N. Ronzitti, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Cine finanțează...*, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibidem.*

from the US, including 9,5 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the United States' largest donor. Funding for the organization is always difficult, as Member States are reluctant to invest in the organization. This 'donor dependency' limits the WHO's room for manoeuvre and underlines the extent to which its coordination role depends on cooperation with the funding States¹³.

The work of the WHO is currently subject to criticism. A first example of the work of the organization under criticism is its fight against the SARS epidemic in 2003. The criticism of his work is due to the fact that, in that crisis, the WHO had the courage to force China into its insufficient response to the pandemic and to dictate to the world the measures needed to combat the disease, which eventually spread less than the current coronavirus. Unlike the USA-centre of power, China held a less influential position in the international arena in 2003. Therefore, the WHO, with the support of the United States, has managed to make its presence felt on the international arena. The financial crisis of 2008 marked a fundamental moment in the history of the WHO's work and the so-called swine flu epidemic from 2009 (it has not proved to be particularly lethal) has seen the who as being rather aggressive in efforts to isolate States, which has obviously caused damage to the economy¹⁴.

The World Health Organization became the most popular institution during the COVID-19 crisis. The coronavirus crisis has become a battlefield between China and the USA¹⁵. At the same time, the Organization was threatened by the USA President Donald Trump that it would remain without USA funding. President Trump accused the WHO of being subordinate to China and of not being strong enough and transparent during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, an investigation by the associated press shows that Chinese officials concealed important data at the beginning of the pandemic and that WHO officials were aware of the situation but preferred only to publicly thank China for their collaboration.

Thus, on 8 May, the United Nation was unable to give a resolution on the coronavirus pandemic. It was unable to adopt this resolution because of the differences between the USA and China. The United States wanted the resolution to attribute the spread of the virus to the lack of 'transparency': in other words, it wanted the Chinese state to take responsibility for the emergence of the pandemic. China has opposed it, insisting that the resolution refers to the role of the body of UN – the World Health Organization. The United States, for their part, have contested this recommendation and no resolution has therefore been adopted. This refusal to recognize the role of the WHO, according to Icíar Gutiérrez is the new tactic of Trump administration, although the overall strategy is not a new one¹⁶. The USA administration has

¹³ A. Guilbaud, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ D. Morley, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ I. Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

blamed the WHO for the crisis and seeking to distract the international community from the management of the pandemic, saying that the WHO has covered the mistakes made by China. As a result, the USA has spoken out for the reduction of the organization's funding, which is a relevant one, because the USA government is (and has been) its main donor. Washington's decision appears as a strategy to influence Beijing's policy.

The WHO activity during the COVID-19 epidemic is increasingly challenged, with the main reasons being: Initial underestimation (e.g. in terms of infectiveness); untimely interventions (e.g. the declaration of an international public health emergency – PHEIC – and subsequently a pandemic); Conflicting guidelines (e.g. on the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)); concessions to the Chinese Government, despite its responsibility for spreading contagion, even when it tried, to transfer responsibility to other States, in particular an EU Member State – Italy. The WHO is also particularly accused of not having verified in time the information provided by China on the origin and evolution of the contagion, thus contributing to the delay in global action to combat the pandemic. It should also be noted that Taiwan is still excluded, with the exception of the brief parenthesis between 2009 and 2016, from the activities and flow of information of the WHO, and this isolation is difficult to manage in the context of the presence of a pandemic.

In fact, the crisis that the WHO is experiencing in terms of effectiveness, transparency and credibility is not new, but has been going on for several years. In 2010, the WHO recognized its own weaknesses in the management of the H1N1 influenza epidemic, in particular excessive alarmism, which led to an accumulation of unused vaccines and raised suspicions about the organization's opaque links with some large pharmaceutical companies. In 2015, the WHO acknowledged that it had reacted belatedly to manage the Ebola outbreak that had occurred a year earlier in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

There are also questions as to whether the current WHO General Director, Tedros Adhanom Genebeyesus, is suitable for this post. As Ethiopian Minister of Health, he was criticized for handling three cholera epidemics during his term of office (2005-2012); In addition, the privileged political and economic ties it has established with China during its time as part of the Ethiopian governments (2005-2016) cast an undoable shadow over the impartiality of its actions¹⁷.

The international institutions have entered a phase of weakening, partly due to a USA withdrawal and partly to the discord of the major powers. It follows that the WHO does not play the central role it should have in the COVID-19 crisis. It was informed too late by China, to the detriment of other States' ability to react and comply with Chinese provisions before declaring a state of pandemic. The WHO gives the meaning that it echoes a 'Chinese line' on the

¹⁷ *Activitatea Organizației Mondiale a Sănătății (OMS) în timpul epidemiei de COVID-19*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/O-9-2020-000034_RO.html> (29.05.2020).

fight against the virus. China, by the way, is taking advantage of the benefits of the investments it has made in the UN system in recent years. This brings us to the second starting point: The rise of China and Asia in the World Affairs.

COVID-19 gives a somewhat negative illustration of this, but it is immediately clear. The original opacity policy promoted by Beijing contributed to the spread of the pandemic. But the most striking element is the other. On the one hand, due to the structure of today's value chains, the closure of a large part of the Chinese economy has had and continues to have major effects on the world economy. Unlike the 2008 crisis, the 2020 financial crisis is only the second shortage of supply and demand in the real economy. On the other hand, the 'competition between the big powers' not only puts international solidarity on the sidelines, but also translates into an amazing competition of 'soft power' between China and its main rivals.

From this point of view, we have seen an unprecedented demonstration. The People's Republic of China was in difficulty at the beginning of the crisis due to its initial attitude of repression of the whistle blowers in Wuhan; the forced closure of its factories; and then they emerge to overcome the epidemic due to authoritarian quarantine measures combined with an unprecedented use of artificial intelligence. Finally, China has emerged from its calvary, while Europeans, now the main area of infection, have belatedly implemented measures to combat the pandemic, while the Trump administration has demonstrated its completely disorderly incompetence. China is reviving its economy at a time when the Western stock markets are collapsing. They are fighting against Donald Trump's xenophobic insinuations and acting as a lifeline for Italy and Serbia, caused by the clumsiness of their European partners. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, China is emerging as the power that can help states internationally. It attributes the role that the United States once held. The organization, whose main purpose is to encourage global cooperation, has not been able to call for an end to the USA-China contradictions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁸. President Trump used the power to react to the behaviour of one of those who support multilateral health cooperation and, in particular, the current response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Sylvie Briand, director of the WHO's Department of Pandemic and Epidemic Diseases, in times of crisis, a guilty must always be found. Also, in the context of Briand's statements, several analysts agreed that the WHO leadership is an easy target to be criticized because it is an international organization that seems to have more power than it actually does. For Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, the WHO 'has run out of power and resources'. "Its authority and coordination capacity are weak, and its capacity to respond internationally to a life-threatening epidemic is non-existent"¹⁹.

¹⁸ D. Morley, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ I. Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*

Thus, China, Germany and New Zealand are some of the countries that are protesting against them in the context of the measures put forward by the USA. UN Secretary-General António Guterres was one of the first to react to the situation, who said it was “not the time” for confrontations. Guterres also believes that the World Health Organization needs to be supported, and this is absolutely fundamental to the states' efforts to win the war against COVID-19. In Germany, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stressed the importance of the fight and joint efforts to combat the pandemic. According to Maas' position on his Twitter account, the virus knows no borders. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, held the same position. In the context of disputes over WHO's effectiveness, Borell criticized the contradictions between the USA and China, noting that “there is no reason to justify this move at a time when states need to rely more to combat the pandemic of coronavirus”²⁰.

The President of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, also described the situation as “deeply lamentable”. Mahamat's position was also supported by the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. According to the official, it is necessary to share information correctly when the international community is present in such a situation. The officials also spoke in support of the organization²¹.

Unlike the positions of Guterres, Maas, Borell and Mahamat, the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, highlighting the “significant amount of work” done by the organization, supported the statements of President Trump. China, in turn, called for reasonable behaviour on Washington's part to comply with its obligations to the WHO. “This decision will reduce WHO capacity and minimize international cooperation against the epidemic”, said Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian. Trump's decision also sparked reactions in the United States. The American Medical Association (AMA), the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CCPB), and the House Foreign Affairs Committee are the opposition institutions of the White House²². Some analysts believe that the Trump administration's actions are aimed at preventing the growth of China's global influence, especially within international bodies. In this context, and in line with Trump's claims in *The Wall Street* magazine, ways are being sought to include more American officials in the organization.

Thus, analysing the activity of the World Health Organization in the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can highlight that international organizations, including WHO: primarily have the role of coordinators and catalysts of international community solidarity. The epidemic of COVID-19 coronavirus is global²³. In mid-March 2020, more than 150 countries reported cases of COVID-19, and the WHO reported more than 200.000 infected people

²⁰ F. Forni, *op. cit.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ A. Guilbaud, *op. cit.*

worldwide. More than 7.000 people have died, and the number has continued to grow at an alarming rate²⁴. International cooperation is essential in combating crises and epidemics.

Secondly, in the activity of international organizations we can also highlight an incompetence in crisis management that manifests itself worldwide, such as the situation conditioned by the COVID-19 crisis.

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²⁴ D. Morley, *op. cit.*