Global Cooperation and Role of Think Tanks in the Post COVID-19 World

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Distinguished Guests and Fellow speakers, Ladies and gentlemen,

When the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, many pundits predicted that the post pandemic world would no longer be the same. But no one knew exactly how the world would change and look like after the pandemic.

It has been more than 20 months since the outbreak of COVID-19, and we are now in a much better position to understand the impact and what changes have been brought about by COVID-19.

As we are well aware, digital technology has played a vital role in the battle against the coronavirus. It is inconceivable how the world could cope with the onslaught of COVID-19 without the help of digital technology.

Prior to the rollout of vaccines, comprehensive surveillance, intensive contact tracing and strict quarantine were the primary measures in containing and breaking the circuit of the spread of the virus, which all relied heavily on digital technology.

And as the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is witnessing first-hand how digital technologies help to confront the threat of the invisible enemy and keep people connected. In fact,

digital communication has become the primary means that keeps the world connected as national borders are closed, cities are locked down and airlines stop their flights during the pandemic.

Family members, love ones, colleagues and friends keep in touch with each other through cell phones, emails, audio-video apps such as

WhatsApp and WeChat, and other social media. Schools and universities conduct their classes through the internet, and meetings and conferences are held virtually. Work from home and shopping online become the norm.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of global economies. To stay competitive in the new business and economic environment, digital adoption in companies has taken a quantum leap at both the organizational and industry levels

According to a McKinsey Global Survey, companies have accelerated the digitization of their customer and supply-chain interactions and of their internal operations by three to four years. And the share of digital or digitally enabled products in their portfolios has accelerated by a shocking seven years.

Global cooperation in digital technology is, therefore, critical in the post pandemic world. The report, "The Age of Digital Interdependence" published by the UN in June 2019, put forth five sets of recommendations on how the international community could work together to optimize the use of digital technologies and mitigate the risks, which are particularly relevant today. The recommendations are: 1. Build an inclusive digital economy and society; 2. Develop human and institutional capacity; 3. Protect human rights and human agency; 4. Promote digital trust, security and stability; 5. Foster global digital cooperation.

The UN report could serve as a guide on how think tanks should work together to promote cooperation in digital technology and help in the global economic recovery.

As knowledge producers, influencers and opinion creators, think tanks can play a meaningful and constructive role in promoting and implementing the five recommendations set out by UN.

Geopolitics and big power rivalry, coupled with the stigmatization of the COVID-19 virus and politicization of the origin of the virus, have tainted international joint efforts in the battle against the pandemic, divided this

sick world further apart rather than brought about closer global cooperation.

It is imperative upon the think tanks to act as a bridge across borders, in terms of exchange of knowledge, views and research findings, sharing pertinent data and information on best practices through dialogues, forums, visits and publications, and other forms of engagement and interactions, either virtually or in person when circumstances permit.

Think tanks are key actors in public diplomacy, to promote peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness in a time that is plagued not only with contagions, but also the Cold War mentality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

About 67% of the world population now have access to mobile devices and 60% are Internet users. Social media and messaging apps have become the fastest means of disseminating accurate data and information related to the disease, which are fundamental for an effective response during the pandemic.

The growth of social media, however, has also led to significant proliferation of misinformation and fake news, and abuse by some to fuel discrimination, xenophobia and racism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the collective vulnerability to disruption and abuse of social media. It was reported that in one week in April 2020, there were over 18 million daily malware and phishing emails related to the disease. According to estimates, the potential cost of worldwide data breaches will be more than $5 trillion by 2024 .

As knowledge producers and influencers, it is incumbent upon think tanks to counter misinformation and fake news with facts and science based analyses, and provide policy recommendations to address cyber vulnerabilities and improve internet governance.

Although COVID-19 is a public health crisis, its impacts on the society and economy are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. Think tanks as

research institutions are well placed to provide independent multi-discipline policy inputs to governments and international bodies.

The COVID-19 pandemic must be understood scientifically, not politically. Think tanks, therefore, should sift through narrow and bias political narratives and react with sound academic research and reasoning, mobilize expertise and put forward opinions and ideas to influence the policy-making process.

Think tanks are important catalysts for ideas and actions by brokering ideas, stimulating public debate, and offering creative yet practical solutions to tackle global crises.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the importance of international collaboration of think tanks in dealing with global crises. Cross-organizational collaboration must go beyond geographical limitations and transcend ideology. A policy proposal that encapsulates ideas of think tanks from different countries will likely be more practical and pragmatic due to the diversity of voices and perspectives of its authors.

Thank you.

Note: Speech delivered at Webinar " International High-Level Think Tank Forum" co-hosted by the Chinese Academy of Cyberspace Studies, the University of Edinburg, WIDE Project and Fundacao Getulio Vargas in conjunction with the World Internet Conference (Wuzheng Summit) from September 26 to 28, 2021