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# The Global Coordination Problem: Collective Action among Unequal States

*Abram de Swaan\**

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**Abstract:** »Das globale Koordinationsproblem: Kollektives Handeln zwischen ungleichen Staaten«. The most pressing problems facing mankind today require for their solution some form of worldwide collective action at the level of states. In order to combat the global threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, wealthy countries must cooperate to provide vaccines for people in low-income countries, if only to prevent these populations from becoming breeding grounds for new strains of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that will also endanger the richer nations. Another, even more pertinent case is the campaign against global warming, which requires concerted action by committed state regimes to curtail the worldwide emission of greenhouse gases. Such figurations give rise to the classic dilemmas of collective action. Throughout human history, with ups and downs, the scale of collective action has extended. This is a corollary of the gradual increase in the scale of governance, from villages to small kingdoms to nation states. National economies, too, have expanded with the increasing control and consumption of fossil energy, as Johan Goudsblom has demonstrated. By the end of the 19th century, nation states were the largest units of effective coordination, each one comprising between one and a hundred million citizens. In the course of the 20th century, a few entities have evolved to the next higher order of magnitude with hundreds of millions, or more than a billion citizens and with a gross national product exceeding in most cases 10 trillion US dollars: these “gigants” are China, the USA, India, and the EU. They are at present the initiators and managers of global collective action. The recent COVID-19 pandemic created an urgent coordination problem. The enduring climate crisis evokes very similar dilemmas of collective action. The Russian invasion of Ukraine quite suddenly compelled the USA and the EU to join in antagonistic collaboration and overcome challenges that were much the same. State actors resort to a limited set of strategies and practices in order to overcome the pitfalls of collective action and the gigants have a leading role in coordinating them.

**Keywords:** Global coordination, worldwide collective action, gigants in world state system, COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis.

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## 1. Introduction

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Both Johan Goudsblom and his friend and mentor Norbert Elias were reluctant to comment on current affairs. They studied long-term, very long-term problems in a process-perspective. In the latest phase of his scholarly career, Goudsblom was a pioneer in the study of what is called “big history,” nothing less than a process approach to the entire universe and humankind within it. Contrary to most scholars, as he matured, he became ever more radical.

I, however, will deal here with quite recent events, be it of a global scope. Throughout the recent coronavirus pandemic, or in the ongoing debate about climate change, the voice of sociologists was and is seldom heard and rarely heeded: both were mere instances of the general absence of sociology in public affairs.

I am firmly convinced that sociologists can make a valuable contribution to the current public debate, precisely on the strength of sociological theory. Such interventions come with the risk of being proven wrong, when events take an unexpected turn, as they are wont to do. I will take that risk.

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## 2. The Emergence of a World System of States

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One recurrent theme in the work of Norbert Elias and Johan Goudsblom, and, in their tracks, in my own writing, is the extension of the scale of human interdependencies in the course of history, admittedly with spurts and relapses, leaps and bounds.

In Elias’s oeuvre, the part that most directly addresses this theme is the chapter “On the sociogenesis of the state” in the second volume of *On the Process of Civilisation*, especially its section “On the monopoly mechanism” (Elias 2012 [1939], 301-11). Actually, when discussing medieval state formation, Elias expressly refers to the, then, present when he writes, in 1939, about “the competitive struggles and the monopolization taking place under our very eyes” (ibid., 302). In his general exposition, Elias discusses free competition among more or less equal (feudal) units, from which gradually more successful, larger units emerge (ibid., 106). In many cases, this free for all ends up with the formation of a single, dominating unit. The remaining smaller entities will vie for the favour of this one preponderant entity in “bounded competition.” The final outcome of this process may well, but need not, be the incorporation of the remaining smaller rival entities in the dominant unit and the consolidation of an outright monopoly of the means of violence and taxation over a single, extensive, connected territory: the modern state.

At present, practically the entire land surface of the Earth is neatly carved up in almost 200 territories, each one controlled more or less effectively by a

distinct state, almost all of them with remarkably stable borders. The countries of the world are a very unequal lot, as to the expanse of their territories, and, what matters more, as to the size of their populations or their gross national product. To speak of a “world order” would be a grandiose exaggeration but qualifying the present figuration as complete chaos or anarchy would disregard its structural properties. “Free competition” in the sense of Elias certainly does not prevail among these states. They are hemmed in by international law and international organizations which hardly existed in Elias’s Middle Ages, and, by the presence of a quartet of very powerful states. A coherent and effective “world government” is not anywhere near. Obviously, a global monopolist has not emerged. Yet, during the Cold War, the USA and the Soviet Union, then in its hey-day, came quite close to sharing an effective duopoly of power.

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### 3. A World System of Autonomous but Unequal States Dominated by Four Gigants

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At present, the USA, still the most powerful state on Earth, is far from being a global monopolist, since China is catching up and now comes a close second in an emerging global power constellation, together with the EU, and, in coming years, India. These four entities are the *gigants* of the present world:<sup>1</sup>

- The United States of America, with a population of 335 million (est. 2021) and a GDP valued at \$19.8 trillion for 2020 (CIA 2021)<sup>2</sup>;
- China, with a population of 1.4 billion (est. 2021) and a GDP estimated at \$23 trillion for 2020;<sup>3</sup>
- The European Union with a population of 450 million (est. 2021) and a GDP assessed at \$19.9 trillion for 2019;
- India with a population of 1.3 billion (est. 2021) and a GDP evaluated at \$8.4 trillion for 2020.

China, the USA, and India are nuclear powers, and within the EU, so is France. Five other countries possess nuclear weapons and a sixth is very close. Most likely, a nuclear arsenal protects a country against foreign attack, but it does not directly increase that nation’s offensive potential, although its

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<sup>1</sup> I realize that 400 million native English speakers do not need me to add another neologism to the more than half a million words in the English vocabulary ([www.Merriam-Webster.com](http://www.Merriam-Webster.com)), but between “gigantic” and “giant,” there is a gap in the language, which the expression “gigant” nicely fills, although “superpower” would also do the work quite adequately.

<sup>2</sup> Same source for all four giants.

<sup>3</sup> Real GDP in purchase power parity; China’s GDP in official exchange rate is estimated at \$14.3 trillion, but as the renminbi is kept artificially low, that is most likely a considerable underestimation.

atomic arsenal gives it leeway for aggressive ventures with conventional weapons that may well remain unpunished.<sup>4</sup>

The EU is not a state, yet. It is a construct *sui generis*, intended to constitute an “ever closer union,” a confederation no longer, but a federation not yet, though steadily moving in that direction, on its way to become “a democratic union of democratic states” (Hoeksma 2022).

There are a few other major powers, but they do not qualify for the league of giants: Russia, with its enormous landmass, has a population of only 142 million; Brazil, with half that surface, is inhabited by 217 million people; Russia’s GDP is €3.9 trillion and that of Brazil €3 trillion: way behind the giants.

The contemporary global power constellation resembles what Norbert Elias called “bounded competition,” in which the remaining smaller units no longer freely compete against one another but must vie for the favours of the emerging dominant unit: without support of it they cannot prevail, against it they can only lose. But in the present constellation, there exist four figurations of bounded competition, with a giant at the centre of each one. This compels the smaller units to seek the favour of the proximate giant, but also allows them to play off that giant against another one.

Johan Goudsblom’s *Fire and Civilization* can be read as an account and an explanation of what he has called (Goudsblom 1992, 212) “*the lengthening and tightening of the chains of dependency*” in the course of human history, from the small roving bands of a hundred or so hunter-gatherers to the giants of today, two of them with over a billion closely interdependent citizens: “Despite the contrasts which divide it, humanity is becoming increasingly integrated into one global society” (ibid., 207). It was their growing mastery of energy that allowed *and* compelled human beings to form such more and more complex, intensive, and extensive networks. In the last pages of his book, Goudsblom evokes a global panorama of states, companies, and research institutions pressuring one another in mutual competition to develop new forms of energy, so as to support ways of life that no one individually can afford to abandon and that humanity in its entirety can no longer afford to ignore in the face of a disastrous warming of the Earth.

In the contemporary world, 193 states compete for scarce resources such as fuel, water, and food, and try to outmanoeuvre their neighbours. In this process, a few entities, the four giants, have achieved a position of near monopoly in their region. But the community of states is faced with challenges of global dimensions, transcending the capacity of any single entity, even that of a single giant. In this worldwide figuration, the endgame of global monopoly formation is nowhere in sight, and it might not ever occur. What did

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<sup>4</sup> Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a recent case in point, since third parties with nuclear capability will not directly intervene in its campaign, in part for fear of a nuclear conflagration. On the other hand, Russia so far has refrained from using the weapons in its atomic arsenal for the same reasons.

emerge is a complex network of transnational organizations, still mainly based on the voluntary consent and cooperation of member states. At the centre of this network are the United Nations governed by a Security Council with a select, partly permanent and partly rotating, membership, and by an assembly of 193 member states (as of 2022). Moreover, a web of international treaties and regulations has added to the growing interdependencies that Goudsblom mentioned. But there is no central agent to enforce these treaties, regulations, or the decisions of international organizations and courts. In fact, the enforcement depends on the “authority” of these institutions, on public shaming, and, in the very last instance, on their imposition through violent means by “a coalition of the willing.” The most coherent and most powerful military alliance is NATO, led by the giant USA, seconded by the giant EU. In Elias’s terms, NATO may be characterized as a superregional figuration of bounded competition among member states for the favours of a near-monopolist, the USA.

To sum up, *within* states, the capacity for effective coordination has been established to a high degree; *among* states, the capacity for coordination is as yet inadequate to impose and effectuate policies that might resolve the global challenges facing humankind in the present world.

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#### 4. The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Global Coordination Problem

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The first and foremost of such challenges is the warming up of the Earth, the climate crisis. Even though he does not address the subject directly there, Goudsblom’s *Fire and Civilization* may be read as an account of the sociogenesis of this climate crisis in the very long term. In the meantime, in the past few years, humanity has faced another crisis of global proportions: the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the recently surfaced SARS-CoV-2 virus. Initially, many states reacted as they had before, most recently when confronted with the Ebola epidemic, by acting on their own and closing their borders to all foreign travellers. Once again, this mutual closure turned out to be completely ineffective. Thus, the states as units of effective internal coordination proved to be inadequate when confronted with a global challenge. Ebola, for reasons specific to the disease, did not spread far beyond its area of origin in West Africa. But highly contagious COVID-19 did spread from its probable origins in Wuhan, China, across the globe in a matter of weeks, because its human carriers were already highly infectious before showing any symptoms of the disease and therefore could contaminate without being themselves aware of their condition and without being detected by the people they came into contact with. Moreover, this was the kind of air-born virus epidemiologists

had warned against for over 30 years (Garrett 1994), much more contagious than diseases passed on through the exchange of bodily fluids, such as HIV or Ebola, or Monkey Pox. Luckily, within a few months, scientists in several countries succeeded in developing a highly effective vaccine which was tested and readied for mass production before the first year of the plague had ended. But this did not resolve the global coordination problem: low-income countries lacked the economic and the political means to acquire enough doses of the vaccine. They thus became, and as of today still are, literally, breeding grounds for possibly more contagious and more lethal varieties of the rapidly mutating coronavirus, ever prone to spread to high income countries also, even if the latter have succeeded to bring the known varieties under control. Evidently, this is a situation in which the rich countries are threatened by the deficiencies and adversities that plague poor countries. But no rich country, not even a giant, can control the danger on its own.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the prevention of contagion creates a collective benefit also for the wealthy countries and requires collective action on their part.<sup>6</sup>

In general, such problems of collective action arise among units that are interdependent, and are aware of their interdependence, but together do not yet constitute a figuration that can effectively coordinate their actions. In other words, collective action problems are a transitional phenomenon. That is precisely the phase in which the contemporary global figuration of so-called sovereign yet interdependent states exists. But this does not at all imply that the present figuration of states will necessarily evolve towards a world government capable of effective coordination at the global level. On the contrary, a third example of a most recent coordination problem will demonstrate precisely this: a relapse of global coordination and a leap toward regional coordination and antagonistic, even bellicose confrontation.

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## 5. Dilemmas of Collective Action on a Global Level

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Problems of collective action occur among interdependent but as yet inadequately coordinated entities that have become aware of their

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<sup>5</sup> China tried hard: after an early start of the vaccination campaign with vaccines developed in the country, it never achieved satisfactory immunization rates, possibly due to a lack of efficacy of the vaccines, or an inefficient campaign, or both. The Chinese authorities then stuck to their “zero COVID” policy and imposed very strict isolation policies on the entire population and severely limited entry from abroad: plague control in one country. When this policy finally (in the Fall of 2022) proved to be untenable in the face of popular protest, it was abandoned and, except for vaccinations, COVID could now freely spread throughout the population. China’s attempt to go it alone and shun the global collective action at present appears to be a major failure.

<sup>6</sup> This is, in a nutshell, the argument explaining the emergence of welfare arrangements within nation states (De Swaan 1988, 21-41). The argument was later applied to global relations (De Swaan 1992, 1997).

interdependence. They occur when no single entity, a state in this case, can solve the problem on its own; when not all participants are necessary to solve it; when no one state can be excluded from the collective good once it is realized; and, when the collective good is not diminished when additional entities also come to enjoy it. The last three characteristics induce the temptation for entities to profit from the collective good without contributing to it. That creates the notorious dilemma of collective action: *either* contribute to the collective good, in the hopes that others will contribute in sufficient numbers to bring it about *and* at the risk that they will not join, so that the collective good will not materialize; *or* refrain from contributing in the hopes that sufficient other entities will collaborate to realize the collective good which can then be enjoyed without having oneself contributed to it *and* at the risk of many others choosing the same option so that the collective good will not be brought about and everyone loses.

This is familiar ground to social scientists and the consensus among theorists was that under such conditions collective goods will *not* be created unless there are only a handful of participants or all the participants are compelled to contribute (Olson 1971). Yet, in the real world, interdependent actors time and again and without outside compulsion do realize collective goods together, as I have argued in *In Care of the State* (1988) and as Elinor Ostrom has demonstrated in *Governing the Commons* (1990), which gained her the 2009 Nobel prize in economics.

In the real world, collective action is not a static, one-shot event; it unfolds as a process among “alert and scheming,” communicating and interacting participants. In such a dynamic figuration, there are leaders who operate by invoking loyalties and moral rules, and by raising expectations, i.e., exaggerating the chances of success, and playing down the estimated costs to participants. If the leader is successful in convincing the participants, these false expectations become self-confirming and end up being true. Moreover, the participants will come to apply rules concerning the distribution of costs and rewards that are widely shared in the surrounding society, assuming that all others subscribe to the same rules and will abide by them. Such common moral values function as a “focal point” (Schelling 1963): a cue in the shared context of interaction that all participants recognize as a salient solution to their coordination problem. Moreover, this is not a one-shot game, it plays out in a succession of trials, participants will monitor what others do or do not contribute and adjust their own choices accordingly: mutual inspection. Finally, participants do police one another. Economists consider this as a form of secondary collective action within the frame of the primary collective action, creating similar dilemmas of the second order. Sociologists, however, know that informally policing one’s peers may not necessarily come at a cost: watching them, and chiding them, gossiping about them may be rewarding in and of itself. To sum it all up, through various social mechanisms, over a



period of time, collective action can succeed in bringing about collective goods. In fact, in the process of collective action the collectivity of participants itself takes shape and the collective good gets redefined accordingly. This is what I have called “the collectivizing process.” It applies to collective action over time, even among states and even at the global level.

In this worldwide context, the gigants function as the “leaders,” i.e., the initiators and organizers of collective action, each one in its part of the world. International law sets the rules that help to coordinate the actions of state actors. International organizations, the UN foremost among them, provide a forum for mutual inspection of the contributions by individual states and for public criticizing and shaming.

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## 6. Collective Attempts to Create a Global Vaccine Regime

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One most germane and recent instance of an attempt at global collective action concerns the distribution of anti-COVID vaccines from high-income countries to low-income countries from early 2021 on. It quickly dawned upon well-informed sections of public opinion that, quite irrespective of the suffering it would cause to the millions of infected patients in poor countries, the vaccinated in rich countries would remain at risk from a dangerous new variety of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, if it was allowed to spread unhindered among the unprotected populations in low-income nations, where new strains might emerge among the many millions of carriers. That is exactly what happened when the more contagious, but less lethal Omicron-variety emerged, in South Africa most likely, and in no time proliferated across the globe. In this case, the envisaged collective good consisted of the immunization of the entire adult human population of the planet. The actors who could bring this about through their collective action were the wealthy and well-vaccinated nations. Once again, fear was the primary motivation. There was moral leadership galore: in April 2021, the Pope took an early lead and so did the heads of 23 EU governments and the WHO in a joint statement (Coutinho and De Swaan 2021). All four gigants made solemn promises to contribute hundreds of millions of vaccines, billions of dollars, small fry in a period that governments spent hundreds of billions of dollars to protect their own citizens and keep their economies afloat. The case of India, a rising giant, is of special interest here. Its factories were considered capable of churning out the vast quantities required for vaccination of low-income populations. But then the virus massively hit India itself, and its own 1.3 billion citizens were given priority. By the time the population of the wealthy countries had been inoculated twice and public opinion was ready for delivery of the vaccines to the neediest,

scientific opinion had it that a third “booster” shot was necessary to bolster individual immunity; the mass transfer of vaccines to low-income countries was deferred once again. Yet, a survey of United Kingdom respondents found that they were willing to donate on average 38% of available doses in the UK to poor nations, rather than keep them for boosts at home (Lee and Tipoe 2022). This is all the more surprising, since governments tend to be reluctant to heed the advice of their epidemiologists and donate vaccines to needy countries, precisely because they fear that the public will oppose the idea.

Global collective action to eradicate contagious disease was by no means a novelty. Smallpox had been vanquished, poliomyelitis had almost been extinguished, and huge campaigns to fight tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV had been carried out for years with good results, bankrolled by the wealthy countries for their own sake and for the sake of the inhabitants of the low-income countries. A network of international organizations existed to coordinate the financing, purchase, and distribution of vaccines. And indeed, hundreds of millions, maybe even billions of doses were delivered to low-income populations. But in the most recent case of SARS-CoV-2, a coordinated, massive, global campaign, led by the four gigants and funded by the wealthy countries, never gathered steam.

What explains this – partial – failure? People in the wealthy countries were not afraid enough. They felt mostly confident that their shots, strengthened by regular boosters, would protect them against any new variety. They were not sufficiently scared of the likely emergence of more contagious, more lethal strains of the virus among the billions of people who remained without vaccination, strains that were then certain to spread to wealthier shores. And they turned out to be right, for the time being.

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## 7. Collective Attempts to Create a Global Climate Regime

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It is this fear motive that is also at the core of the global climate campaign to prevent the earthly atmosphere from warming up even further. Especially in the wealthier, western countries, citizens, young citizens even more so, are constantly reminded of the catastrophe that will soon befall humankind, if the consumption of fossil fuels and the plastics made from them is not curtailed immediately. It is indeed a massive intimidation campaign, and almost certainly one with very good reason. Moreover, it seems to work, slowly but surely. One major problem is the definition of a universally accepted rule for the division of the burdens of climate control: should historical CO<sub>2</sub> emissions be the criterion, or current emissions, should financial capacity be a criterion or maybe climate damage already suffered... Poorer nations argue

convincingly that they have not contributed to global heating in the past and even now do so much less than wealthier nations. Countries that industrialized at a relatively late stage, like the giants China and India, make a similar argument about their still recent pre-industrial past. Nations that began to industrialize on a grand scale already in the early 19th century should therefore shoulder the largest burden, and, in fact, the EU does, and to some degree so does the USA. China's belated but most rapid industrialization has caused so much pollution at home, that efforts at limiting pollution not only benefit the global climate but even more so its domestic environment. Of course, this radically changes China's payoff matrix for the costs and benefits of engaging in collective action and a similar argument may be made in the case of India: "Nevertheless, how to align national development plans with the global mitigation target still remains poorly understood in the current climate policy literature" (Li, Hamdi-Cherif, and Cassen 2017, 259).

If there is one instance of truly global collective action with momentous stakes, getting off the ground ever so slowly, but nevertheless picking up momentum, it is the campaign against climate change:

The solution to climate change is clear: stop carbon emissions. Unfortunately, the global collective action problem of bringing humanity to stop emitting carbon is the biggest and most complex political and economic problem the world has ever faced. (Baraka 2018, 6)

The Paris climate conference of 2015 provided a major impetus for global collective action to halt the planetary rise in temperature, it facilitated mutual inspection of each country's polluting activities and its efforts to fight climate change, and for chiding and discrediting refusers and stragglers. Yet, the four giants hesitate to act as leaders in this setting, as it would force them to curtail their own emissions even faster and contribute more generously to pollution mitigation in low-income countries. Leadership is mostly left to the United Nations and its agencies, which lack the clout and the funds of the Big Four. As this is mostly a matter for the General Assembly, decision making proceeds with one vote for each of the 193 participating countries, irrespective of population size or GDP. This confers an absurd leverage to even the tiniest holdout and can bring decision making almost to a standstill (Lane 2014). In the Security Council, each of the five permanent members holds a veto, effectively blocking almost any measure. Moreover, India does not hold a seat, nor does the EU, obviously, but its member state France is represented. Fortunately, formal voting arrangements are not the last word. If the four giants could agree on policies to protect the environment, they might well push them through, quite irrespective of the voting rules. And they will, once each one realizes that future domestic damage caused by continued global environmental degradation may well exceed the current costs of investing in the protection of the earthly climate as a whole.

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## 8. Collective Attempts to Maintain Collective Security

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At times, albeit seldom, a collective venture springs up in a matter of weeks, even days. In this instance, fear, with its twin, anger, is once again the leading incentive. On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Against most expectations, it took only a few days for a grand western coalition to come to Ukraine's aid with advanced weapons, relief supplies, and intelligence. Many countries volunteered to increase their military expenditure considerably, in some cases even spectacularly, something which most EU governments had staunchly resisted until then. They agreed to impose sanctions on Russia that were certain also to cut in their own flesh. Even more amazing, those countries suddenly were willing to take in large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, even if until then almost all of them had tried to take in as few asylum seekers as possible.

In this instance, a coalition of the willing almost instantly initiated collective action against a Russian occupation of Ukraine. The leaders were two giants: the USA, closely seconded by the European Union. NATO suddenly sprang to life and resumed its role as coordinator of the common military effort, including countries that are not member states of the EU (the UK, Canada, Turkey, Norway, and a few smaller countries). EU members Finland and Sweden immediately applied for NATO membership, leaving only Ireland, Austria, Malta, and Cyprus out of NATO and in the EU.

This remarkably swift and effective coordination displayed three specific features. There were two leading powers, giants both, the USA in first place, the EU a close second. There was a very clear-cut template for their coordination: the NATO alliance, which nevertheless had lain dormant for a quarter of a century. Yet, its pattern of cooperation apparently could be revived easily. Lastly, this was a case of "antagonistic coordination," collective action against an external adversary. In many respects, this enemy defined the situation for the cooperating actors. It was Russia that made the first move to invade Ukraine, Russia that set the timetable, and Russia that initially determined the stakes. Under these conditions, the participating state actors could easily monitor one another's contribution and bring profiteering or reluctant allies into the fold, or at the very least prevent them from consorting with the enemy, as Hungary was tempted to do. But nothing can guarantee that this astonishingly rapid, decisive, and large-scale effort to act collectively will be sufficient in the long run to prevent a lasting Russian occupation of Ukraine, in part or in its entirety. What it does demonstrate, however, is how a shared opponent can help to overcome the dilemmas of collective action in an antagonistic situation.

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## 9. A Sociological Approach to the Global Coordination Problem

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Almost every square inch of the Earth's land surface is part of a territory where a state apparatus can enforce its authority through a monopoly of the means of violence and taxation, but in the global figuration of unequal states itself no single agent monopolizes these resources; the state of all states does not exist. That is a given which defines the global coordination problem among relatively autonomous but unequal states.

Sociologists do have some theoretical instruments at their disposal to study the dynamics of competition and domination at the global level, taking their cues from Elias's theory of state formation among competing entities. They can further their understanding of the global climate crisis, the major collective action challenge in the contemporary world, through a reading of Goudsblom's insights in the almost unavoidable external effects created by competing human economies, compelling one another to increase their fuel consumption and thus heating up the terrestrial climate. Finally, sociological notions about the workings of the collectivizing process may help to better grasp the dilemmas of collective action that state actors confront, whether trying to control a worldwide pandemic, the planetary rise in temperature, or an armed violation of international law – all of them instances of the global coordination problem between unequal states.

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Long-Term Processes in Human History

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