

COVID-19: A STIMULUS FOR RESHAPING THE WORLD ORDER

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Abstract

The rise and fall of great powers is a driving force of transition in international politics. The cycle of emergence and decline of superpowers continues as a principal source of evolution in the world order. The 20th century unveiled with Pax-Britannica as the axis of international politics, but some of the highly critical incidents allowed the US to entrench its global hegemony. Subsequently, at the twilight of the century, Pax-Americana transpired as the pivot of the global system. However, self-imposed hegemonic commitments, an obsession with manipulating the world system, and mania of supremacy embedded punitive challenges for Washington. The emerging powers eventually launched an enterprise to reshape the international system to multipolar world order, and the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) has further stimulated such undertakings. This devastating global challenge may warrant a capable and committed player to undertake the assignment of resurrecting the international system and ascertain itself as a dominant global power, and China could be the strongest candidate. This study, therefore, aims to explore the dynamics of future world order and the abysmal impacts of COVID-19 on its transformation. The exiting hegemon seeks to maintain the status quo, while the emerging powers are striving to reshape the global system towards multipolarity.

Keywords: COVID-19, Unilateralism, Multipolar, World Order, Hegemony.

Introduction

The rise and fall of great powers is a driving force of transition in international power politics. During the twentieth century, on the basis of its political, economic, and geostrategic dominance, the US relished its hegemony worldwide, which was not only admitted by global actors but also hailed by the majority of them including its traditional rivals. However, right from the beginning of the 21st century, Washington has to suffer massive economic, political, and strategic burden at domestic and international levels, owing to its unilateral approach and ambitious undertakings.¹ Contrary to superpower's overstretched commitments, the emerging great power China has launched an enterprise for realigning the future global system

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to multipolar world order. Eventually, the US could not withstand the propensity of decline from its hegemonic triumphalism.²

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 is expected to further accelerate the reshaping process of the global political system. The coronavirus has bitterly affected almost every individual on the planet in some way, as the international system got stuck to nearly a standstill position. To evade the widespread pandemic, global trade, transnational shipping and airways, continental roads and railways, postal services, education, and healthcare facilities remained suspended for months. Some scholars maintain that despite its horrors, COVID-19 has also unveiled certain brighter prospects for a rising key international actor, China, which is already defying the US global hegemony³ in various regions of the world.⁴ The rising tensions between the US and China can threaten the overall structure of the 21st century globalized world.⁵

In the post-COVID-19 world order, Beijing might be looking for an opportunity of introducing itself as a 'global savior'⁶ by helping the worst affected nations worldwide, especially those which are already wary of the contemporary world system. China may capitalize on the occasion to institute strategic footholds in different regions.⁷ Since, its capability and commitment for undertaking such a colossal assignment would ascertain the dragon as a dominant global power in the future world order. For establishing its hegemony, the US had already exercised this scheme at various critical junctures of the 20th century transnational politics. By drawing an analogy, in the post-COVID-19 world, China may likely grab the unique opportunity of establishing itself as a decisive global power ready to help affected countries, especially their economies, which traditionally used to look towards the US during such unusual happenings.

Dynamics of Reshaping the World Order

This study aims to explore the dynamics of the future world order and the abysmal impacts of COVID-19 on its transformation. It also deals with the complimentary issues like does China possess the requisite potential and commitment to undertake the challenging task of reshaping the world order and what would be the nature of engagement of key global actors, particularly, the US, China, and the European Union (EU) in the future world order. The majority of recently launched transnational investment initiatives by China reflect its strategy of slowly but surely projecting and strengthening its influence in the world.⁸

The world order and its transformation are highly complex subjects and demand comprehensive study of international relations paradigms. The Realist Theory is pertinent to study the world order and role of great powers in sustaining or transforming the global political system since the realist school of thought categorically underlines the quest for power as a driving force of state behavior in the anarchical structure of international politics. China, as an emerging great power, is rapidly maximizing its economic, military, and political sway the world over, which is,

undoubtedly, a great challenge for the US global hegemony, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.⁹ The interplay of the existing hegemon (the US) and emerging great power (China) would be a pivot of the future world order.

The discourse of hegemons and their perceived roles in the world order also validate the relevance of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) to the global balance of power mechanism. HST maintains that the presence of a capable and committed hegemon in the global system results in order and stability; it can help in articulating and administering the rules of engagement among key stakeholders. However, this argument better suits the unipolar world system since in other global structures – bipolar or multipolar – the same paradigm falls short of elucidation. In the future world system, predictable rivalry amid existing and emerging superpowers, the US and China, certainly deviate the discussion from hegemonic model to power-driven realist model. In the existing international system, China has yet to empirically illustrate its capability and commitment that substantiate the likelihood of Beijing's emergence as an uncontested global hegemon, which has potential of replacing Washington in the coming decades of the 21st century. However, theorists of International Relations certainly demonstrate their adherence to the probability of China's regional hegemony¹⁰ or its agenda of hegemonic expansionism.¹¹

The Sino-US relations entail a great deal of diversity and complexity. They are key strategic players in the Asia-Pacific region. Though China and the US are strategic and economic rivals, both are the world's largest trading partners as well, thus, validating the Complex Interdependence Theory to the study. Similarly, China's drive of expanding its power world over through trillions of dollars investment and economic assistance initiatives certify the complex interdependence paradigm. Lastly, the outbreak of COVID-19 also renders a larger connotation to this theory since no single player in the international system can overcome such a devastating global pandemic alone. Power is a vital variable in any world system, but interdependency is also inevitable in the modern globalized world. Therefore, conflict and cooperation would coexist in shaping out the future world order.

This research has, therefore, identified some of the significant variables that help ascertain great power status to key actors and their respective roles in the world order. The analyses of the economic, military, and political standing of key players like the US, China, the EU, and Russia would assist in measuring the overall ranking of global players. Moreover, an overview of wallet diplomacy or Dollar Diplomacy¹² of the US in the 20th century and Chinese Dollar Diplomacy in reverse would assist in understanding the edifice of the 21st century world order. In recent years, China has launched a huge drive of transnational investment initiatives to broaden its offshore influence and strengthen overall national power.¹³ At the same time, the outbreak of COVID-19 has unveiled new arenas of engagements between great powers, especially the US and China, and their overall behavior towards the rest of the world.¹⁴

Global Economic Players and the World Order

The archives of international politics reveal that states usually go for acquiring military clout after economic gains. The US, before its military dominance, had already positioned itself as the largest global economy.¹⁵ Similarly, for its extraordinary economic growth during the past few decades and huge share in global trade, China maintains the world's largest currency reserves, i.e., US \$ 3.1072 trillion,¹⁶ and it is also pushing hard to modernize the People's Liberation Army (PLA). China would ultimately attempt to establish its worldwide ascendancy by pushing the already transforming global balance of power in its own favor and reshape it into a multipolar construction.

The volume of Gross Domestic Products (GDP) is the vital indicator of the all-inclusive worth of the economy and the measure of the monetary or market value of all the finished goods and services of a country. In the past few decades, owing to the rapid rise of various emerging GDPs, the pivot of the global economic order is transforming. Apart from the US and the EU, China has emerged as the third economic giant in the world. The World Bank, in 2018, highlighted the countries as the world's largest economies including the US and China being the top two, with US \$ 20.5 and 13.6 trillion respectively.¹⁷ The EU's combined GDP worth around US \$ 19 trillion.

Table-1: World's Largest GDPs in 2018

Ranking	Country	US \$ Trillion	Ranking	Country	US \$ Trillion
1	USA	20.49	5	U K	2.83
2	China	13.61	6	France	2.78
3	Japan	4.97	7	India	2.73
4	Germany	4.0	8	Italy	2.07

(Source: World Bank Database)

The volume of global trade is another significant indicator of a state's economic potential in the world. Interstate relations are, primarily, directed towards increasing international trade. Even complex political issues among competing nations are overlooked for attracting global trade. Despite numerous issues among the US, India, Japan and China, trade continued among these contending players.

Since the early 20th century, the US has been the largest global economy with around 20 percent of the global income.¹⁸ However, owing to its internal and external commitments, the US economic hegemony is facing serious challenges posed by emerging economies, especially China. One of the world's leading data visualization platforms for international trade data, the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), in its 2018-report, indicates that the US is the largest economy in the world. Its global trade valued around US \$ 3.85 trillion with US \$ 1.44 trillion exports (third in the

world) and around US \$ 2.41 trillion imports (the world largest) facing around US \$ 1 trillion trade deficit.¹⁹ On the other hand, OEC indicates that China is the world’s second-largest economy and it holds the world’s largest exports, worth around US \$ 2.6 trillion, and second-largest imports worth US \$ 1.9 trillion.²⁰ The balance of China’s global trade has been rising consistently in favor of Beijing ever since the era of mid-1990s.

Table-2: Chinese Exports and Imports in 1995-2017 (US \$ Billion)



(Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity Report - 2018)

Once pooled all economies of the EU together, it becomes one of the highly significant and decisive players in global trade. The World’s Top Exports, a leading export monitoring agency, displays that, in 2018, the combined exports of the EU touched around US \$ 6.5 trillion²¹ that accounts for almost 37 percent share worldwide.²² The comprehensive analysis of the data specifies that China, the US, and the EU are the G-3 economies. In the contemporary Sino-US trade war, unlike the bipolar system, the EU may not put its entire weight in the American power bucket. Moreover, it is quite likely that the European interests are better served in the Asia-Pacific region rather than in its traditional transatlantic engagement. The COVID-19 has also unveiled the widening cracks between Washington and Brussels since the Sino-EU trade and interdependence are deepening gradually.

Role of Global Military Powers in Transforming the World Order

Military supremacy is the most vital pillar of a state’s national power because stronger forces certainly enjoy greater security and stability in their countries as compared to weaker ones, which are usually at the mercy of powerful neighbors and competing rivals. Military assists in defusing hostility of aggressors and reducing competitors in international power politics. Conventionally, an expanding military

might continue as the ultimate objective of climbing to the status of great power since weaker nations mostly confront ruination. The undermentioned statistics would help analyze the role of global military-powers in the future world system.

According to Global Fire Power (GFP), a famous defense statistical agency, out of 138 nations, the US is the world's strongest military power.²³ In addition to its major objective of defending the superpower from internal and external threats, the US forces are also guard their worldwide interests. They are assigned the protection of its allies along with international waters and airspace. The US maintains US \$ 750 billion defense budget (the world's largest), 300 percent higher than the Chinese (world's second-largest) and 700 percent higher than that of Russia.²⁴

Having unique geography amid the Atlantic and Pacific, GFP maintains that the US accounts for 2.26 million armed forces, around 10 million km² area, 12,000 km long borders, 20,000 km coastline, and to watch all of them, the US military is equipped with 6,417 fighter helicopters, 8,725 tanks, and about 10,000 nuclear arms.²⁵ The US retains the world's largest airpower with 13,400 aircrafts (one-fourth of the world) and 13,500 airports²⁶ in addition to almost 800 military-bases worldwide; these numbers are many times the combined figures of all its competitors.²⁷ The US is maintaining one of the world's largest naval fleets with around 500 ships and submarines, 22 aircraft carriers, and several major sea-ports.²⁸ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicates that the US is the world's largest arms exporter, with around 36 percent share in global arms exports.²⁹ By 2018, the US had received orders of around 900 fighter aircraft from various countries, which accounts for 50 percent of the world's jet sales.³⁰

Russia has also been one of the world's largest and decisive military powers in the last two centuries. It is the world's largest country having around 17 million km² area, 22,000 km long borders and around 38,000 km coastline.³¹ Russia maintains around 3.5 million armed personnel along with the world's leading nuclear weapons stocks.³² Russia's officially declared military spending in 2018, was US \$ 61.4 billion (Sixth-highest in the world)³³. However, some of the observers express their suspicions for the accuracy of Moscow's defense budget, and its figures are quoted around US \$ 150-180 billion.³⁴ The Russian military holds around 22,000 tanks (world's highest and 300 percent higher than the US), 50,000 armored vehicles, 4000 fighter planes, and 1200 airports.³⁵ Moscow has one of the world's largest naval fleets, with around 700 ships and submarines along with an aircraft-carrier.³⁶ Being the world's second-largest arms supplier, the Russian defense exports in 2015, were worth of around US \$ 14.5 billion, more than one-fifth of the global arms sale.³⁷ Generally, Russia holds second or third worldwide ranking in almost all the military statistics that reflect its overall status in global power position.

Vladimir Putin, since assuming the office of President, has been aiming to re-instate Russia as an indispensable global power. Unlike the past, Moscow is aggressively fortifying its military by following the idea of a smaller but better force

that is more balanced, mobile, and proficient in conducting the full range of modern warfare.³⁸ The Russian military is capable of not only intervening and influencing the countries of its periphery but also far-away, as Moscow's operations in Crimea, its mobilization and war strategy in East-Ukraine, and the will and pace of its troops in Syria were quoted to be highly astonishing.³⁹ These statistics as well as events equally illustrate the Russian ambitions for a leading role in the 21st century world order.

China is also a rapidly emerging military power in the Asia-Pacific region. It has unique demography with 1,385 million population and 2.7 million armed personnel (the world's largest), an area of 9.6 million km², 22,457 km long borders, 14,500 km coastline, and about 500 airports.⁴⁰ Since the dawn of the 21st century, China has focused on strengthening and modernizing PLA by raising its budget almost 10 percent per annum.⁴¹ However, China's defense budget is usually questioned for accuracy, as the 2018-official figures were US \$ 170 billion, but certain sources estimate it to be around US \$ 239 billion.⁴² PLA is equipped with 13,000 tanks, more than 3000 aircrafts, (second and third largest in the world).⁴³ Beijing also maintains one of the world's largest and fastest-growing naval fleets.⁴⁴ A former US Navy official admits that once fully dominant in the region, the US ships now sail cautiously in yellow waters.⁴⁵ Chinese navy is modernized to safeguard its regional interests and also to meet the challenges of the future world order. China's rapid rise is also driving PLA towards the strategy of modernization as well as indigenization and apart from fulfilling its own domestic needs, its defense industry also exports a range of military equipment to various developing nations.⁴⁶

Overall Assessment of the World's Military Powers

During the 20th century, the US remained the world's most decisive military power. Any actor, aiming to disrupt the overall world order or to rift the US worldwide interests, had to bear the fury of the US military power. However, since the dawn of the 21st century, the US worldwide supremacy is declining due to its overloaded engagements of self-imposed global commitments that have ultimately overburdened the US military and economy. The US has to face the growing military influence of China and Russia in different regions of the world. Eventually, in order to rescue its waning hegemony, Washington has to spend more on its military, which is already around 38 percent of the global defense budget.⁴⁷

Military muscles of the leading global powers display a great deal of disparity. However, the majority of variables ascertain that militarily, the US is so far irreplaceable and its defense budget is equal to the combined expenditures of the next ten world militaries.⁴⁸ However, in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, China has emerged as a challenging player to US supremacy. Even in the contemporary liberal world system, military power is as inevitable as in the past. The Group of Two (G-2 economies), the US and China are also the two largest military spenders of the world. In the modern globalized world, great powers are equally determined to mount their defense expenditures too. In 2018, worldwide defense spending grew by around

2.6 percent as against the preceding year and the global defense budget between 1988 and 2018 grew by 76 percent, raising its total volume to US \$ 1822 billion.⁴⁹

In the last two decades, Beijing and Moscow have strengthened their strategic alignment in order to challenge the US hegemony. The two powers have repeatedly expressed their stark differences over numerous international issues with the US, which is off-color due to Trump's more inward-looking strategies. The outbreak of COVID-19 has further uncovered the "America first" stratagem.⁵⁰ From Brussels, the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, signals for the US are also least promising, especially since the Turkey-Syria conflict.⁵¹ Due to various international issues, NATO's key actors like Germany, France, and Italy are gradually distancing themselves from the US and COVID-19 pandemic may prove a further stimulus to the rapidly occurring developments in the global power politics.

Second Tier of Military Players

France, Britain, and Germany stand among the world's most modern militaries. Quantitatively, these European armed forces may lag behind the US, China, and Russia, but qualitatively, they are highly robust, equipped with most-lethal weapons, and they can constitute an indispensable military power, once pooled together. However, these European powers are already part of US-led NATO and their withdrawal to establish military alliance like European Parliament would face the leadership dilemma. India, in some of the inferences, has also projected itself as an emerging power, but it is confronting serious domestic and regional challenges. Indian analyst, Pravin Sawhney, while reacting to India-China recent border conflict, highlights that all is not well for India as Beijing has marked new facts on the ground by pushing New Delhi to react in ways that may further disadvantage its military.⁵²

Likewise, in 2019, when Pakistan shot down Indian fighter jets, *The New York Times* branded Indian military equipment as "vintage" for losing fighter planes against a significantly small force in numbers and spending.⁵³ Gaurav Gogoi, a lawmaker and a member of India's Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defense, highlights that Indian troops lack modern equipment.⁵⁴ Therefore, apart from quantitative exuberance, the qualitative analysis of the Indian military reveals obsolescence.⁵⁵ At present, ethnic diversity and clashes of radical nationalist Hindus with minorities, mainly against Muslims, are a huge challenge for India. Communal violence against minorities by Hindu extremists is seemingly supported by some of the major political parties like Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), headed by the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.⁵⁶ In its 2019-report, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom has categorically highlighted the cases of forced conversion, hate crimes, and incitement to violence against religious minorities, whose overall conditions have badly worsened in recent years.⁵⁷

Global Political Players: Veto Powers (P-5)

The global political powers are actually the most influential international players with big economies and overriding militaries, capable of exercising worldwide political dominance. The key instrument held by great powers in international politics is the Veto Power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and possessed by the US, China, Russia, UK, and France.⁵⁸ Among global political actors, the US, undoubtedly, has clenched a distinct position for being the only world power capable and committed to play its dominant role in maintaining the world order. Other key political players have certainly played their part in streamlining the world system, but more to serve their own interests; so far, none of them could effectively override the US supremacy in global politics.⁵⁹ However, China has been striving to broaden its worldwide influence by employing trade and investment as proclaimed tools of her wallet diplomacy. It is generally believed that despite its significant worldwide damage, the COVID-19 may herald a new era of opportunities for the rapidly rising great power, China.

Analyzing the dynamics of world order, it can be stated that despite waning US global hegemony, Washington will certainly maintain its status as an economic superpower in the future world system. On the contrary, the trillions of dollars investments and exports to various regions of the world by China, are not only fortifying Beijing's transnational influence but also challenging US status-quo worldwide.⁶⁰ At the same time, growing Sino-EU economic interdependence and participation of major EU players in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have further reinforced Beijing's global infusion. BRI is viewed as a vital development that would stimulate the shifting process of the pivot of global balance of power from the West to the Rest, and eventually, the axis of world order in the 21st century. Meanwhile, the outbreak of coronavirus and reactions from the US and China towards this pandemic are highly significant developments for the already transforming world order.

COVID-19: A Global Challenge

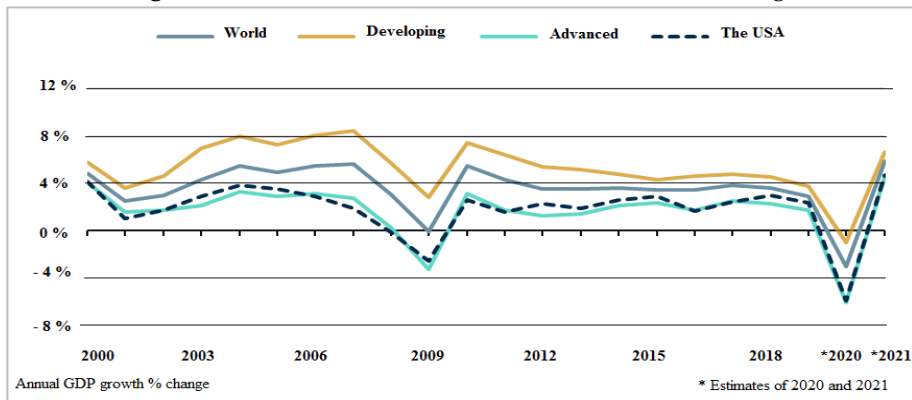
Since its eruption, the coronavirus has been obstructing the entire global system. By December 2020, the worldwide confirmed cases were around 76 million with 1.7 million deaths.⁶¹ The US Congressional Research Service 2020-report indicates that coronavirus has affected the global economy up to around US \$ 90 trillion, and global economic indicators may shrink to the lowest level ever since the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁶² The global economic growth could reduce to an annualized rate (-4.5% to -6.0% estimated for 2020) and global trade could plunge up to 9.2 percent.⁶³ These statistics of COVID-19 help estimating the overall situation of the global system.

By December 2020, the US has emerged as the world's worst-affected country from coronavirus with around 18 million affected-cases and 0.32 million deaths.⁶⁴ During March-July 2020, almost 55 million Americans filed for unemployment

insurance, as the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that out of 158 million national civilian labor force, around 20 million lost their jobs, pushing the overall jobless figures to 23 million (15 percent unemployment) – the worst situation since the Great Depression.⁶⁵ In the first quarter of 2020, the US GDP fell by 5 percent, the largest quarterly decline since the 2008-financial crisis.⁶⁶ Europe is the second-worst corona-affected region of the world.⁶⁷ In the first quarter of 2020, the EU suffered from around 4.0 percent contraction in economic growth and 17 percent in overall industrial production.⁶⁸ A European Commission report has predicted around a 7.4 percent fall in EU growth. The European Central Bank has cautioned that the Eurozone economy could contract by 8 to 12 percent this year.⁶⁹

China has also suffered from coronavirus with a 10 percent economic decline in the first quarter of 2020 and it has also suffered around a 13 percent drop in exports and 3 percent in imports.⁷⁰ China's growth was estimated negative in the first quarter of 2020 and fell below 5.0 percent with serious repercussions expected in case the outbreak lingers on, though, Beijing is expected to be far better than its neighbors.⁷¹

Figure-1: IMF Forecast of Annual GDP Growth in Percentage



(Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis⁷²)

During COVID-19, the US and China continued to level accusations against each other. Washington alleged Beijing for originating the pandemic and notoriously coined the term “Wuhan virus” along with blaming the World Health Organization (WHO) for inefficiency and giving undue favor to China, who accused the US military of bringing the virus to Wuhan city.⁷³ However, amid this global challenge, much more cooperation at the global level was needed, particularly, among the two key actors, the US and China. The Chinese economy has been severely damaged by the pandemic in the first quarter of 2020; business markets remained empty for several weeks and consumer demand fell manifold.⁷⁴

Given the cuts in demands for Chinese products and disruption in global supply chains, the Chinese economy has certainly been affected as it is profoundly dependent upon exports. IMF has suspected that world trade may decline by 11 percent annually (estimated for 2020) with the worst performance by advanced economies.⁷⁵ A

prolonged worldwide economic depression may also trigger new waves of production patterns with reinforcement of protectionist tendencies in the global trade. States may bring industrial production back home to reduce the risk-elements that will eventually contract the global supply chains. As the world's largest exporter and a key link in international shipments, China can meet severe challenges and certainly, its economy may perform considerably low than it was initially targeted to.

However, it is generally believed that after some initial miscalculations about COVID-19, China has complaisantly responded and effectively controlled coronavirus at home. It emerged as the first global player expressing its resolve for helping any other country in fighting the epidemic including WHO.⁷⁶ There is a growing insight that unconditional economic and healthcare assistance may help China in deepening its worldwide political influence. The emerging great power also opens wallet for achieving its strategic goals, once exercised by the US in 20th-century global politics.

The twentieth century is believed to be the deadliest era as nearly 200 million people died because of wars.⁷⁷ Scholars like Margaret Drabble believe that it was a beastly era;⁷⁸ Eric Hobsbawm characterized it as an age of extremism.⁷⁹ During this era, the US repeatedly followed wallet diplomacy by offering fiscal-assistance to various nations, confronting economic and security challenges. The ultimate aim of such tactics was to cement the US hegemony world over. Following Americans footprints of the 20th century politics, China may also adopt the strategy of wallet diplomacy by offering economic assistance and transnational investments in mega projects, especially in the post-COVID-19 world system to fulfill its future goals.

China: A Global Savior in Post-COVID-19 World

The West battles with the epidemic at home, while China is looking to portray itself as an emerging great power. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, fiercely rebukes the coronavirus response of the EU, particularly outside its borders.⁸⁰ Such reactions are a clear warning to the West that China has launched a worldwide soft power campaign to revamp and mark its global position by sending medical assistance to the worst affected regions of the world, especially Italy and Iran. Ultimately, China has received a blend of reactions from the West in responding to COVID-19, which includes sarcastic remarks as well as adherence to Beijing's mounting global clout. On the contrary, the response of the US and the EU is predominantly characterized as stumbling. Michael McCaul, US Senator, maintains that "I commend them for sending supplies to Italy and Iran and impacted areas, but they do not do anything without the propaganda component."⁸¹

China is emerging with a sense that pandemic is a great opportunity to burnish its soft power credentials with Europe and others. On the opposite, the US has not invested resources for even helping its traditional allies and Washington would certainly lose significant ground in this narrative warfare.⁸² It is also believed that China is looking to grasp all-available opportunities of moving forward and demonstrate itself as a global savior while other actors are unfocussed, especially the

US, which has been in the “America First” mode.⁸³ The Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo’s demand that the US and the EU should confront China together, also reflects the US weariness for maintaining its global position.⁸⁴

COVID-19 and US-EU Bilateralism

COVID-19 has certainly drawn the world’s attention towards emerging China as a new international player. European political leadership is deeply upset by the US response to the pandemic. Germans, according to a survey, are equally divided on whether the US (37%) or China (36%) would be their more important partner. In a similar study conducted in September 2019, Germans gave a 26 percent edge to the US against China.⁸⁵ Responding to another survey conducted by a British foreign policy group, about 28 percent of British people trusted the US for its international responsibilities.⁸⁶ Another survey, carried out by the French Institute of Public Opinion, highlights that only 3 percent French believe that the US is best placed to confront the future challenges. An Italian poll in Rome demonstrates that 36 percent of people in the city trusted in stronger ties with Beijing as compared to 30 percent in favor of Washington.⁸⁷

However, the internal sociopolitical dynamics in China, such as transparency, human rights, and freedom are still a matter of concern for those in Europe, who expect much better standards than the US. The meager response of Trump’s regime towards COVID-19 has reinforced the perception of its decline from global leadership role, which may aggravate the alienation of various nations.⁸⁸ The European leadership has to take broader considerations into account while choosing the US or China; the former is a leading democracy and shares vital values with Europe, whereas, the latter is a rising economic giant with worldwide infrastructure development initiatives as a soft power.⁸⁹ The edifice of international politics is swiftly reshaping, which may herald the dawn of an Asian era. European politicians realize that global political arch is shifting in favor of China as it has effectively contained coronavirus at home and proclaims to have assisted more than 80 countries around the world including some of the key European players.⁹⁰ China has also announced US \$ 30 million for WHO in its fight against Covid-19.⁹¹

Covid-19: A Stimulus for Reshaping the World Order

The post-Covid-19 World Order is an exciting debate in contemporary international politics. The mounting tension between the US and China is the instant outcome of the pandemic, but its long-term impacts could be more complicated. It is deliberated that the pandemic has stimulated the transition of world order to a more fragmented structure with an unclear future. In the post-Covid-19 world, neither China nor the US would emerge as a “winner” that could dramatically shift the global balance of power in anyone’s favor and solely lead the international system. The economic burden of pandemic may further coerce the US economy and defense budget that may badly affect its overall internal dynamics. It is likely that the paradigm of great power

competition will be further perplexed and no single actor could exercise its will, thus, conflict and cooperation would coexist amid the waning West and the rising Rest.⁹² Relations between the axis of global powers, either friendly or strained, will certainly determine the future world order.

The US-EU transatlantic engagement remained the pivot of global politics in the past several decades, but in the post-COVID-19 era, Sino-US engagement and balancing-role of the EU would be the core of the global system.⁹³ China has already echoed its resolve to counter-balance US supremacy and institute a “new” or “neo”, “multipolar”, “multicentric” or “multilateral” world order.⁹⁴ The simultaneous occurrence of trade war and interdependence or the degree of conflict and cooperation in the Sino-US relations shall govern the 21st-century world order. The pace of transformation of the global system from US hegemonic triumphalism to its relative decline along with China’s rise will be the pivot of the international system.

Conclusion

COVID-19 will leave the world in reduced openness, prosperity, and freedom while strengthening states’ governing apparatuses under their strict legal regimes, thus, reinforcing nationalism. Regimes would adopt strict measures to cope with the crisis, and it would be difficult for many of them to renounce such authoritarian powers afterward. However, the pandemic can serve a useful purpose of realization that yet this is not the end of an interconnected world system. The coronavirus itself is the evidence of transnational interdependence, as no actor could protect itself all alone. Even the great powers need to adjust their strategic interests to the dynamics of reshaping world order in the 21st century. COVID-19 would hasten the shift in power from the West to the Rest due to the scrupulous response of China to the global pandemic. The US and the EU responded to the pandemic too slowly and haphazardly, which has further tarnished the aura of the western brand. The conflictive nature of contemporary international politics might not be able to usher in a new era of worldwide cooperation, though further retreat from hyper-globalization is too likely in the future world.

The growing Chinese economic and military power has already provoked a reaction in the US to decouple itself from China. COVID-19 may force the key stakeholders to reinforce their capability of handling the protracted economic self-isolation. It would be unlikely that the world returns to mutually beneficial globalization based on shared gains from global economic integration, particularly that of the past few decades. COVID-19 has a significant effect on global economic structure and evidently, it may hasten the transition from US-led to China-centric globalization, in which the US has already lost faith and see free trade agreements (FTAs) as toxic. However, the Chinese have not lost their trust in the modern globalized system for their increasing share in global trade and progressively mounting cultural confidence.

In reshaping the world order, the US is left with two choices. In case Washington's primary goal remains to maintain its global supremacy, it will have to engage Beijing in a zero-sum geopolitical contest. On the contrary, if its goal stands for the well-being of Americans, whose socioeconomic condition has already faded, the US will have to extend cooperation with China. Keeping in view the cost and benefit effect or Rational Choice theory, prudence counsels that cooperation is a highly fruitful option. However, amid bitter political sentiments of US officials about China, prudent counsel may not prevail, which may bulldoze the overall world system.

The US is seen as an abortive player in the global leadership contest during the pandemic. It would be difficult for Washington to exercise its influence in the future as an international frontrunner due to its narrow approach of self-interest and incompetence in execution. The worldwide effects of the pandemic could have been significantly attenuated by providing better and timely information to the international community and no one other than the US was the best option for this crucial assignment. Regrettably, the US could not fulfill the expectations of the international community. On the contrary, China has presented itself as an effective rising great power, functional and determined, to be registered as a global savior. The traditional US allies are also looking towards China for its leading role in reshaping the future international system for a more progressive, balanced, and open-world, providing better choices for multilateral engagement.

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