

Reshaping the Global Order in the Post COVID-19 Era: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) — an infectious disease that is spread across the world in the last couple of months — has been declared as a global pandemic because of quick infections and a large number of deaths in the worst-affected countries. The impacts of this pandemic are very significant for the existing global political and economic leadership. The internal policies of the United States and other European countries have plunged the whole world into uncertainty, where China emerges as a new savior. Considering the global politics amid COVID-19, the paper's main objective is to find out the role of the current global leaders amid COVID-19 and the future of global leadership. Following the qualitative methods of research, this paper critically analyzes the active global role of China to fight against this pandemic by providing necessary assistance to the affected countries. However, this paper shows that

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although China has emerged as the protector of countries during the coronavirus period, it will have to face many obstacles in leading the post-COVID-19 world order. This paper will help further research on the future of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) policy, which is now being used as a 'global health silk road'.

Keywords

COVID-19; pandemic; global order; USA; China.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most dangerous disasters to the humankind in the 21st century so far as the depth of this calamity cannot be measured. Though the countries are busy treating the corona affected people and trying to find out the way to get rid of this disaster, the consequences of this current pandemic in the global level are also needed to be focused, particularly, the growing competition between the two giant, United States of America (USA) and China, and the future of global politics in the post-COVID-19 era.

Besides the disaster of the global health sector, the current pandemic has also raised a few questions in the international political arena. First, the COVID-19 has led to the reminder of changing global power from the UK to the USA in 1956 following the 'Suez moment' where the crisis had long-established the UK's increasing dependency over the USA (Peden, 2012). It also put a big question mark over the present global order where the USA plays a key role. Second, the neoliberal policy of many Western countries is under criticism due to the increases in inequalities across the world. The whole world has started renationalization thinking by giving up the neoliberal policies, states have provided aid for the business and workers, countries are implementing shut down and imposing sanction over free movement within or outside the country amid the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

In the case of these types of war, where there are no seen enemies, leadership now depends on who responds better. One of the bases of mastering the world by the USA for the last few decades is her quick global response to any crisis across the world, either through donating wealth or exercising its military power. But the COVID-19 shows a clear failure of such a quick response from the USA. Instead, China is following the same path of helping the coronavirus affected countries as a quick global response due to the absence of the USA or any other global power.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 will bring impact over the world economies – may be more than the great depression of the 1930's or financial crisis of 2008. Generally, such a financial crisis has a significant impact on the global power politics. The current crisis has already shaken the world economies, which is certainly going to change the international politics or balance of power – either the emergence of new global power or revising the existing system.

Considering these issues, the policymakers now predict that the spread of coronavirus and its consequence could help to shift global power from the USA to other – China in this case due to her engagement to other states where any assistance is needed. As the COVID-19 spreads across the world, many countries find themselves in a very difficult situation and ask for assistance from the developed countries. But no countries except China has come forward to help the others by providing medical assistance for fighting against this pandemic. Such increasing engagement with the corona affected countries is seen as China's sharing of the global responsibility – a basic feature to be the global leader. Now, it is important to justify how China emerges as a trusted responsible power and how they share the global responsibility amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this paper tries to answer the question of whether COVID-19 could reshape the global order and to what extent global order could turn toward a new global leader.

2. Methodology

The research has been conducted following the qualitative method of research. The qualitative method – that is analytical and descriptive – assists this study to understand the current global crisis amid COVID-19 and evaluate the role of world leaders to support the coronavirus affected countries and also figure out the prospects of the global leadership. Data have been collected from both academic and non-academic sources. For academic papers, books and journals were explored while newspapers, magazines, and websites were used for non-academic resources. After revising the literature related to the current pandemic situation and global policies, the paper analyzes the role of China and the USA as an individual global actor and the European Union (EU) as an active international organization. This paper – after reviewing the policies and actions of the current global leaders – critically analyzes the real-time activities of

China to fight against the pandemic while having geographical disadvantages, socialist policies, and antagonist neighbors.

3. Understanding the COVID-19 Pandemic

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a virus named 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2). Initially, the COVID-19 was first detected in China's Wuhan city in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO), the highest body of health-related international organizations, confirmed that this virus started spreading from human to human on 22 January 2020. Later, WHO declared the COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 ([WHO Timeline – COVID-19, 2020](#)). But it was too late and the virus spread all over the world due to lack of protective measures and preparation by most of the countries of the world. Connectivity among the states played a vital role in this case to spread the virus.

Most of the affected countries went for nationwide lockdown so that the spread of the virus can be contained to the minimum level. Situations developed gradually at the birthplace of COVID-19 in China due to the effective role of the Government of China, but it worsened in most other places in the world. Europe became the worst affected continent where countries like Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, etc. had the most number of confirmed cases and deaths. As a single country, the USA is having the worst scenario in the whole world with the most number of confirmed cases and deaths. At present, the whole world is fighting with this global pandemic. The search for an effective vaccine is going on in different countries of the world right now.

4. The COVID-19 and Global Order

4.1. Rise of China

In the last few decades, China followed Deng Xiaoping's '24 Character' strategy¹ – observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly;

¹A grand strategy of Den Xiaoping which was emerged in 1990. It provides the basic principles of protecting China's national interests and its way of increasing interactions with the world.

hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership (Benjamin and Davies, 2020) — to define its position in the world. Based on the strategy, China walked slowly so that no country, even the USA did not face any military threat or any other aggression from China. Afterwards, since Xi Jinping came into power in China in 2012, he moved beyond this '24 Character' strategy following his great 'China Dream' (Mohanty, 2013) and 'One Belt, One Road (OBOR)' initiative (now Belt and Road Initiative or BRI) to influence the international economic order (Nie, 2016).

Currently, China — the second-largest economy in the world — has maintained a decent connection with other countries having played one of the supreme roles in the multipolar world and positioned itself as a life liner to many countries. Even in the Middle East, China's footprint helps its alliances to fight against the aggression of the USA (Auon and Kelner, 2015) and challenges the Western-dominated status quo in the region. Besides, BRI — the grand strategy of China — has now become the central tool of China's landmark foreign policy (Moblely, 2019) which will strengthen the connectivity and cooperation between China and Eurasia. Under this branding strategy, China started to provide loans and investment in the infrastructure development of BRI signatories' countries. However, this gradually shifting strategy — from Den Xiaoping's '24 Character' strategy to Xi Jinping's 'BRI' diplomacy — ultimately boosts China or Asia to lead the future global order.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has further helped China so far to accelerate its desire to create a Chinese influence of horizon through the BRI with a new 'health silk road' policy. China has started to offer medical supplies across the world to battle the pandemic collectively. China's sphere of influence has reached most of the countries; from Asia to Africa; from Europe to America. However, the quick response — a fundamental feature to lead the international politics — of China throughout the globe to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic are as follows.

In Europe, particularly, in the Western part of the EU, China seeks to extend its influence. In this response, Italy, the first country of G-7, signed an MoU with China to participate in the BRI (Okano-Heijmans and Kamo, 2019) though it was criticized by both domestically and Western allies. But such initiative is being proved right especially when China has come forward to provide assistance to Italy to fight against the pandemic

after the failing of Italy to get assistance from the EU. This quick response of China to Italy — after posting a video of arriving an aircraft having Chinese assistance by Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio — is seen as a diplomatic ovation of China as a savior of Italy (Fallon, 2020) that strengthens the Sino-Italian bilateral relations. That shipment was displayed by a gigantic Chinese flag with a read 'The friendship road knows no borders' (Chakraborty, 2020). Alongside, Chinese company ZTE — a joint 5G innovation and technology in Italy — donated around 2000 face masks as medical assistance (Fallon, 2020). Like Italy, other Western European countries i.e. Spain, France, and Germany have also relied on China to get sufficient medical assistance. For instance, China sent much needed medical supplies — face masks, protective suits, and gloves — to France and Spain.

On the other hand, in Eastern Europe, China sent immense medical assistance to Serbia after dismissing European solidarity as 'a fairy tale' (Campbell and Doshi, 2020). Besides, China suggested the promotion of public health cooperation during a videoconference with 17 Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) — a framework of China-CEEC, '17 + 1', launched in Warsaw in 2012 — to control the infection (Kawashima, 2020). Before the COVID-19 crisis, China offered a US\$ 10 billion as a soft loan for the investment to CEEC countries (Fabrizi, 2015). Though other Eastern European countries maintain strategic relations with the EU and Russia, some CEECs moved closer to China which is considered a great success of Chinese foreign policy. Moreover, the non-EU member countries in Europe sometimes face a lot of challenges to run the government smoothly and due to the non-effective role by the EU to integrate those countries within the EU organization, aggressive competition between Russia and China took place to increase their involvement and engagement with those countries.

In Africa, amid the current pandemic of COVID-19, particularly in the health sector, China has a good cohesion with the African developing countries. China is also one of the partners of African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (Brinza, 2020). Like the Chinese government, some other Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE are also investing in e-health technologies in the African continent. Besides this bilateral cooperation, China is also interested to create a 'health silk road' (Brinza, 2020) through strong health, network to combat the further

pandemic in the world, especially in Africa. On the other hand, in the Middle East, China sent a medical team with seven specialists to Baghdad of Iraq and Iran as well.

In Southeast Asia, China showed its solidarity through sending a medical team and necessary equipment including test kits, face masks, personal protective equipment to the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia so far to fight against the pandemic. Besides, in Japan, China donated kits for testing coronavirus to the Japanese National Institute of Infectious Diseases (Chakraborty, 2020). On the other hand, in South Asia, China extended her friendly hand to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh through providing essential medical assistance. In Bangladesh, when China sent a shipment, it also carried a gigantic Chinese flag with a read 'The boat of love runs through the mountains'.

Beyond the above-mentioned regions, China has also declared to help the USA — the biggest competitor of China — by sharing its experiences to get rid of this disease. Besides, Alibaba, a Chinese multinational technology company, has promised to send a large number of medical materials to the corona affected countries, as well as to the USA.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic helps China to get more engaged with most of the countries and to successfully implement the concept 'it is China only who can help' to the mindset of state leaders that promotes China to increase international reputation (Kawashima, 2020). China believes in branding — from BRI to the current 'face musk diplomacy' ("Post COVID-19 World: Will It reshape Global Leadership?", 2020) — particularly to become the only superpower in the world. China has also successfully sent a message to the world when USA — the existing global leader — scrambles to protect her citizens within its borders, China moves forward to help the both American allies and enemy countries battling the pandemic.

4.2. US's inward policy and the decline of its supremacy

After the end of the Second World War, the world had witnessed the emergence of the 'Cold War' where the world was divided into two blocs: the Soviet Union and the United States. Since 1989, after the end of the 'Cold War' followed by two global incidents, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of Berlin Wall, the United States has emerged as the only

superpower in the globe. Then the world entered into the 'unipolar world order' (Wohlforth, 1999) full of USA imposed rules and regulations.

Since 9/11, a paradigm shift took place in US politics (Duclos, 2020). The American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of 'war on terror' and its movements throughout the world for countering terrorism raises a question about the hidden interest of the country that has helped to spread the fear of American invasion to the other countries. Currently, President Trump's administration's military expansion in Syria — raises another fear of atmosphere — suspiciously represents the USA to the other states. These military expansions and other exercises have become a disadvantage for the USA to uphold the leading character, enabling China to boost its legitimacy in the region and international arena as well (Saltskog and Clarke, 2019).

However, the current outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has also raised a firm challenge over the supremacy of the United States. Initially, the USA and other western countries did not pay any heed to COVID-19. Such negligence to the COVID-19 became the biggest threat to all these Western countries. Among them, the most serious case is now in the USA. However, the new dilemmas of this current pandemic to the USA's position in the international arena are as follows.

First, the pandemic shows the lack of healthcare resources in the USA that also points out the lack of coordination between the state governments and the federal government. However, due to the high necessity of financial support in the healthcare system within the country, a question has emerged about the necessity of using a high amount of defense budget where the enemy is not people rather an unseen virus. Such debate could push the American defense policy as well as defense budget to think again about the necessity of operating military bases all over the world and it could be a shrink, as the country's health issue is the prime concern to the American citizens. People could pressurize the government to put more focus on socio-economic and political sectors. So, any downward military budget could be more disruptive and would lessen the number of naval operations and presence, particularly in the Indian Ocean and the East China Sea, which could invite China to fill up the gaps.

Second, after observing some incidents of the COVID-19 pandemic, the western alliance between Europe and the USA is compromised which

embittered the EU. When Italy asks for assistance through NATO, the USA remains silent which ultimately shows the inward foreign policy of the USA, followed by the 'America-first' policy of Trump administration. On the other hand, Russia sends vast medical assistance to Italy in response to fight the pandemic, thus leading to the birth of Pan Europeanism. Besides, China also sends the necessary assistance including a medical team to serve the Italian crisis. However, such a contradiction in the USA-EU alliance could bring negative results for the USA in the post-COVID-19 era, particularly in the field of business and commerce. Again, it could help both Russia and China to accelerate their business dealings with the EU countries.

Third, due to this current pandemic, the USA could face immense economic damage. The continuous quarantine and lockdown have frozen the economy of the USA. Already, a large number of people in the United States have lost their jobs and fall into uncertainty due to the struggling economy and shutdown of the small businesses. The Stock market has sunk and the industries are being forced to shut down. This economic downturn is sometimes compared with the Great Depression of the 1930's. Trump's administration should have given more importance to domestic financial issues.

Fourth, the USA has failed to maintain close relations with the vulnerable countries, not even with its close allies, where one of the features of the global leader is to respond quickly if any country faces any crisis, the USA has failed to make such responses. COVID-19 shows the clear hopelessness of the USA to provide any kind of assistance to the other countries. Even during the Ebola crisis in 2009 and 2014–2015, the then Obama administration was able to lead a coalition of countries to counter the disease (Singh, 2020). No countries could coordinate or assemble any coalition to fight together against the pandemic – only China is doing so alone.

However, due to the inward policy and failure to provide support to the corona affected countries, the USA is now being considered as the fallen star of the old world. The USA is losing its supremacy so far as to lead the world in this pandemic crisis. On the contrary, China, a rising star in the contemporary world, has been able to provide support to the affected countries through either sending medical teams or medical assistance. Besides, China has promulgated the US's inaction of assisting China and other countries during the crisis.

4.3. The inaction of European solidarity

EU is considered as the most effective regional political and economic organization. It is well known for its dynamic solidarity as a fundamental value of the organization (Sangiovanni, 2013). The main basis of this solidarity — the state's closeness and open border system — is now totally collapsed. The spread of COVID-19 pandemic shows the fizzle of the EU in terms of responding to the request for assistance to the member states while the EU is one of the epicenters of the current pandemic. The union is now acting based on the state's interest where most countries closed their borders — an adverse of European spirit; though to reemerge Europe and to battle the pandemic, collective action is more necessary than this individual state approach.

European countries have given up the neoliberal policy amid the pandemic. No country gets any assistance from the Union. Even Italy, an active member of the EU, was also refused assistance after asking through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (Fallon, 2020). Despite the European agglomeration, no partner countries came forward to provide support to Italy. On the other hand, Germany and France ascribed a ban to the export of face masks — a humiliation to the Italians by their Western allies.

Besides Italy, Serbia has already declared European solidarity as 'a fairy tale' (Campbell and Doshi, 2020) after being rejected by the EU to get the necessary assistance. No collective measures have been taken yet to fight against the COVID-19. However, such inactiveness by the world's most active regional organization and the inward policy by most of the European countries raised a question about the true effectiveness of the EU during the emergency.

5. New Global Order and Challenges for China

Due to the inward policy of the USA and the inaction of European solidarity, a new question has come up regarding the leading of the international order amid the current and post-pandemic. In this regard, China — a rising star in the 21st century — has the desire to lead the world and maintains close connection through providing necessary medical equipment to the corona affected countries to fulfill its long dream 'OBOR' initiative. The quick response of China to fight the pandemic has already successfully conquered the minds of most countries that are facing the

current disaster. However, though China has given quick responses in this current pandemic, only responses cannot help China to lead the post-COVID-19 era. There are some major challenges that China would face during the post-COVID-19 period to lead the world.

First, as China has also faced the cascading effects of the COVID-19, her economy is still not sufficient to share the responsibility of the world. Rise of the unemployment rate, shutting down of the industries, and the fall of the GDP is the current scenario of the Chinese economic arena. Besides, the sharp drop in international investment and export orders hindered China's economic development (Watts, 2020). Moreover, the world's consuming power is going down and Chinese products would face a big challenge in the markets all over the world. The current supply chain is in chaos amid the pandemic. All business deals are going to be canceled or delayed. Following this global scenario and the domestic economic disorder, it would be difficult for China to share the global economic burden for a long period.

Second, China's desire for leading international politics is not dependent only over the crisis response in this current pandemic situation. The inward foreign policy of the USA is also an opportunity for China to fill the gap and lead the world by showing the path to get rid of this pandemic. But the question is the length of such an inward policy of the USA. After the end of the pandemic, USA's new engagement with the rest of the world would lessen the leading role of China. It is important to see the reaction of Washington and how they coordinate and assemble the states to fight against poverty in the post-COVID-19 era. Due to the communist government system, a large number of states, having democracy as their political ideology, may think twice before going under the Chinese umbrella. So, communism could be a disadvantage for China to lead post-COVID-19 international politics.

Third, the world system has changed rapidly since the 9/11 terror attack. After the end of the Cold War, there was no powerful state who could compete with the then militarily and economically powerful USA, even Japan, who had a bubble economy at that time, was the key ally of the USA (Envall, 2017). But the global balance of power has shifted later and the world has witnessed the re-rise of Russia and the rise of powerful China. So, in the post-COVID 19 world order, it would be very difficult for China to lead the whole world, particularly, in this multipolar world system.

Moreover, some small countries like Sri Lanka and some other African countries have some uneasiness in maintaining relations with China.

Fourth, there are some geographical disadvantages for China rather than in the USA. Geographically, the USA has friendly neighbors where China has a conflict with its neighbor particularly with India, Japan, Philippines, and Vietnam which poses a great barrier for China to take any action freely. Moreover, Chinese industries mainly depend on Middle Eastern oil and gas, and the Indian Ocean is the lifeline for China as more than 80% of China's natural resources come from this sea trade route where the USA has a strong naval presence. So, considering the geographical realities, it would be difficult for China to lead the global order in the post-COVID-19 era.

However, due to the over interdependency of the other states and the multiplicity of international politics, it is difficult for a single country to emerge as a global leader but it can influence others to support its motives and to help to fulfill its interest. At the same time, as there is no position of emotion in international relations — as Hans Morgenthau pointed out — no country could behave irrationally in the post-COVID-19 era. So, countries with different ideologies, may not turn toward China after the end of the pandemic due to several reasons. Considering these challenges, it is important to see how Xi Jinping outlines the new post-COVID-19 stable international order with the Chinese leadership.

6. Conclusion

For years, the world has observed the rise of China where it has played a key role in the global value chains despite facing challenges — discomfort relations with the USA; USA-Japan's continuous pressure in the East China Sea; India's all-out attempt to suppress China, particularly in South Asia. But no effort is successful to keep down China's economic engagement in almost all the region i.e. relations with Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries (Bhowmick, 2020).

On the other hand, the USA's military aggression to any parts of the world, particularly, in the Middle East and her disdain to international law has angered many countries in the world. In this case, the emergence of an alternative leader could be welcomed by the majority of the countries.

Moreover, the desire of China to lead the global order is now seeing the light of hope due to the spread of the current COVID-19 pandemic. The world will be grappling due to the COVID-19 pandemic for years to come. If China can provide more support to the developing countries and be positive about global governance or global sharing, it will create a possibility of transforming global order and more precisely, COVID-19 will create a path for China to rule the post-COVID-19 world order. At the same time, the haphazard policy of China and its communist government system could bring some challenges to fulfill its dream in the post-COVID-19 international system.

However, though it is far too soon to predict the post COVID-19 world order, the severity of this current pandemic could help to foretell the global order; either the USA will continue its leadership in the post-COVID-19 international system, or the world will see a new superpower – China – to lead the global politics where the center of gravity of power will be shifted toward China.

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