

Great Power Politics in the Time of Corona

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Even as the rest of the world grapples with the deadly pandemic unleashed from Wuhan, China is back to the business of great power politics—building military infrastructure, conducting naval exercises and sinking fishing boats of other nations. Where the rest of the world has come to its knees, in no small part due to irresponsible Chinese behaviour, Beijing is busy reaping the dividends out of this global disorder. If at one level it is using this COVID-19 pandemic to project itself as a global leader by supplying medical kit and expertise to nations in dire need, thereby trying to distinguish itself from an inward-focused Trump Administration, at another level, it is busy waging an information war in Europe, seeking to create an internal rift within the European Union. This paper briefly outlines some of the trends in the rapidly evolving global order even as the full impact of the coronavirus pandemic is yet to be ascertained.

The American Void

As the world has continued to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic with one grim milestone passing every other day, China's response has been at the centre of most debates and discussions. Chinese Communist Party's opacity in dealing with this crisis in its initial weeks, its ham-handed manner of treating whistleblowers, its use of information as a tool of diplomatic leverage and then after its recovery, its attempts to portray itself

as a saviour of the beleaguered nations has generated intense global debate. After all, the very future of the global order is at stake and here is a country that is ostensibly aiming to emerge as the global hegemon.

But this deliberation is also happening at a time when America and its political leadership has shown itself thoroughly inept in managing its domestic crisis emerging out of the viral contagion as well as its global fall out. For a country that was widely viewed as the last port of call whenever such global crises had emerged in the past has been found wanting in this most serious crisis the world is undergoing since the end of the Second World War. The US is emerging out of this crisis as a power much diminished in credibility if not in its capacity to manage the externalities of such a profound situation.

US President Donald Trump's leadership so far has been more defined by its absence. For weeks he refused to treat the pandemic with the seriousness it deserved. In fact, for a long time, he continued to maintain the early fatality numbers in the US were much less than those from the flu or even automobile accidents. "We lose thousands of people a year to the flu," Trump was arguing to convince the country that a lockdown was not needed. "We never turn the country off."¹ In fact, he was hopeful that the US could begin to reopen businesses by the Easter holiday in early April.

Trump Administration's recklessness was on

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full display early on when after the first few cases in the US, it did not show any sense of urgency but maintained that the situation was under control and would dissipate in the summer “like a miracle.” Trump seemed more interested in picking petty fights on Twitter with Democratic state governors who called for more stringent measures. And then as the situation deteriorated, America’s domestic capacity problems got severely exposed with a lack of adequate medical supplies and insufficient testing.

After American public health officials started projecting the number of deaths in the country to be between 100,000 and 200,000, Trump was forced to acknowledge the worst, saying “I want every American to be prepared for the hard days that lie ahead” and that “this is going to be a very, very painful two weeks.”²

The US Congress has passed a USD 2 trillion coronavirus relief bill which is the largest stimulus package in the nation’s history aimed at reviving a pandemic battered economy. This rare bipartisanship is also likely to result in another bill on infrastructure investment and additional healthcare benefits but political strains are quite visible. Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker, has announced a new House Committee would examine “all aspects” of the federal response to the pandemic, not ruling out an investigation in the style of the commission on the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks.³ Trump has shot back by calling it a “witch hunt” and deriding it as partisan politics.⁴

That American polity’s response to the crisis would be shaped by the undercurrents of partisan politics is to be expected, given that this is an election year and stakes are high for both, Trump

and the Democrats. Recent opinion polls reflect this as well with 94% of Republicans approving of Trump’s handling of the crisis, compared with 27% of Democrats. Trump’s approval stands at 49%, quite high by his standards and in a time of highly polarised domestic political landscape.⁵ As the crisis unfolds further in the days and months ahead, Trump’s handling of it will have a profound bearing on the November elections.

For the world at large, however, questions about America’s global leadership are becoming serious by the day. China, with all its faults, is presenting a model of global leadership which might seem very attractive to a large part of the world even as America’s claim to global pre-eminence becomes seemingly more dubious by the day. Trump is busy picking fights with close allies like Germany and France by diverting medical supplies meant for these countries by outbidding the original buyers, as well as with Canada and Latin America by forcing American companies to stop exporting hospital-grade N95 masks to them. The fact that few in the world are calling upon the US to lead and manage the global response to this pandemic should be worrying for American policymakers. The expectations are so low from Washington that even America’s closest allies are not coordinating their responses with it. The world knew that America was beginning to become more isolationist and during the coronavirus crisis that isolationism became visibly manifest. America’s relationship with the global order is at a crossroads and the rest of the world is beginning to come to terms with it. This has profound consequences for us all but it has been Europe, however that has been most acutely affected by the US-China dynamic.

The European Dilemma

The coronavirus which has ravaged Europe unlike any other crises since the end of the World War II should have been an opportunity for the continent and the European Union (EU) to showcase regional solidarity, making an effective case for the benefits of integration. But instead, responses within the national boundaries have been the norm and the EU has been found wanting with hardly any role in framing a coherent regional response. European nations have been the primary drivers of policy even as most regional leaders have been seemingly scrambling to respond. Health vulnerabilities of some of the richest countries in the world stand exposed.

There has hardly been any coordinated response on display in Europe with national governments deciding to seal their borders and increasing controls. What was once a fringe rightwing populist sentiment is now driving policy responses of most European nations. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, was one of the first leaders to blame "foreigners" for the pandemic. Orbán's assertions might be symptomatic of a larger trend in Europe where broader questions are being raised about the future of the European enterprise itself which has been premised on openness to outsiders. The ideational moorings of the European project are coming unstuck.

On the economic side too, the European project is having to unlearn some of its fundamental assumptions. The European Commission had to trigger the so-called "general escape clause," lifting stringent spending rules and allowing countries to run big deficits in response to a crisis. This is an emergency economic measure which has been used for the first time in the history of the EU,

which prides itself in maintaining fiscal orthodoxy. According to Eurogroup President Mario Centeno, the eurozone will emerge from the crisis with much higher debt levels, something which can exacerbate the fragmentation of the EU.⁶ Yet, even in this time of acute crisis, divisions with the EU persist with northern European countries reluctant to issue euro zone-wide bonds that could bail out Southern European countries.

And then there is a wider geopolitics which is raising some serious questions about the future of the EU. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio publicly praised China when a planeload of medical equipment and doctors arrived in Italy in March to help the country fight the coronavirus. Making his displeasure for the attitude of European nations, who only offered words, clear, Di Maio underlined that "many foreign ministers offered their solidarity and want to give us a hand...and this evening I wanted to show you the first aid arrived from China."⁷ Meanwhile, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic was also unabashed when he suggested that "European solidarity does not exist...it was a fairy tale on paper," and announced that he had sent a letter to his "brother and friend" Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, asking for medical aid, as "the only country that can help us is China."⁸

This attitude of some European nations stands in stark contrast to countries like France which are assessing how far the EU's dependence on China is working to EU's disadvantage. French Finance Minister, Bruno Le Maire, has talked of the need to reconfigure the supply chains to "gain in independence and sovereignty."⁹ There is widespread disenchantment with the way China's initial opacity about this crisis led to the crisis to aggravate. And countries like Spain, the Czech

Republic and the Netherlands have been forced to return faulty coronavirus test kits to China. But with China being EU's second-largest trading partner after the United States, there are clear limits to how much decoupling can happen between the two economic giants. Moreover, the EU would also be cognizant of the fact that once the dust settles down and the economic recovery becomes the priority for Europe, China cannot be ignored.

Since the end of the Second World War, the EU has been an exemplar of how nation-states can overcome their parochial interests and collectively work for pan-regional aspirations. That ideal of the world's only supranational organisation stands severely eroded today as the EU member states have retreated into their own national comfort zones. The European idealism was dying even before the coronavirus pandemic had struck. The latest crisis might just make the task of reviving that idealism even more difficult, if not impossible.

While one can think of the US-China discord as a continuation of their great power rivalry predating COVID-19, the toughening up of European response is a more interesting development. Senior political leaders in Europe are robustly questioning Chinese behaviour and policies now. Challenging the conventional wisdom that China had handled the coronavirus outbreak better than others, French President Emmanuel Macron has termed the view as "naive," adding things "happened that we don't know about."¹⁰ He made it clear that there can be no comparison between open societies like democracies and those where truth was suppressed. The UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has also been very critical of China, arguing that the world will "have to ask the hard questions about how [coronavirus] came about and

how it couldn't have been stopped earlier" and that there cannot be "business as usual" with China after the present crisis ends.¹¹

This European assertion vis-a-vis China has come after the European Union (EU) failed to handle in the upsurge in cases in countries in Italy and Spain, leading China to make a further dent in European solidarity. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's urgent request for medical equipment was ignored by the European governments for days. The divisions became starker when some countries like Germany, France and the Czech Republic decided to block exports of emergency equipment to the needy neighbours until they had finished counting up what stocks they had. This led to stark warnings about the very future of the EU, resulting in the EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's "heartfelt apology" to Italy for not helping at the start of its deadly coronavirus outbreak.¹²

China has been busy not only with using the crisis to enhance its geopolitical influence where it can but it has also announced its intent to use this crisis to start working on a "Silk Road" of health care./ China has been reaching out to countries from Europe to Africa with medical supplies and kits and has not been shy of underscoring its own leadership at a time when the West had looked divided and inward-focused. Over the last two decades, Chinese companies have made notable acquisitions and investments in European technology firms. There is a danger that this pandemic and the resulting economic crisis can open up new possibilities for Chinese inroads in Europe. But there is a new resolve in Europe to fend off the threat of a Chinese takeover. Margrethe Vestager, the European Union's (EU) competition commissioner, has suggested that

European countries should consider taking stakes in companies to fend off this threat.¹³ But how far will Europe be able to go in taking on China's growing financial, political and military muscle remains to be seen.

Global Fault-lines Firming Up

It is indeed quite extraordinary to witness the full play of great power politics at a time which according to most liberal institutionalists, should have been a case study of greater global coordination. Global pandemics were widely viewed as non-traditional security threats which would lead to greater cooperation amongst major powers as supposedly "we are all in this together," not as arenas of contestation among major powers for relative gains. And international institutions were supposed to help the international community to navigate these security challenges.

But the state of the world today should disabuse us of all these fallacies. If anything, the fault lines between the US and China have been accentuated because of the coronavirus crisis. Historically, China and the US have tried to work together to manage various global crises in the past. But not this time. Trump's 'America First' approach has meant antagonising even close allies by diverting medical supplies by outbidding the original buyers or by forcing American companies to stop exporting hospital-grade N95 masks. Lack of leadership shown by Washington has made China a veritable necessity for many nations even in the West who had to import faulty medical kits from China for lack of any real alternative. While a large part of the world remains furious with China for its initial concealment of adequate information, they are forced to take Chinese help in the short

term. And this has allowed China to expand its influence under the garb of helping the world during this pandemic, a crisis which would have been much less severe had China behaved responsibly in the initial stages.

As a result, the world will continue to transition to a phase where jostling between China and the US will get exacerbated and the biggest loser will be global governance, something that this crisis has brought into sharp relief. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) could only hold its first session on this global crisis last week, some four months after the deadly viral contagion emerged as the biggest security challenge to the world after the Second World War. After taking over the presidency of the UNSC last month China's Ambassador to the UN, Zhang Jun, made it clear that Beijing does not plan to discuss the pandemic situation in the Council during its presidency as there was no need to panic over the coronavirus epidemic, even adding that the world is not far from the defeat of COVID-19 "with the coming of spring."¹⁴ Washington and Beijing remain divided on the scope on the joint resolution with the US, insisting that the UNSC resolution should be explicit about the origin of the virus in Wuhan, China, much to Beijing's vexation.

But more serious has been the manner in which the World Health Organization (WHO) has dealt with this once in a lifetime crisis. Far from being the nodal agency to coordinate the global response to this pandemic, it seems to have made itself completely subservient to the Chinese interests, losing its credibility in the eyes of its other stakeholders. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was forced to declare a public health emergency of international concern

only in January end after having to call it off just a week earlier under Chinese pressure. Tedros repeatedly defended Chinese handling of the crisis with the WHO even tweeting in mid-January that “preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission” and Tedros suggesting in January end that “WHO doesn’t recommend limiting trade and movement.”¹⁵ This has generated an intense backlash in Washington which is WHO’s largest single funder with the US President Donald Trump not only accusing the UN agency of being “very China-centric” and criticising it for having “missed the call” in its response to the pandemic but also following it up by halting US funding “while a review is conducted to assess the World Health Organisation’s role in severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus.”¹⁶ Though Trump’s move to cut funding has led to political bickering in the US, senior members of the US Congress have also called for a Congressional investigation into the WHO’s handling of the crisis in cahoots with the Chinese Communist Party.

Conclusion

It has become commonplace to suggest that globalisation is at a crossroads. From Brexit to the election of President Donald Trump, from the western backlash against migration to the growing trade barriers across the world, this period in world politics has been termed a period of de-globalisation. The high octave optimism of the ‘End of History’ hypothesis has given way to the constant dribble of pessimism about the ability of the world to come together.¹⁷ The liberal order of the global elites is being challenged like never

before and the multilateral institutions are crumbling under the weight of their own contradictions.

The world was at an inflexion point even before the threat of coronavirus had entered the lexicon and our daily lives. It has been a linear progression from the global financial crisis of 2008/09 to the extant global economic disruption – all leading to questions about the credibility of the political and economic elites to provide effective governance and to manage the aspirations of the ‘have nots.’ Now, as a nation after nation quarantines itself, the spread of COVID-19 is challenging the way we have become used to living and arranging not only our daily lives but also the global order. The vulnerabilities of the teeming millions are out in the open and the ‘experts’ do not seem to have credible answers.

Great power politics has continued unabated even at a time when many were expected to show greater global solidarity. The international order was getting fragmented and major power rivalry was beginning to shape the global contours before the present crisis struck. That process has been galvanised by the COVID-19 crisis and nations like India should be prepared to navigate the externalities of this challenging environment. As the world becomes more fragmented, the challenges to revive support for globalisation will only mount. This is a problem for a country like India which has benefitted from the forces of globalisation as the free flow of information, ideas, money, jobs and people has enabled Indians to prosper like never before. But as the global landscape evolves rapidly, Indian policymakers will have to figure out how to make the most of some of the opportunities that are emerging as global supply chains get disrupted and a new trade and

investment regime is getting constructed. Realists had long argued that greater interconnectedness leads to greater vulnerabilities. But this simple lesson became a casualty of globalisation hyper optimism. As that optimism dies down, the danger is that lessons that are being learnt will end up

doing more damage. Globalisation's obituaries have been written many times in the past as well. It will surely survive this latest assault. But the form in which it might endure will also challenge us to think more creatively about the world we live in and to provide adequate policy responses.

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