



INESCAPABLE BIOLOGICAL EVENTS AND INESCAPABLE IMPACT: INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

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Abstract

Pandemics do come, but rarely. When they come they destroy every aspect of human lives. This work analyses its political impact. Infectious diseases are recurring in nature and globalization has intensified its spread. The outbreak of Coronavirus in 2019 has presented its easy mobility due to open economies and led to extraordinary social-economic-political disruption caused by curbs in order to contain the virus. In contrast to earlier pandemics, COVID-19 is dynamic in nature with its constant evolution and resistance towards antibacterial agents. It has affected every aspect of human life and politics is no untouched. Everything is at risk, and as economies shut down and assets are extended, international power dynamics saw a move in the age of Coronavirus. The political impact is likely to more severe given the uncertainty of virus's recurring nature. This paper draws out the impact of disease outbreak on international politics and relations between nations. Firstly, paper begins by drawing various inferences from history showcasing how disease outbreak impact politics. Secondly, it analyses the blame game started over the origin of coronavirus outbreak. Thirdly, the paper presents how China took an opportunity to project their power during the crises. Fourthly, the paper presents how India came out as a reliable partner during the crises. Lastly, the paper recommends some actions that governments should take during health emergency.

Key Words: *Coronavirus, International Politics, Blame game, Vaccine diplomacy, India, China, United States, Pandemic.*

Introduction

There occur a series of public health emergencies at the outset of the twenty first century-First SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), Avian Flu, followed by Ebola and then Coronavirus or COVID-19. It has raised several issues and many questions regarding the unexpected vulnerability of human beings and society at large to sudden outbreak of diseases. The outbreak of COVID-19 has opened an eye of the Supreme Being that how vulnerable this so called modern society and modern man is to infectious diseases and pandemics. Epidemics, pandemics, and infectious diseases have played an important role in development and change in history. Infectious diseases are as significant in understanding human development as revolutions, wars, conflicts, economic crises, natural calamities and demographic change. Throughout human history, it is found that infectious diseases are emerged as far more devastating than any other diseases and they are responsible for suffering and deaths around the world.

Pandemics not only have impact on the lives of humans but also on art, academic, religion, culture, medicine, literature, and intellectual history among others. International politics is no such different. The COVID-19 pandemic is the recent tragic incident that has grappled the whole world and has caused suffering never before. It has impacted the international relations and has caused political pressures. The impact is so drastic that United Nations Security Council has passed a resolution demanding a global ceasefire. Leaders of certain nations have blamed different nations for not containing the infection



viably and bringing about the uncontrolled spread of the infection. Analysts have even predicted that post COVID-19 world will mark the starting point for the “new world order” (Saxena, 2020).

All global crisis impacts the international system in some way or another. The world has witnessed several crises-two world wars, cold war, conflict between great powers, and the founding of League of Nations and the United Nations (UN), the international system, its values, norms, laws, and structures do change. No need to even go back to those times. In the century we are living, we have witnessed 9/11 attacks, financial crisis of 2008. They all have changed international system. Pandemics are no doubt global crisis. The spread of deadly virus is evidently a global health crisis as no country and no one was immune to it. As the world was grappling with deadly virus spreading without any discrimination, it is highly disappointed to see that some countries used this pandemic to advance their interests, When the world required action and response, countries were engaged in blaming each other for the crises. As this happens, relations between nations affected in both positive and negative manner.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to look at the politics of Corona pandemic and discusses its impact on international relations. It concluded that although it was health crises but its impact on politics is discernible.

Pandemics and Politics: Historical outlook

Pandemics do have lasting effect, if not permanent. It generally changes the world order. To begin with, for a large portion of mankind's set of experiences, pandemics have pronouncedly affected foreign relations. Diseases have an effect on the course of military campaigns which in turn affect international politics which ultimately leads to change in political regimes. History has been an evidence of showing the relation between epidemics and politics. It reminds that pandemics have political connotations affecting international relations in different ways. Over time disease outbreaks have shaped politics around the world. Before indulging into current scenario, let's go back few centuries back as to how history has been shaped by pandemics.

Snowden (2019) has illustrated two examples to show how epidemics have changed the course of political history. First illustration was of the period 1802-03, when in order to impose French rule and to restore slavery, Napoleon Bonaparte has sent huge military force to the Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue. In the mean time a destructive epidemic of yellow fever has wrecked Napoleon military and prompted a course of consequences including Haitian independence and Louisiana Purchase. Another illustration that was depicted by Snowden was of during 1812, when the French emperor tried to invade Russia with the army on the scale that was not assembled before. Two diseases – dysentery and typhus together annihilated the great army and changed the geopolitical balance of power as it has led to the defeat of emperor himself.

As cited in Mngomezulu (2020), Spanish flu started in America and not in Spain. The origin was credited to Spain for political reasons so that America could look innocent. The pandemic began during the course of World War I. Since Spain was a neutral country during war and it was fair and transparent in its reporting of influenza cases. This resulted in the pandemic being accredited to Spain. This is just one illustration to depict that mankind has always been selfish. Even in times of distress, man thinks of his own.

With time, strategies of war and politics have changed. Now is the time of evolved political tactics where victory is not decided in battle fields but in conference rooms. Diplomacy has taken over war



games. Diseases on the other hand are also continuously changing. The impact of disease outbreak cannot be same as that of past but it could be much worse. This paper is an attempt to analyze the outbreak of COVID-19 on the course of politics in general and international politics in particular. There is no argument that Coronavirus has both worsen and consolidated international relations depending on the country been exposed to the virus. Some key aspects have been mentioned to highlight the impact of pandemic on international relations.

Coronavirus and the Blame Game

There have been reports surfacing that China is responsible for spreading the virus and it was criticized for mishandling the spread of infection. According to The Economist March edition (2020) the United States has bashed Chinese government of mishandling the pandemic and has insisted on China's responsibility for the spread of pathogen. Eduardo Bolsonaro, son of Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro has launched an attack on China through tweet by saying that "It's China's fault". He claimed that "The blame for the global coronavirus pandemic has a name and surname: the Chinese Communist party". The tweet has drawn ferocious rebuke from China and in response Yang Wanming, China's diplomat in Brazil has retweeted that "The Bolsonaro family is the great poison of this country" (Phillips, 2020). China on the other hand blames United States that it was the source of virus. It was founded on the grounds of conspiracy theory that the virus was originated in United States and it was carried over by U.S army. However there is no evidence to support the claim (Myers, 2020).

It is not only China who has been criticized for the containment of virus, but World Health Organization (WHO) also has to face some criticism. WHO has been criticized for not containing the virus in the right time. The then United States president Donald Trump has blamed WHO by stating that "They have missed the call". "They could have called it months earlier" (Gilsinan, 2020). Critics argue that WHO has trusted China and did not alert it at the first step. These arguments have brought forth the agency's limitations where it has limited power over any government. Another drawback faced by global health agency was that it has to rely on the information provided by its member countries. Questions have been raised on its agenda and it has failed to justify the purpose for it was established. Various changes in its way of working is required so that other such situations can be handled appropriately and can even be well avoided.

Vulnerability of Nations

Covid-19 is not only a health crisis but proved to be an emergency showing the vulnerabilities of nations to deal with it. Various loopholes have been found not only in developing nations but even the developed nations have shown numerous vulnerabilities. Social conditions like inaccessibility to healthcare services, medical equipments, have added to the caseload. According to World Health Organization findings, half of the countries that have been surveyed have disrupted their services partially or completely for hypertension, cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular treatment. This pandemic should be taken as an opportunity to not only deal with the pandemic but to reshape health care system in order to prepare for upcoming pandemics.

Pandemic and "The New Global Order"

The covid-19 pandemic has set in motion some trends already in process to change the current world order. Ian Bremmer (2020) has defined three trends: "Deglobalization, rising populism and nationalism, and ascendant China". Walt (2020), too views that the COVID-19 pandemic "will not transform the essential nature of world politics" but would reinforce divisive trends already in underway before the first case emerge. The trends include retreat from globalization, greater power of governments (whether



democratic or non democratic) over their citizens, intensification of rivalry between major powers, and barriers to trade, travel, and investment.

According to crisis group publications on COVID-19, seven trends have been identified during pandemic: 1) The vulnerability of population living in conflict affected countries. The countries which are already in war or suffering from its after effects, mismanaged or corrupted governments have left their population more vulnerable to Covid pandemic. 2) The weakening capacity of international institutions and the damage to conflict resolution mechanisms. It means that leaders are focused on domestic issues and have less or no time for conflict or peace process during COVID-19. 3) The Corona pandemic put huge stress on societies and political systems, sowing seeds for future disorder. 4) The pandemic has set stage for ample opportunity for political leaders to exploit the crisis either to magnify their power at home or to advance their interests abroad. 5) May change the shape of multilateral order. 6) The pandemic also provided opportunities to show humanitarian gestures among rivals. 7) In order to deal with the pandemic, ample opportunities and strategies could be generated for new generation of security crisis.

While analyzing the impact of COVID on international relations, Perthes (2020), pointed out various questions what the world might look like after the crisis. Will it reduce global cooperation? Will it intensify great power rivalry? Will it contain wars? The answers to these questions are not in definitive form. It might be also too early to dictate that the world will not be the same. But it is quite definitive that the corona pandemic has changed international relations.

Some common seen trends are explained below:

De-globalization

The biggest theoretical victim of covid-19 pandemic is the quick supply chain that has reshaped globalization for the good part of the last century. It is difficult to work when borders are shut and people are locked. Companies are working to ensure profitability. After this shock ends, companies need to find ways to cut labour and to move towards automation. Meanwhile, an enormous spike in worldwide unemployment along with new public-private partnerships created to fight the pandemic will push to ensure generation of higher job opportunities at home. All of this implies a turn in the event of globalization and it will be the most significant and structural change on the stage of global politics since the postwar era begins. Perthes (2020) also views that the corona pandemic has set the stage for multiplication of United State's efforts to decouple China and will probably promote sectoral de-globalization.

Resurgent populism and nationalism

Insurgency powers have effectively been able to hold their places in society when the global economy was performing quite well. This will intensify significantly on the brink of worst economic crisis the world has been grappled with. Enormous extent of middle and working classes has been hollowed out due to displacement. Against this background, reinforcing borders to contain corona spread will transform into long term hostility towards immigrants. Furthermore, at community level, the diversity of social connection will be ramified by social distancing and working online, giving ground for more cultivated political polarization.

Ascendant China

China is the second largest economy in the world and in more recent times to come it will be a technological power. China's attraction as model of development which other can look for will increase thanks to this pandemic. This is visible in China's aid for health care, medical equipments and more so it's humanitarian response in times of distress. Most importantly, China's ability to



respond and its effective strategic planning to defeat the virus and to restart their economy when other democracies failed systematically let down their people. China is still not in place to replace the United States as a superpower but post corona world, it will be prepared to work on it and to compete for the title. This will be further elaborated in the following sections.

China and epidemic: Power projection

The first outbreak of virus was originated in China and later it spread to every nook and corner of the world and became a global pandemic. China has created a blunder by not sharing the proper information regarding the outbreak, the result of which is visible through lockdowns, travel restrictions, shutting down of institutions and businesses disrupt economy, and even loss of lives. According to one study conducted by the University of Southampton, it is found that China could limit the spread of infection by 95% if its government could have handled it properly and have acted the moment when the first alarm was raised by doctors and Beijing was constantly denying the extent of the situation.

Chinese president Xi Jinping has attended the G20 meeting through videoconferencing to address the leaders on coronavirus epidemic. China's deputy foreign minister, Ma Zhaoxu, summarized Xi's speech, saying that its chief purpose was to introduce "China's experience," set forth "China's proposition," put forward a "Chinese initiative" and outline pledges for "China's contribution." (Gang, 2020). Praising words have been explicitly chosen to show the China's success in fighting against coronavirus.

When the whole world was grappled with the crises, China was planning to use the crises to advance its economic strategy. China could take advantage of being the first to recover from the coronavirus as it was the first country to get infected with it. It seeks to seize market share, increase its foreign direct investment in industries which have been impacted due to lockdowns and are critical in order to grab them before others do (Rogin, 2020).

China's expansionist approach has created much furore in the international community towards its power projection. When others were fighting to contain the spread of virus, China was engaged in planning to further its strategic stakes. In April, China has announced to establish two new districts in Shansha city which would improve and expand its administrative control over the South China Sea and would advance Beijing territorial interest (Haver, 2020). At the same time, China has increased its presence in disputed Senkaku Island, setting 65-days record for operating off in disputed space (Niekawa, 2020). In May, China has approved the proposal to enact National Security Law in Hong Kong, which will broaden China's power over the state. Since May, it has been engaged with India in a border dispute in Ladakh territory which has claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers and unknown casualties from Chinese side. The recent border skirmish has known to be the deadliest in the last 45 years.

China took advantage of the pandemic by satisfying its opportunist schemes. The way forward would be shifting of economic trade ties with other nations as it will maintain balance of world economy and states would be less reliant on China.

Altogether, it is quite evident that China is getting ready for a substantially more assertive global role, taking an advantage from the shortcoming from American lead response to coronavirus, the increased international dependence on China, and the absence of strategy and leadership from other nations.



Vaccine diplomacy

The pandemic has reshaped everything and global politics is no different. With the advent of vaccines, various countries have initiated vaccine drive as an effort to control the crisis. In a situation where vaccine is the only way possible to end the chain of spread, the so called vaccine diplomacy has emerged as a new way through which nations seeks to gain advantage and alter the political environment in their favour, improving their diplomatic relationships, distributing vaccines to favoured countries to fulfill national interest. Leng et al. 2022 argues that “in an age of escalating great power rivalry, overseas vaccination efforts are too often mistaken for charity and pursuing the national interest conflated with playing for short-term geopolitical gain”.

The COVID 19 crisis has altered the ways nations used to project influence. The corona pandemic provided countries platform to build their international image and shore up their influence by offering the world with much needed medical aides and vaccines. COVID-19 vaccine has emerged as a new tool for public diplomacy. The distribution of vaccines around the world has played a key role in nation branding and as an instrument for projecting soft power.

Beijing has taken this opportunity well to advance its interests. The analysis of China’s activities presents that Covid diplomacy has improved its image and helped in strengthen its relationships with nations that sought or already have good relations with China but on the other and it has also led to criticism of China’s heavy handed diplomacy. Lee (2021) argues that “Chinese vaccines are used not only for image repair and for expanding Beijing’s great power ambitions, but also to reinforce and leverage existing soft power programs, and to capitalize on new economic and geopolitical opportunities”. In the opinion of Perthes (2020), “China is now presenting its authoritarian system as superior to democratic models in dealing with such a crisis”.

According to Vannarith, 2021, China has transformed the pandemic into window of opportunity to increase its soft power diplomacy and to exert its leadership and influence. As per the analysis under China power project, China’s Covid diplomacy is based on “political and strategic calculations”. Beijing’s decision to provide medical aid and vaccines has “strings attached” which means that in return China requested them to show gratitude towards China and support its foreign policy goals.

The core of the problem is that when the world needs cooperation and a sense of harmony, nations were fighting for increasing their influence using so called vaccine diplomacy. This is a moral failure. Leng et.al (2022) has even compared vaccine diplomacy with new great game and also concluded that all are playing wrong as there will be no winner in this game. Nations work in their self interest and they fail to realize that international cooperation in times of distress is in favour of every major power national interest. During pandemic, anything less than providing equity access to vaccines would worsen and prolonged the pandemic and hence instability.

India as a reliable partner

India’s covid diplomacy at the time when world is grappled with the worst crisis has enabled India to “emerge as a responsible and reliable international power”. India has started dispatching medicines as gift to neighboring nations like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Seychelles, Mauritius and some African nations to assist them with battling the COVID pandemic. India has also initiated a vaccine program called Vaccine Maitri, a diplomatic mission to supply large scale vaccines to the needy countries. Under this drive, India has supplied vaccines to its immediate neighbors, African countries, and Caribbean countries.



India has taken lead in addressing the call of the pandemic. It has shipped drugs like Hydroxychloroquine to its neighbor on case by case basis and evacuating people in distress (Chaudhury, 2020). According to Taranjit Singh Sandhu, India's ambassador to United States said that India has supplied virus related medicines and equipment to over 100 countries, including United States. The pandemic has caused the world to understand the need for strong and reliable partner, which can withstand vulnerabilities and shocks.

Government response in distress times

It is clear and now visible that outbreaks are costly both in terms of human lives and monetary loss. The outbreaks are also a challenging form of tragedy of commons. It generally refers to a situation in which individual being with access to common resource acts in their own self interest and while doing so, potentially overuse the shared good. This economic theory explains people's propensity to settle on the best choices for their personal circumstance, paying little attention or concern to the negative impact that it may have on others. When it comes to health emergency, common good implies the health of the nation and tragedy is defined by people's self interest. Self interest includes irrational panic, hoarding or profiteering, black marketing, and rumour spreading. Their self interest harms the common good. Here, the role of government is pivot in mitigating the fear generated by these selfish people. What actions a government should take?

- **Transparency and information exchange**

First, transparency is crucial. Transparency begins inside the government, with bidirectional stages of communication and aligned procedure between federal, provincial, and district governments and no piece of information being kept secretly in that hierarchy. With the public, government should decide in favour of transparency by channeling valuable information on various modes of communication. With facts and trust, rumours and panic may be avoidable.

- **Equal importance to scientists as to politicians**

Scientists and researchers should have equivalent stature with government officials and bureaucrats. Governments should feel confident enough to trust the scientists, their work, their research, and outbreak response protocol. During emergency times, government cannot arbitrarily settle on outbreak response or residents freedom of movement depending upon the whims of politicians and bureaucrats alone. Doctors, epidemiologists, and experts in infectious diseases should be consulted as equal decision makers. For outbreak plans and responses to be really effective, scientists and researchers must be equally consulted and should be treated equally.

- **Equitable health facilities**

Government should guarantee that society and health framework remain equitable during crises and emergency times. Government must ensure essential healthcare supplies not to run out. The supplies should be fairly and equally distributed. As those who can afford will have more buying capacity as compared to those who cannot afford. So, government must ensure equal access across socio-economic and geographic groups.

Conclusion

It should be carefully understood that we are living in the inescapable world of microbes and when they start transmitting diseases they will not differentiate between political borders and do not differentiate from where a person belongs, religion a person follows and what ideology they believe in. Neither they do have passport nor can we stop them. They will attack with full force on each one of us without any



discrimination. It is well known that anything that has come will go eventually, same with outbreaks. They have defined beginning and an end.

Governments should take bold decisions when all this is over. Government must spend money and time to develop and modernize country's health infrastructure. Health should become a key element in country's national security. Most important governments must collaborate among themselves to contain the pandemic. Eventually, health and well being is a political choice. The COVID pandemic was clearly a political problem as much as it was a health problem. Politics form the core as to how governments should prepare and respond to crises. Political decisions can improve or worsen an emergency. The current covid-19 pandemic has changed the relationship between market, state and society. While economies collapsed because of the lockdowns, the state and society have acquired new importance in protecting people from the effects of pandemic. Epidemics represent an opportunity for governments to show competence, ability and gain legitimacy. Strong and bold political decisions can save lives, and they should be taken during emergency as well as non emergency times. The change in the structure of the world after pandemic will be decided by the will of leaders and the ability of international political actors to cooperate.

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