Proliferation Of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Critical Analysis Of Us, China And Russian Foreign Policy Behavior

Dr. Shahid Hameed¹, Zahid Mehmood Zahid², Tahir Abbas Sial³

¹Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Women University Bagh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Central Punjab Lahore, Pakistan.

³Senior Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Central Punjab Lahore, Pakistan.

Abstract

This paper explores the effects of the proliferation of COVID-19 on the great power politics and how patterns of cooperation and conflict were shaped. This pandemic increased the power competition between the big three US, China, and Russia. COVID-19 and resultant pandemic politics proved the ‘China Moment’ for China, where it expanded global influence with mask, ventilator, and vaccine diplomacy. America’s aversion to multilateralism under ‘America First’ put a question mark on its status. The type of regime, not the capability factor, played a pivotal role in this eventuality. The paper examines how US inaction during the pandemic presented an opportunity to China to increase its soft power potentials that inflicted a credibility crisis on the USA. Finally, this paper also explains why Putin’s Russia played a ‘geopolitical spoiler’ by going against the international norms, intimidating Europe, and weakening the liberal order.

Keywords: Proliferation of Pandemic, Foreign Policy Behavior, Great Powers Politics, COVID-19

Introduction

Few would have expected that pandemic would act as a gravitational point in affecting global politics. Contrary to high expectations that great powers would move beyond their rivalries and cooperate in this global threat, a complete opposite was witnessed. It, on one hand, provided states with an opportunity to rebuilt their relations with other states; an on the other, aspirants situated themselves in evolving global order. It became a new avenue of contestation between opponents and Washington was not far behind in grabbing this opening to build issue-coalition against the
Chinese. This realization came after a complete absence of US from the pandemic landscape as Trump administration policies were domestic centered. On the other hand, Chinese were more concerned about extending their global outreach and reassuring current friends of their commitment. As pandemic intensified the rivalry between the Chinese and the US, Russians took this as an opportunity and limited capability to re-position itself especially in the areas of its former influence. This study is an attempt to analyze foreign policy of the big three US, China and Russia during the pandemic.

Due to Globalization and technological advancements world witnessed an increase in migrations, international travels and swift transfer of goods across the globe. Consequently, non-traditional security threats like money laundering, cyber security, drug trafficking and smuggling, environmental disorders and food security emerged as preferential part in defining foreign policy behavior of the states. The most sensitive addition in same category that played a vital role in shaping foreign policy behavior of states is inclusion of infectious diseases. Nearly a quarter deaths per year around the world are caused by such diseases (Cecchine & Moore, 2006). In fact, these diseases pose an existential threat to humanity (Davies, 2008) and off course, this high rate of mortality by viral infections increased fear and shaped new threat perceptions in contemporary world.

The issue of infectious disease and its implications on state behavior is not new phenomena. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, viral disease like HIV/AIDS, Ebola, SARS, Bird Flu, Swine Flu (H1N1), H5N1 Avian Influenza, and Congo infections influenced policy thinking and discourses of great powers particularly the US (Monson, 2017). To avoid outbreak of disease, the first step usually states take, is to suspend flight operations, migrations and direct imports, mainly with hotbeds of disease. At times situation becomes more critical, as in 2014 Ebola pandemic many states shut down their borders with Sierra Leone and Liberia considering this act as a 'quarantine’ (Ferrell & Agarwal, 2018). Some scholars consider spread of viral disease as a global security threat and recommend ‘securitization’ of these infections by international institutions and state actors (Davies, 2008).

Globalization has acted as an enabler in spread of the diseases resultantly complicating foreign policy decisions. It has greatly affected states as they wanted to cut off external sources of pandemic for example increasing trends in migrations that has been identified as the primary source in the global spread of these disease (Gushulak & MacPherson, 2004). Ultimately strengthens a view that states do not show a serious attitude towards increasing biological threats unless they cross border of state and harm its own people (Monson, 2017).

Proliferation of pandemic refers to outbreak of zoonotic disease (Dudley, 2004). In late 2019, Corona virus generally known as COVID-19 emerged as an unexpected zoonotic disease and caused thousands of deaths within a few months. World Health Organization (WHO), announced an emergency with the outbreak of COVID-19 (BBC News, 2020) taking a cue from the Chinese which was already experiencing a lockdown. On the other hand, in US, state department
announced a level four alert for US citizens (Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2020). Notwithstanding, whatever may be human loss of life from COVID-19, the political implications of the proliferation of this pandemic are as high as Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Post outbreak of COVID-19 global political landscape rapidly changed; as US, China and Russia found this problem as a test case for their capabilities. It provided an opportunity to divert public attention from shorting-comings at the domestic front.

In order to understand why China and US behaved in a particular manner during the pandemic, it is important to take into account their capability and standing in international structure. Trump’s reluctance on foreign policy while giving preference to domestic policy as populists tend to do left foreign policy in disarray. US adoption of “protectionism at home” led to “protectionism abroad.” Soon US-China were entangled in trade war as both countries retaliated against each other by enforcing tariffs and barriers. Beyond the economics US analyzed Chineses and the Russians as “axis of authoritarianism” while it led the “free world.” US policies pushed EU away from them as is evident from their European Commission Report 2019. This report categorized China as a cooperation partner and one with whom their interests aligned. European Union found US to be an unreliable partner as for the first time EU and US parted ways over outcomes; JCPOA, Tariffs, Russia etc. The Chinese before the pandemic were focused on their flagship project BRI and power projection. Chinese were less concerned about western sensitivities and rejected any western criticism on internal matters such as Uighurs and new security law for Hong Kong. On the other hand, Russia regained its confidence through their economic recovery under Putin allowing Russia to draw red lines manifested in their invasion of Georgia in 2008. Efforts in aimed at preventing NATO’s eastward expansion towards its frontier. This un-challenged confidence encouraged them to play a role in Syrian conflict and the take-over of Crimea.

China’s victory announcement against COVID-19 (Campbell & Doshi, 2020), US assuming it ‘Chinese Virus’ (Euro News, 2020) and Russian ambiguous response with an informational quarantine (Reevell, 2020) can be viewed as political maneuverings on new chess board of great powers contestation. Thus, question arise why China declared a victory against COVID-19 Pandemic whereas, US and the Europe are still in a declared emergency. Second, Why Russia is not interested in integrated global response to COVID-19? And finally, how these developments are shaping foreign policy behavior of US, Russia and China in global power contestation?

**US-China Foreign Policy Behavior in Post-COVID-19 Outbreak**

The COVID-19 outbreak and an unexpected spread of this virus around the world including Europe, Asia and the US, influenced US-China foreign policy behaviors as well. On March 18, 2020, US President Donald Trump labelled COVID-19 a ‘Chinese Virus’ creating a tense political environment with Beijing (Craw, 2020). He tweeted;

“I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the “borders” from China - against the wishes of almost all.
Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false” (Trump, 2020).

In a similar demonizing streak, the US secretary of the state Mike Pompeo referred COVID-19 as ‘Wuhan Virus’ and has been officially responded angrily by Beijing (Craw, 2020). Chinese foreign policy towards US is more “reactive” in conduct. The COVID-19 episode precipitated a new wave of tensions between China and US. Their officials have exchanged heated arguments for instance US accused China of having wolf warrior diplomacy and China accuses US having hooligan diplomacy. China announced its victory against COVID-19 in Wuhan removing lockdown and normalizing routine life (The Guardian, March 2020). In fact, it was a clear message to the world in general and US in particular that China’s capability to meet any such challenge is unmatched. Pandemic provided US an opportunity to take a dig at the Chinese. It was done to externalize responsibility and was also a diversionary tactic to shift focus towards the Chinese as US and its allies were found unprepared to deal with such threats. On the domestic front Pandemic and Trump’s policies of “protectionism” had badly shattered US economy and with 2020 being election year Trump was in-search of a scapegoat which could secure his re-election.

As pandemic hit the US, a new debate of capabilities started and China’s rapid response and recovery from COVID-19 raised new questions about US capabilities to handle growing non-traditional threats. This debate was important in gauging where the top two powers stood in terms of their capabilities. Capabilities to respond to such threats also became an indicator to measure powers of states. Trump’s US was introvert and absent from the global horizon and that presented an opportunity to the Chinese who were happy to fill the void. Not only Chinese reached out to new (states) but also reinvigorated their resolve with the existing ones. This capability debate pushed Trump to reconsider his approach and realizing the sensitivity of the problem, he ultimately announced 2.2 trillion dollars rescue package to meet COVID-19 pandemic (Bowden & Nelson, 2020). Historically US never allocated such huge amount for any infectious disease threat. Initially the Trump administration was considering a lesser bailout package (JOHNSON, 2020) but increased domestic pressure and downfall in increasing US global prestige after China’s victory against COVID-19 became factors behind this extraordinary bailout package.

US maintains highest number of mobile laboratories for surveillance and response system known as Global Emerging Infectious Surveillance (GEIS) (Davies, 2008). These labs are working to estimate and locate potential biological threats and US defense department is responsible in regulating GEIS (Davies, 2008). During such infectious disease, news and media portrayals played a vital role in constructing a directional discourse essentially based on ‘otherization’ (Monson, 2017). Thus, increase in fear inflation through misinformation created by communication sources ultimately introduces hate and charged emotions in foreign policy decision making of the states (Leitenberg, 2005).

US-China global contestation has similar destination but different strategy and foreign policy behavior. COVID-19 seized global economic activities, trade routes, air services, and
transportation and immigration activities fell down collaterally. On the political front, the issue took form of a prestige and power capability test by US and China making global political landscape reactive rather than proactive. US followed policy of “economic embargo” by imposing sanctions on nearly two dozen countries around the globe (Hanania, 2020). Despite having the knowledge of risks associated with geo-politics, both US and China used economy for their geo-political gains. US knows the scale of industrial development of China and the challenge it poses to the global primacy of the US (Kennedy, 2020). Thus, rapid recovery from COVID-19 is poised to increase the Chinese hospital products. Chinese have already captured 43% of the total hospital related products (Chad, 2020) that makes Europe and rest of the world dependent. Currently China has increased its productions with the rising global demand for these products. For example, only ‘masks industry’ observed 12 times increase in demands during COVID-19 spread (Chad, 2020).

**The Chinese Response**

With thousands of deaths and millions infected Europe is facing the worse of the pandemic. At the height of pandemic, the Europeans were looking towards the Americans for help however Americans failed to live up to their expectations. China’s foreign policy towards Europe is also becoming turbulent for Trump administration as Beijing has taken this outbreak as an opportunity. As Europe became epicenter of this disease, China immediately approached 17 Central and Eastern European states for collective efforts to contain this viral infection (Xinhua, 2020). Raising eyebrows of many in Washington. As European question has become an avenue of keeping influence in the region for both contesting players.

Despite having differences on policy issues, China’s relations with Europe are improving day by day (Fabrizi, 2020). In fact, China is now firmly inside Europe (Godement & Vasselier, 2017) and what actually China is pursuing by all means is seeding a new discourse based on emerging influential power (Godement & Vasselier, 2017). Thus, China is converting situations into opportunities either it is Brexit or COVID-19. Chinese soft power projection through the supplies of masks, ventilators and vaccines to the Europe is potentially overwhelming the already existing negative perception about China.

An important tool of Chinese increasing influence in Europe and Asia is its economic diplomacy. In East Europe Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic publicly announced that they were looking towards China and not the EU and UK is the reflection of how China has attracted the Europeans during the Covid crisis (Larsen & Robbie Gramer, 2020). His gesture and emotional expressions calling Xi Jinping not only a friend but also his brother (Larsen & Robbie Gramer, 2020) also predict the future of Sin-Serbian relations in the future. On the other hand, it shows not just the US, their European friends also lack the capabilities to defend themselves in such eventualities.

A new narrative is emerging in European thinking that they should reduce their reliance on the US and look for the ways for foreign policy autonomy-immune from US dictates (Biscop, 2017). This new narrative is actually the result of US non-preferential foreign policy towards Europe under
Trump president Trump who adopted ‘America First’ under the banner of American nationalism (Biscop, 2017). Thus, China’s look towards Europe is not a one-way policy thinking but the European states are reciprocally forging a common future with China and Russia. Though, building these ties will be an uphill task as there are serious incompatibilities of threat perception, value system and future destination (Godement & Vasselier). Consumers of this narrative mostly reside in Eastern and Northern parts of Europe (Conley, 2018).

There is also a realization in Europe that US primacy is facing a downwards spiral. Post COVID-19 and European reciprocal response to China’s cooperative foreign policy behavior confirms new trajectories in Euro-China future particularly in Eastern and Northern parts of Europe as well as in Western Balkans.

“As China’s role in the world becomes ever more significant, especially at a time of diminishing American global leadership, its engagement in the Western Balkans is of particular importance for both the trajectories of economic and political development of the countries themselves” (Vangeli, 2017).

Meanwhile, the Southern-Central part along with Mediterranean coast lines, Italy was worst hit and found no serious help from European Union and/or US. European states abdicated their responsibilities leaving Italy helpless (Braw, 2020). Even US did not appear to help Italy manage that humanitarian crisis and provided space for China to extend its sphere of influence. During the pandemic especially at the start each state was left to fend itself dumping the concept of interdependence and integration. China’s exceptional acknowledgement of seriousness of crisis in Italy and rapid response by providing medical supplies (Al-Jazeera, 2020) will pave new way for future Italy-China relations as Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio publicly acknowledged China’s support on one hand while criticizing European Union (Barigazzi, 2020).

China’s historical experiences to deal with infectious disease also played a vital role in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic. Experience and success gained from the 2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) viral disease China has been using its unique experience to deal with infectious disease as diplomatic tool (Huang, 2010). During this period China experienced a ‘quarantine state’ in international scenario. During SARS period more than 100 countries-imposed restriction on travel to China (Huang, 2010) however an efficient recovery from these SARS in a short period of time build China’s global image to fight with emerging infectious disease. Americans believe that China’s European quest is equipped with ‘sharp power’ concept (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). As China’s sharp power increases, European traditional discourse about China becomes weaker and the new narrative becomes strong that China can play a significant economic and political role in the region. As Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwing argued that as a result of sharp power tactics, Greece and Serbia have a visible change in their foreign policy behavior towards Russia and China (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). In the last few years China has invested significant amounts on media and academia to promote soft edges in Europe and the West (Bandurski, 2019). These investments cover all sectors of life including journalism, film industry,
documentaries and internet sources. The very recent addition in same policy can be traced in China’s health care support to European states during the COVID-19. Domestic manufacturing capacity has already been supported by the government to provide foundations for increasing global demands in all sectors. Thus, China’s capability to meet demands during global emergencies like pandemics crisis situation is matchless. Only Xinjiang Aid program resulted 4400 enrolments of new enterprises with more than one million job opportunities in Xinjiang (Xu, Cave, Leibold, Munro, & Ruser, 2020). On the other hand, Europeans had their own reasons to engage with the Chinese.

The European drift from the US (Rough, 2020) eventually created vacuum that China is ready to fill. France and Germany the two influential European players seem no more willing accept US dictates whom they consider ‘serve American interests only’ (Rough, 2020). This diversion has not evolved all of a sudden but as a response for non-preferential foreign policy towards Europe especially since Trump presidency. The trust deficit was further lowered with Trump’s travel ban which was announced without prior consultation with European counterparts (Onishi, 2020). This change was not limited to governments but is also visible at the societal level as well. For Europeans travel ban on Europe was like equating them with the Chinese (Onishi, 2020);

“We made a life-saving move with early action on China. Now we must take the same action with Europe. We will not delay. I will never hesitate to take any necessary steps to protect the lives, health, and safety of the American people. I will always put the wellbeing of Americans first” (President Trump Remarks, 2020).

US president blamed Europe for spreading ‘corona virus’ in US (President Trump Remarks, 2020). It was first time in post COVID-19 episode that US presented Europe as a threat and acknowledged issues of ‘only America and only American.’ Meanwhile Chinese support to the Europe put Xi-Jinping above Trump in the list of friends (Lee & Rubin, 2020).

Where Does Russia Stand?

Russia is playing most critical and complex politics in contemporary of global politics. Putin’s priority areas are to increase Russian influence include use of ‘military instruments for manipulating, undermining, and weakening opponents (Meister, 2016). As China announced Corona emergency in the country Russia immediately closed its long border with China. Till the mid of March 2020, Russia confirmed fewer cases of COVID-19 that which surprising for rest of the world. On the other hand, Russian’s use of (dis)information campaign against the West in failure to cope with COVID-19 (Emmott, 2020) created an additional challenge for US. However, the two countries engaged in areas of mutual interests as is evident from Trump’s call to Putin. On March 30, 2020 US President Trump in a long telephonic conversation with Russian
counterpart (Kremlin, 2020) wherein both Trump-Putin conversation transcended beyond COVID-19, e.g., energy politics

As Saudi and US relations faltered especially over killing of Jamal Khashoggi, Russians and Saudis found this as an opportunity to come closer (Kaura, 2017). Although, they had serious differences over the question of Bashar Asad and energy quotas as ascribed by OPEC but Khashoggi episode brought a détente between Riyadh and Moscow (Kaura, 2017). US appeared helpless in the wake of global oil crisis and COVID-19 pandemic however, it is the later which raised questions about US capabilities (Egan, 2020).

American oil companies compelled Trump to intervene in Russian-Saudi oil standoff (Puko & Elliott, 2020). Russia is giving in and on the other hand OPEC have also concerns that COVID-19 spread can further reduce global oil demands (Ward, 2020). Some scholar also claim that US oil exports have a common threat for Russia and Saudi Arabia that propelled both sides towards rapprochement (Rumer, 2019) and thus ready to absorb a short-term damage (Shattuck & Gvosdev, 2020). Contrary to the popular the belief that it is Jamal Khashoggi development brought Russia and Saudis together, many believe it was US energy exports which was consider as a common threat for both countries.

“Decision making in both Moscow and Riyadh is opaque, but two developments with far-reaching consequences likely compelled Russia and Saudi Arabia toward a rapprochement. The first of these, longer in the making than the other, was the effect of the shale revolution, which saw the emergence of the United States as a major oil exporter and a resulting oversupply of oil and gas that threatened the economic well-being of major producers and required coordinated efforts to deal with this challenge” (Rumer, 2019).

Russia gains out of this détente and the contestation between Chinese and the US however, Russian gains are short-term. China’s active role in the pandemic serves its long-term interests. While in both cases aggrieved remains the same i.e., America. As a matter of fact, oil war coupled with COVID-19 outbreak may collectively increase global economic uncertainty. As the COVID-19 continues a slowdown in industrial and transportation can impact oil producers but Russia is less likely to be affected by this falling demand. Few Russian oil markets are yet not affected by COVID-19 and reducing oil prices are still bearable for Moscow. According to some reports, Russian oil export to North Korea during 2017 were more than 1.7 million US Dollars and North Korea imports nearly 200,000 to 300,000 tons per year of oil from Russia (The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2018). These figures and the figures of oil export to the Chinese have largely remain unaffected even during the Covid-19, in fact they have increased. The nearest market for
Russian oil consumption is China. In last few years China increased oil import from Russia (Vasquez, 2018) that shows additional space for Russian oil exports. China imports nearly 15% of its crude oil from Russia which is almost 1.6 million barrel per day (US Energy Information Administration, 2020). In 2016 Russian crude oil exports to China surpassed Saudi Arabia that indicates a compensating oil receiving cluster.

Although the large portion of Russian energy exports to the members and OECD and non-OECD may affected due to Covid-19 but Russian response will be reactionary depending on US role in manipulating energy politics for its interests. However, global demand can influence energy prices and in case of decreased demand all exporting countries would be on the losing side but Russian exports to China would be less affected. Russian readiness to bear economic losses is rooted in preservation of prestige (Baev, et al., 2016 & Sim, 2020). The emerging trends in Russian foreign policy trajectory show that Moscow is hiding behind Beijing (Baev, et al., 2016) and this convergence brings it greater leverage in the global politics.

Conclusion:

Foreign policy behavior is not confined to state interests but includes a wide array of intervening variables. In a globalized world states status in international power structure is based on their capability factors such as economic, political and military capabilities that define foreign policy behavior in the presence of domestic and external factors. US is looking for ways to maintain status quo where it has full spectrum dominance over the world in all avenues of socio-political-economic life. China appears to be dissatisfied actor, questioning US overwhelming influence over global institutions, demanding structural reforms, looking for its own stakes, where US has failed to accommodate China and rather labelled it as a ‘revisionist state’ in the international system.
Russia, the third of the great power, appears to have three pronged-strategy grand strategy: intimidation of Europe, weakening of liberal order, and in quest of new markets for its energy and arms exports, making it the ‘geopolitical spoiler’ – as described by many in the Western world.

References


