

New World Order and New India: The Uncertain Geopolitics

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Abstract

Coronavirus has led to the unfolding of a new world order and at the same time, a disintegration of the hitherto new world order with a dream of global integration and global governance as espoused by the then President of the United States (US) George H. W. Bush, after the end of the Cold War. Reeling under the duress of COVID-19, countries all over the world virtually stopped all their business-as-usual interactions inspired by globalization. The rapid pace of movement through international air, water and land routes gradually came to a sudden and a screeching halt, with a period of few weeks between February and March 2020. This article attempts to understand the various facets of emerging geopolitical realities obligated by COVID-19, while situating the history of a New World Order concept. It situates the unique position that India is in vis-à-vis the global pandemic and its capacity of ensuring a healthy and a peaceful world order by abiding to the tenets of “Vashudhaiv Kutumbkam” (the world is one family).

Keywords: Coronavirus, New World Order, Geopolitics, India

Introduction

Contemporary world is a testimony to the ongoing ‘mega-changes’¹ or dramatic disruptions and sweeping developments in social, political, economic, environmental, and technological spaces (Franklin, 2012). These upheavals have one pivotal reason—the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which originated in China

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and within a matter of few weeks engulfed almost the whole world. In other words, an invisible strand of virus has waged a war against all nations of the world. On the one hand, this has forced nations to focus to its domestic constituencies and combating the spread of the virus within their borders, it has also generated debates surrounding a new post-pandemic world order, on the other. Some narratives of countries claiming an edge over the other, some resorting to isolationism and nationalism and others confident on the multilateral school of international order have begun to appear. By discussing the concept of a new world order when it was first announced in 1990, and assessing its 21st century realities, this article discusses how COVID-19 has begun to shape international politics. It also situates India's position amid the COVID-19 and the post-COVID-19 world order.

Post-Cold War New World Order

The optimistic rhetoric of a new world order was first presented by former President of the US, George H.W. Bush. Amid the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (Gulf War I, 1990-91), he addressed a joint session of the US Congress, and outlined his goals of building lasting foundations of a new world order. Interestingly, this speech was made on 9/11 (1990), wherein he called for “a new era-freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony” (Bush, 1990).

The opportunity to fulfil his (American) dream of leading the world towards a new world order came soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, where the US became the *de facto* leader of the free world (Stokes, 2018). Speaking at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in on September 23, 1991, he highlighted that the liberal world had reaped the benefits of free markets with high levels of prosperity, growth, and

happiness as against the centrally planned economies. He sought to delegate the responsibilities upon the United Nations (UN) to offer a new lease of life to institutions of freedom, and to play a crucial role in the quest for a new world order. While he underscored that this process would not entail any US “intention of striving for a *Pax Americana*”, he did mention American engagement and leadership to create a *Pax Universalis* or Universal Peace (Bush, 1991). Therefore, he dismissed any ideas that the post-Cold War period would see the US retreating into isolationism.

Co-founder of the theory of neoliberalism in international relations Joseph Nye Jr cautioned that the above articulation of a new world order was “messy, evolving and not susceptible to simple formulation or manipulation”, where nations of the world were faced with impending uncertain futures. Amid the high ideals of the liberal democratic transnational world order, Nye warned that ‘protectionist pressures’ would increase all over the world (Nye Jr, 1992). The next section discusses the realities of the new world order in the 21st century, which affirms Nye’s caveat, wherein the US itself has begun to tread on the path of nationalism and protectionism.

21st Century New World Order Realities

The post-Cold War thinking of the concept of a new world order rested on the assumption that the world’s major powers would eventually converge towards norms and institutions towards which the world’s major powers would eventually converge. When globalization was at its helm, many believed that economic connectedness, where the virtuous cycle of due to the West-led low-cost manufacturing in the emerging economies would contribute to the development of the latter and simultaneous benefits for the Western companies and consumers (OECD, 2013). Gradually, all the countries of the world would recognize

the benefits of this global interconnectedness and enable a convergence of their goals and reduce the likelihood of international conflicts. However, this has turned to be more of an ideal thinking, where the faith in the mutuality of benefits has dwindled.

The world has already begun to grapple with a geo-economic pattern of wavering of support to globalization by the geopolitical narrative of growing protectionism (World Economic Forum, 2018). Populist and authoritarian and terror networks have diffused across the world and has indicated a movement towards the imminent failure of the post-Cold War liberal international order (Altman, 2007; Passi and Pant, 2018). Growing aspirations of the countries for redressing the past wrongs done unto them (real or perceived), have often been accompanied by nationalist agendas and their projection of themselves as strong states. As a result, several billions of dollars have gone into demonstrating their military might to the world. China, for example, seeks its great rejuvenation to put the country's "century of humiliation" firmly behind it (Griffiths, 2019). It has a deeply embedded desire and aspiration to enhance its role and authority in redefining the priorities, rules, norms, and approaches of the international order and, as such, to undermine the dominance of the West, especially that of the US (Zhenglong, 2015). US President Donald Trump seeks to "make America great again" after decades of being "taken advantage of" in the liberal international order (Trump, 2017; Norloff, 2018).

While the new post-Cold War-US-led, liberal order brought enormous benefits in terms of increasing domestic wealth, but it also increased the country's exposure to foreign competition and contributed to a gradual erosion of its relative economic dominance (Ahmed and Bick, 2017). Trump's "America First" semantics have seemed to suggest that his administration would turn its back on America's crucial role in supporting the international economic and security order, for

which it did strove hard to establish in the years after 1945. This turned out to be true, when he constantly cited the ills of the international institutions, and withdrew the US from multilateral arrangements like the Paris Climate Accord (in 2017), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (in 2017) and United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (in 2018) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the "Iran nuclear deal" (in 2018). He abandoned the US support to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, forced renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into a United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) (in 2018), and expressed resentment with the working of the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO) and the comprehensive UN system.

Looking at how the US had consistently tried to 'integrate' China into the liberal international order and instead generated for itself consequential challenges to its primacy in the world, scholars pointed out the need to revise the American grand strategy vis-a-vis China. Such a strategy must be centered around balancing the rise of Chinese power (Blackwill and Tellis, 2015). Trump has long accused China of engaging in unfair trade practices and for manipulating its currency to reap huge profits from global exports. Throughout his term as the President, we have witnessed growing threats of Sino-US trade war. There are concerns that such dangers could create geopolitical fractures and lead to consolidation of strong-state politics, major power tensions and small-state disruptions in an increasingly disordered world (World Economic Forum, 2018).

The Chinese President Xi Jinping articulated his views on the type of international order that China is pursuing: "a community of common destiny for all mankind" (Jinping, 2017). This concept is established on the assumption that the international society has evolved into a community of common destiny due to the collective challenges faced by humanity. His idea of the community is one

which there are equal partnerships based on equality among all sovereign states, inclusive development through collective policy coordination, universal security through joint actions against global security challenges, and the prospect that transcends all differences and maximizes benefits for all (Jinping, 2017; Limin, 2017).

Chinese actions and its lofty ideals of creating a community of common destiny seems to be poles apart. This is evident from its vigorous maneuvers in finding international partners to support and accept its Belt and Roads Initiative (BRI). The official goals of the BRI include: promotion of an orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; encouraging the countries along the Belt and Road to achieve economic policy coordination and carry out broader and more in-depth regional cooperation at higher standards; and jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015). However, the ambitiousness of some of these plans has raised concerns that they might exacerbate conflicts with partner states. For instance, it runs the old risk of rejection by the recipient countries due to debt traps created, as well as the risk of imperial overstretch for China, adding to the vulnerability of lower-income countries (Sun, 2018). This situation would worsen in the event of deterioration of bilateral relations of these countries with China in the years/decades to come.

BRI's massive scale of expansion amid its bullying demeanour to press for territorial and maritime claims have created concerns of its neighbouring countries like Japan and India (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020; Chakma, 2019). While both countries have spoken against this expansionism at various fora, they have avoided a hedging policy

to bring in other countries like the US, Australia or the European states, which could heighten pre-existing tensions with China.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to focus on transformation of Russia's international status from the wreckage of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin has used his policy in Syria to transpose himself as a leading foreign policy actor, with the ability to shape military outcomes and geopolitical balances. Sino-Russian relations have witnessed a camaraderie and both their rapport with the West, especially the US have deteriorated. Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea was an unabashed violation of recognized norms of non-intervention and respect for the sovereignty of other countries. This led to the imposition of a huge US-EU-led sanctions against individuals and businesses (*BBC News*, 2014).

It is not just the US, China and Russia who are seeking to re-create a new world order, but countries with a nationalistic theme can be seen around the world. For instance, United Kingdom's decision to regain control by exiting the European Union, Japan's nationalism under Shinzo Abe, destruction of pluralism in Turkey as Erdogan deals with his domestic and international opponents, among several others (European Union External Action, 2017).

Countries like Russia, China, and North Korea, have made it a habit to violate the rules and precedents of the existing open liberal international order, and have sought to create a discourse of their own, especially in their immediate neighbourhoods, where they wield considerable influence. With nationalistic fervor running high in these countries, they have compromised respect for global norms and peaceful international interactions over their self-interests. Apart from rogue and failed countries who have committed themselves to disrupting a civilized world order, there are violent non-state actors like radical jihadist groups, most prominently the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Time and again they have succeeded in holding the world order of

rules and peace to a ransom (Lieber, 2018). Thus, the hitherto existing rules-based international law and order has steadily witnessed a decline in terms of its respect as well as in practice by several countries of the world. The next section discusses how the already eroding post-Cold War world order has become intensified with the spread of the coronavirus disease in over 200 countries of the world.

Coronavirus-directed World Order

In real-politik world order is the product of a stable distribution of power among the major states (Nye, 1992). Instead of leading to any such stable global consolidation and coordination, the global spread of coronavirus has led to an abeyance of the concept of internationalism, where each country has closed its borders and is tending to itself. With enormous socio-economic implications and the urgent need to cater to domestic constituencies for alleviating the mass sufferings of the population due to COVID-19, some scholars have suggested that the concept of an international community might cease to exist as each nation is vigorously looking inwards (Narayanan, 2020).

The implications of the virus that “supposedly” began from a wet market in Wuhan, led to the chickens go to roost in almost all countries of the world in varied proportions. It has been argued that closer the proximity and linkages of any country with China in terms of tourism, trade and investment, the greater has been the number of persons infected with the coronavirus (Ghosh, 2020).

Existing international institutional arrangements have never failed in any international crises to such an extent as this. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been under deep criticism for having failed to measure up to the grave challenge posed by the pandemic. Their international reputation has been compromised with charges of bias and for grossly underestimating

the nature of the epidemic, which could have been contained if it had acted on time. Questions have since arisen over whether signals were missed or if the WHO overindulgent with China declared it to be a pandemic only on March 11, 2020. In fact, with over a month into the spread of the disease in China, and oblivion of the inchoate disaster, the WHO director-general on January 28, 2020, Tedros Adhanom, met Chinese President Xi Jinping in China (WHO, 2020). They exchanged pleasantries and maintained obscurity of the lethal nature of the virus which had its origins in that very country.

While he was initially reticent about the severity of the impacts of the virus, Donald Trump's overtures soon changed when the number of cases began to climb in the US. As the country became the epicenter of the infection, he has furiously and unapologetically referred to the coronavirus as the *Chinese* virus (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman, 2020). Embarrassed and provoked by this remark, China retorted with an aggressive propaganda campaign calling coronavirus as a Western anti-China bioweapon (Yuan, 2020). Such war of words and his dissatisfaction with the WHO in being timid, and for downplaying the dangers and in allowing China to promote "disinformation" about the virus that led to a global outbreak, which if acted timely, could have contained the spread and thus its negative impacts around the world led him to put on hold the US funding to the WHO (Mason and Duran, 2020). He maintained that the WHO "must be held accountable" for the "mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic" (Trump, 2020).

In retrospect, the coronavirus has exposed the fault lines in the global institutions and evidenced them to either weak and politically compromised, in the case of the WHO, or all-but-irrelevant, in the case of the UN. It has restored or hardened borders, blocked migration patterns, decentralized power from the international to national and the national to local. And it has incited a renewed great power rivalry, with prospects of an

enduring US-China Cold War amid the already prevailing trade war between them. In all this, international institutions and countries of the world would be the first casualties. Those countries who welcomed the BRI for their economic and infrastructure development have witnessed a standstill with the closure of borders and incomplete work. On the other hand, it continues to flex its muscles in the South China Sea (Mollman, 2020). Such events are testimony of China's indecorous attitude of taking advantage of a situation where the nations of the region are fighting the virus and are wounded by its rampant negative socio-economic fallouts. This is reflective of its complete abhorrence of the accepted civilized norms of global order.

Amid the chaos created by the coronavirus, the US and European countries have begun to look inwards. This could terminate the world order existing since the 1940s. With the weakening of the US economy due to the coronavirus, its capacity and intent to play a critical role in world affairs is certain to diminish. The main beneficiary of this geopolitical turnaround is likely to be China, a country that does not quite believe in playing by the rules of international conduct. Europe, in the short and medium term, will prove incapable of defining and defending its common interests, let alone having any influence in world affairs. Germany, which may still retain some of its present strength, is already turning insular, while both France and a post-Brexit United Kingdom will be out of any position of international influence as of now. Several countries apart from India, such as Australia and Germany, have begun to restrict Chinese foreign direct investment in companies and financial institutions in their countries, recognizing the inherent danger of a possible Chinese hostile takeover of their critical assets. Many countries have announced the re-location or closure of their enterprises in China.

The hitherto liberal world order may be compromised in the post-COVID-19 times where an omnipotent state could become a reality, with liberty being the center of all jeopardy. It is

reflective of a Chinese system writ large. Further, the coronavirus has provoked serious doubts on the benefits of globalization (Douthat, 2020). Unfazed by criticism of misinforming the world about the impending health disaster which originated in its country, it has sought to utilize the opportunity that it has successfully contained and eliminated the virus from its soil. While any such Chinese claims cannot be trusted, yet it has used its manufacturing capability to its geo-economic advantage. It has offered and sent medical aid and COVID-19 related paraphernalia to several countries of the world to enable them to meet their current pandemic threat. In turn, it seeks to gain a geopolitical and geo-economic advantage by this action. It has begun to take advantage of faltering financial capacities of national institutions around the world, amid the scaled-down value of assets. India, for example, received a rude shock when the Peoples' Bank of China acquired a 1% stake in India's HDFC, when the latter's stocks were experiencing a sharp decline (*The Hindu*, 2020). The next section analyses the various facets in which India would likely adjust, adapt, and direct a COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 world order.

India in a COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 World

With China looking out for all options to steal the show in demonstrating its 'concern' to help the world including the South Asian region to combat COVID-19, India is faced with the dilemma on concentrating on providing domestic health infrastructure and a challenge to Prime Minister Modi's SAARC initiative. It faces the prospect of being isolated, with the Beijing winning new friends and contacts across a region deeply impacted by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, there is no room for complacency.

Likewise, India's leverage in West Asia has greatly diminished with its large expatriate community, who are among

the hardest hit by the spread of coronavirus and consequent fall in the oil prices and economic downturn, and have been stranded due to job losses. Many of the latter have either returned or may seek repatriation in the near future, back to the host country. Going ahead it would substantially reduce the inflow of foreign funds to India from the region. Rather, continued efforts at looking beyond immediate horizons will be required to adjust and foresee further changes to the global strategic landscape (Jaishankar, 2019).

With the growing disappointment with Chinese actions, several global companies have announced the winding up of their operations in China. Amid this changing global economic order, India can harness this as an opportunity and undertake appropriate measures to ensure India presents itself as a preferred alternative destination for investment. India's eastern states could be critical and most viable as they have all four factors of business in abundance: namely, human capital, social capital, natural capital and an improving physical capital. This part is relatively less explored and can be the fulcrum of development of the region in the post-COVID world. Whether India will be a net winner or loser depends on the sensitivities of the coefficients of the economic variables, the dynamics of the global order, and the "soft power" that the nation can wield in the international domain (Ghosh, 2020). India's internationally acclaimed virtues of being a peace-loving and a tolerant nation, which reaches out to countries in need be it for health and medical emergencies like the COVID-19, or for disaster relief, or for peacekeeping operations. It has maintained a track record of protecting and preserving the world to the best of its capacities and adhered to its ancient values of *Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam* (the world is one family).

Today India has articulated its desire to be a leading power in the international system without inhibitions, a power that is a rule-maker, not a rule-breaker (unlike China). India has long sought accommodation into the global order as a major power but

has recently been reckoned it as a force which is now a part of the global high table. However, until it is universally recognized and receives its due place in international decision-making institutions like the UN Security Council with equal powers, the post-World War II international system will continue to be challenged by Indian decision-makers. India's pragmatism in diplomatically yet strictly articulating an alternative rational normative framework a rational voice in the international platforms and engagements could be India's unique contribution to upgrade the idea of an emerging multipolar world order, which is more equitable, demand-led, participative framework for global politics, where it has all the potential and capacity to be a key stakeholder in most regional and global changes. India has bright prospects of redefining a new world order in terms of national security, economic priorities, health protocols and systems, compact and self-sufficient supply chains, ecological sustainability etc. It certainly missed out on such leadership when the present post-World War II world-order was established, but with the present leadership, the prospects are promising as the country paces towards becoming a *New India*.

Conclusions

Together with its BRI, and a virtual economic and substantial stranglehold across the world, along with the allegations of coronavirus being a Chinese 'manufactured' virus provides qualitative evidence of a well-planned move by China to prepare the way for a Sino-centric multilateral globalization framework, holding the world to a ransom. But a temporary halt to globalization posited by the COVID-19 does not mean that the liberal order would surrender to a new post-liberal era. Neither would the ideological and institutional globalism disappear. But certainly, in the post-pandemic world order, both liberalism and

globalism may seem more like optimistic utopian ideologies, proven incapable of inspiring hope.

Wary of the global disorder presented by the coronavirus, veteran diplomat Henry Kissinger suggested a three-point formula for the US to deal with the situation. *One*, lead with a new Marshall Plan as a part of the global fight against infectious diseases. *Two*, revive not just the US but a dangerously contracting global economy. *Three*, safeguard principles of the liberal world order, which ensure security, order, economic wellbeing and justice for all (Kissinger, 2020).

Finally, it is important for India to focus on creating a stable and peaceful post-COVID-19 international order because we have all witnessed how in a world of transnational interdependence, international disorder created by an invisible strand of coronavirus can hurt and disturb the world population.

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ⁱ According to *The Economist*, mega-change is “change on a grand scale, happening at remarkable speed.”