

Geopolitics at Play in a Pandemic: An Analysis of COVID-19 Pandemic in International Relations

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease, known as COVID-19 pandemic hit the world at a time when the international system and its balance of power were already showing increasing signs of weakness. With such a panic at play worldwide, we have been witnesses to rising tensions, shrinking trust, and a notable degree of international cooperation fatigue on important matters of mutual concern by nation states. To discuss the type of world the pandemic has occasioned, and will likely leave in its wake, we must rely on theory; all the more so because we are dealing with an unfolding event in whose many aspects are unknown to us. Realist International Relations (IR) theory can offer important insights into the geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. From a realist vantage point, this paper argues that a prognoses about a radical change in world politics due to the crisis are unfounded and tend to be exaggerated. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to reinforce major geopolitical trends that already characterizes the international system-a multipolarity before the outbreak.

Keywords: Coronavirus disease; COVID-19 pandemic; Realism; Geopolitics; International Relations (IR)

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a new viral lung disease, later named COVID-19, broke out in the city of Wuhan, the Hubei Province of China. The origin of the virus is said to be zoonotic and specifically from bats. It is most likely that at the Wuhan market, the SARS-COV-2 virus overcame the interspecies barrier and began to infect people. Originally, the Chinese authorities attempted to hide the outbreak of the epidemic by trying to silence the medical doctor, turned whistleblower, who shortly thereafter, succumbed to the deadly disease. By February 8, 2020, shortly after the start of systematic analysis of the disease, it was reported that 33,738 people were infected, with an initial death toll of 811 in China. With such rapid infections creeping around the globe, particularly, spreading to Italy, Spain, Iran, South Korea and spots all over the world, the COVID-19 epidemic was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO), who pointed to the global threat of the coronavirus. Since this date, China has become the first training ground for fighting the pandemic and has demonstrated to the world the ways and means of combating COVID-19 by applying radical public and health policies,

particularly known as lockdowns on the city of Wuhan and its surroundings. By March 10, the dynamics of the epidemic development in countries within Europe became a global worry compared to China [1]. As of March 16, 2020, COVID-19 was already present in 158 countries around the world, infecting about 170,237 people leaving behind a death toll of about 6,526 people with only 77,788 people recovering from the deadly disease. With such media reports across the globe, economists and scholarly theories have suggested that the impact of coronavirus will send the world economy into recession.

The coronavirus does not recognize borders; it spreads around the world and affects people in the same manner. Nothing stands its way as race, ethnicity, language or religion, body weight, height, power or fame are as irrelevant to it, as an administrative border. But at a time that the world touts itself as "a globalized world" acts multilaterally and witnessing a rush for regional integration schemes by states why are such short term emergencies and long term strategic planning as in the global responses to Ebola virus and HIV/AIDS pandemic, not seen with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? Unpleasantly and unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating such

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weaknesses of the nation state, as cooperation efforts among the states is like finding drinking water in the Saharan desert. Solidarity between nations has become an exception rather than the rule, such that agreements on common challenges have been blocked to the point that, economic protectionism is on the rise and the sharing of medical research, now more important than ever, embryonic [2]. Apart from the economic impact of the coronavirus on the world economy, the attitudinal behavior of nation states to the pandemic tells us the realism of realism in international relations. Realism in international relations is not only alive and well, but is back with a big bang! This school of thought considers states as the primary actors, driven by interests, seeking to maximize security in an uncertain world. A fundamental premise of realism is that states can only rely on their own resources self help, or self preservation to guide states in the international system. Though dominant during the cold war era, realism was largely discarded in the 1990's and early 2000's as belonging to the bygone era. But over the last fifteen years, this theory has made a comeback, due mainly to certain factors like the rise of Russia and China and the tumultuous developments in the middle east in the aftermath of the Arab spring, which has indeed added to the sense of realism's resilience. Does these assertions sound obvious and if so why doesn't it sound obvious that a global problem requires a global solution? To attempt to grapple with something portentous about IR, one needs a theory to either defend the behavior of states during the pandemic, invent a new species of it, or use it as a point of departure for some of the "isms" that should be defended, so as to make sense of the blizzard of information that bombards us daily. More so, the study of IR is best understood as a protracted competition between the realists, liberal and radical traditions [3]. Realism emphasizes the enduring propensity for conflict between states; liberalism identifies several ways to mitigate these conflictive tendencies and the radical tradition describes how the entire system of state relations might be transformed. While this assertion is correct; of course, it seems that whenever a global crisis hits, realism offers the best singular explanatory lenses for analyzing it. It is not only that states remain the central actors, it is also that current national measures at the expense of international cooperation is precisely what realists would expect to happen in times of crisis. International cooperation comes easy in times of harmony but individualism of states during COVID-19 reminds us once more that such cooperation is much harder to come by when it is actually needed [4].

Conceptualizing the study

As a political scientist, theories of International Relations (IR) are usually weapons of choice to try to make some sense of global political and economy dynamics. So what if anything are the impacts of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the international system in general and globalization more specifically? It turns out; they offer very different interpretations to the crisis. Categorically stated, IR theory cannot help solve any of the current medical problems regarding the global spread of the novel coronavirus/COVID-19 disease. However, what IR theories can do, is to offer informed predictions as to how states reacted to the crises and how they can help us to understand

why states reacted the way they did principally in this case *via* realism. As realists would expect, when crises hit, it is not international organizations, not even the World Health Organization (WHO) that countries' citizens turn to in the first instance. For instance, at the onset of the coronavirus, the United Nations was quiet; so were many global organizations like the world trade organization and even regional economic integration schemes like the European union [5]. It was their own respective governments that states' citizens requested, to take the necessary actions to protect them from the threat and to provide for their relief efforts. In the absence of a global authority governing international relations, the nation state is proving once more that it is the main actor in global politics. On the one hand, modern doctrines such as neoliberalism and institutionalism among others, note how international relations have developed into a cooperative system by essence. On the other, realism believes international cooperation is a mere tool, to be used if required, or to be ignored. Realists adopted the notion of states as rational egoists, with inter state affairs necessitating a higher morality of state interests and survivability, which essentially means minimizing risks and maximizing benefits. Nation states do these things with fear, reputability and self interest being the main driver of state action. Accordingly to realists, basic agenda of IR are security issues, thus political and military issues are primary topics and top issues in the hierarchy among the topics they are tasked to manage on the agenda. In such a world, and for all states, maximizing their national interest is the main objective. In order to sustain the state existence, security issues are accepted as high politics while other issues related to commerce, finance, money and health are those of low politics. For realists as noted, power is always the basic means to proffer solutions to a given situation. Therefore, power struggles have inevitably been the central subject of IR. One of the important premise of realism (particularly neo-realism), is the anarchical structure of the international system. There is no central authority to govern the relations among states [6]. In such an international environment, naturally providing security becomes the main concern of states. States have to deal with their own security problems that is called the rule of self help. Since all states behave the same way, no state can attain utmost security; it rather feeds the insecurity for all states known as a security dilemma (or security paradox).

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is always a challenge to understand and explain international relations, owing to the different world views and approaches. This is mainly because there are many ways of studying international relations. First of all, it requires an interdisciplinary and multilevel analysis to explain international phenomena, which may embody conflict, cooperation or both. A realist description of international relations is based on competition among states as major actors pursue their interests, whereas a liberal description concentrates more on harmonious relations of pluralist actors. Theories have grown out of the need to seek regularities and reflect the quest for a grand theory to explain all observed phenomena, which has truly been an overarching and ambitious attempt. Theories of IR borrow

assumptions of each other so to say, and provide feedback for their reconstruction, through the critiques they make against each other [7]. Indeed, no theory explains everything, of course, and realism focuses primarily on the constraining effects of anarchy; the reasons why great powers compete for advantage, and the enduring obstacles to effective cooperation among states. The theory, realism has little to say about interspecies viral transmission, epidemiology, or public health best practices to curb the spread of the coronavirus disease. The realist approach to international relations and foreign policy does not devote much, if any, attention to the issues of potential pandemics like the COVID-19 outbreak either. More so, a realist cannot use the theory here to foretell whether people should start working from home or to social distance while in a church or school. Despite these obvious limitations, realism can still offer useful insights into some of the issues that the new coronavirus outbreak has raised and its impact to globalization, regional economic integration and international outcomes. It is worth remembering for example, that a central event in thucydides' account of the peloponnesian war, is the plague that struck Athens (431-404 BC), and persisted for more than three years. What history revealed in that event is that the plague may have killed about a third of the population of Athens including its prominent leaders such as pericles which had obvious negative effects on Athens's long-term power potential. According to the realist paradigm, the nature of human beings have important result for international relations. For realist scholars, human beings are naturally sinful, interest oriented, egoistic, and aggressive and all the time power seeking in character. In particular, classical realism depends on the opinions of Carr and Morgenthau, and explains the international relations through human nature. Objective laws which dominate human nature must be understood to conceive international outcomes. In other words, as long as these laws are neglected, IR cannot be figured out. Naturally, humans are created with negative evil character and has passion and vanity. Morgenthau and Niebuhr among leading post war realists explain IR with human nature. According to them, just like individuals, states also have negative characters such as interest seeking and aggression. States seek persistently to increase their power and capabilities to the extent that they can take other states under their control [8]. Therefore, in such a structure, war and conflict are normal processes. Once again, as major actors in international outcomes, states' interests and the rivalry they exhibit for getting more powerful is what shapes politics. To realists, Multinational Companies (MNCs) and international organizations are not assumed as actors of international politics, but nation-states. Realists accept states as rational actors; that behave in accordance with certain rules and national interests to realize their objectives and to sustain themselves through national capacity. So, in a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, realism has something to say about the situation we find ourselves, and also reminds us that in emergency situations, as the coronavirus pandemic, states are still the main actors in global politics. Notwithstanding the fact that scholars and pundits suggest that states are becoming less relevant in world affairs and that other actors or social forces, such as NGOs, MNCs, international terrorists groups like ISIS, akayida, global markets, are undermining sovereignty and pushing state

underneath the dustbin of history. But when new dangers arise, human beings look first and foremost to national governments for protection and eventual solutions as in the case of the coronavirus pandemic of 2019.

Unfortunately, realism also reminds us that achieving effective international cooperation on this issue may not be easy, despite the obvious need for it. Realists recognize that cooperation happens all the time, and that norms and institutions can help states cooperate when it is in their interest to do so. But realists also warn that international cooperation is often fragile, either because states fear that others will not abide by their commitments, worry that cooperation will benefit others more than it benefits them, or want to avoid bearing a disproportionate share of the costs. Foreign policy realism also suggest that if the epidemic does not subside quickly or eradicated permanently (as the 2003 SARS epidemic did), it will reinforce the growing trend toward deglobalization that is already underway [9].

DISCUSSION

In the 1990's, the 'drum-beaters' of globalization believed the world was becoming ever-more-tightly connected by trade, travel, global financial integration, the digital revolution, and the apparent superiority of liberal capitalist democracy, and concluded that we'd all get busy getting rich in an increasing flat and borderless world. But the past decade or more has witnessed a steady retreat from that optimistic vision, with more and more people willing to trade efficiency, growth, and openness for the sake of autonomy and the preservation of cherished ways of life. For example in 2016, agitation by a majority of people in the United Kingdom, prompted the brexiteers to exit the European union for the purposes of "taking back control" of their destiny. For realists therefore, this backlash is unsurprising. Placed succinctly by a realist in the person of Kenneth Waltz in his landmark book, "Theory of international politics", nation states "want to "specialize" or (localization), while the international imperative is "take care of thy self". The christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr offered a similar warning in the 1940's, in which he wrote that the development of international commerce, the increased economic interdependence among the nations, and the whole apparatus of a technological civilization, "increases the problems and issues between nations much more rapidly than the intelligence to solve them can be created. Similarly, liberal theorists' have long argued that increasing interdependence between states would be a source of prosperity and an obstacle to international rivalry. By contrast, realists warn that close ties are also a source of vulnerability and a potential cause of conflicts. What Waltz and Niebuhr are saying is that ever-tighter connections between states create as many problems as they solve, sometimes more quickly than we can devise solutions for them [10]. For this reason, states, the critical building blocs of international politics, should try to reduce risks and vulnerabilities by placing limits on their dealing with one another.

An analysis of the geopolitical impact of COVID-19 in IR

Notwithstanding the assertions of Robert Keohane, Joe Nye (1977), and other neo liberal institutionalists that some threats create powerful demands for cooperation as they cannot be resolved by states on their own. The posture of countries from the onset of the coronavirus did not indicate that cooperative attitude, as there was no overarching global consensus on the ways and means to handle the coronavirus pandemic by governments. Borrowing a statement from Waltz's piece in his "Man, the state and war", he avers how, in an anarchical situation like the coronavirus, nation-states had to fend for themselves against the impacts of the disease because there was and still no central coordination [11]. In the past, global public health has generally been more favorable to cooperation than other issue areas, particularly, the gains of working together on the Ebola and HIV/AIDS epidemics in some parts of the world and to avoid future infections and minimize economic disruption globally. In a situation as the coronavirus pandemic, many states, especially those in Africa and Latin American cannot meet the wherewithal to tackle the disease on their own, and few if any, can collect necessary information on the trajectory of the disease all over the world or invest in the novel therapeutics and vaccines that are required to treat the sick to ultimately stop the virus. Such nation-states will have to rely on global integrated supply chains, where they will depend on imports of medical supplies such as masks, pharmaceuticals, and machines from the more advanced countries. In "explaining cooperation under anarchy," such as the coronavirus pandemic, Ken Oye, applies the basic game theory metaphors here to international relations, where he reminds us 'to think horse before we think zebra.' Oye's assertion, in relation to what is happening during this time under COVID-19 pandemic is that if actors cooperate, the most likely situation is a harmony game, where actors have overwhelming incentive to cooperate no matter what others do [12]. If actors do not cooperate, then the situation is more likely to amount to deadlock, where actors have misaligned incentives and strong incentives not to cooperate with each other. In public health, where the costs of inaction are so large, some of these concerns about relative gains should be attenuated. That said, where public goods, such as the vaccine for coronavirus is concerned, there are collective action problems. The hardest being to induce countries to pay for public goods if they can get them for free. Citing Mancus Olson, Todd Sandler, Elinor Ostrom, among others of collective action, there is going to be a problem of collective action provision and free riding, if there is a single, dominant power willing to underwrite public goods the payment of the vaccine. To the extent a dominant power is willing and able to lead in providing public goods, may make other states unwilling to contribute themselves [13].

Scholars of IR have long wondered about the durability of cooperation if there is hegemonic decline. With rising multipolarity in the economic arena, the hegemon could become less willing and able to provide public goods. The rising challenger may not be inclined to do so either. The United States, beset by its own struggles, clearly has no interest for

leadership on the coronavirus. As the New York times noted recently, "this is perhaps the first global crisis in more than a century where no one is even looking to the United States for leadership". While there is, as yet, no indication that the United States wants to play this game, geostrategic competition may also give rise to competitive dynamics between great powers that leads to more public goods provision, variably referred to as "tote board" or "scorecard" diplomacy and "competitive generosity." While China has begun to offer donations and assistance to other countries to combat the COVID-19, pandemic, it is not clear how far such "mask diplomacy" will go after sending donations to about 82 countries on record. In all these dimensions, there is strong believe that after the current pandemic is over, the world should return to normal, albeit in the context of the economic crisis [14]. The international community can mitigate the consequences of COVID-19 only through cooperation and a strengthening of the institutions of multilateralism. There are many examples of how, under quarantine during COVID-19, ordinary people, institutions and others alike have tried to assist each other in the form of food, amenities and reliefs. It is now up to the leaders of the nation states and their policy makers not to end multilateralism. Nevertheless, they should remember that we live in a completely different world, different from the time of the first world war, the "Spanish" pandemic, the great depression, or after our victory in the second world war, whose 75th anniversary we are celebrating [15].

Are there remedies to the coronavirus?

Under COVID-19 preventive measures, such as the social distancing, and stay home, the world is going through what by every measure is a great health, socioeconomic, and political crisis. It is imperative from both a scholarly and policy perspective to ponder over the geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking a look, at least half a decade before the COVID-19 outbreak, the world was characterized by four prominent geopolitical features. The first was the case of the United States of America; its "unipolar moment had passed and the power distribution at the systemic level had shifted from uni to multipolarity [16]. The second period was the post cold war liberal institutional order; which had decayed and as a result, witnessed the loss of much of the functionalities of international institutions [17]. The third period saw how the nation state's role in the economy and protectionist policies had increased. The last, but not the least was the springing up of nationalist far right political movements upon the assumption of office of president trump of the United States and many nation states in Europe; of the exhibition of authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to alter this geopolitical landscape; rather, it will reinforce its four prominent features. The current analysis concludes by arguing that building a new liberal post COVID-19 international order is equally unlikely for the simple reason that the structure of the international system will likely continue to remain multipolar and will be dominated by the security competition between the three great powers-the United States of America, the peoples Republic of China and the socialist Republic of Russia. Unlike the two decades after the end of the cold war, now that power is

distributed in more than two hands, a liberation international order cannot rise [18].

CONCLUSION

There is realism and also realism in international relations. The former is the general idea that people are self-interested, that people run states, and thus self-interest will win out over ideas in a crisis. But the realism that this article talks about is embedded in international relations theory; by this I really mean neorealism. While the actions of nation-states during the coronavirus pandemic, termed COVID-19 was mooted on realism, realism in IR is a different thing altogether. Realists assume not just self-interest, but rationality in decisions they make. They argue that great powers are the most important actors in the international system. They claim the only relevant actors are nation states often viewed as unified black boxes. Therefore, based on such experiences, the only topics that matter to realists in IR are alliance formation in a time of turmoil; which leads to defense strategy, and eventually war initiation when everything fails.

In its path, the coronavirus has been a huge obstacle and a calamity to the world. The choice for the world has been self interest and short term benefit against a cooperative system and long term benefits for the world. Definitely, there will be tension after the coronavirus pandemic is over, where the gains made by multilateral organizations in IR will be sliding back to the “state of anarchy”, in which self interest would stand the only guiding principle. But international organizations have a duty to help countries work together and demonstrate that with shared decisions we will be better off against such an invisible enemy and others to come. Finally, it would be a missed opportunity if nation-states do not use this forced COVID-19 pandemic lessons to refocus on resources-both at domestic and international levels-where humanity needs them, rather than relying on the need to maintain excellent economic indexes. The world will have to recalibrate the very concept of ‘economy’, which should be a tool for the people, rather than the string puller of the whole world. States should, in other worlds put their economies aside and rediscover the power of genuine human relations and of the human family in spite of whatever our so called “economies” tell us. It is becoming clear that even with the actions nation states are taking to mitigate the continuous spread of the coronavirus through social distancing, the acute phase of this emergency is far from over. Indeed, every day of the pandemic marks a new grim milestone and as the virus continues to hit our countries and our people harder than the

day before, we realize that even once the spread of COVID-19 is brought under control-whenver that will be things will not go back to normal as it was before the pandemic. Besides all these, the longer the emergency lasts, the deeper and more permanent the changes will be to all aspects of our social life from now on.

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