
**THE EFFECT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AND THE POSSIBILITY OF GLOBAL POWER SHIFT**

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the paper is to appraise the Effect of COVID 19 Pandemic in the Middle East and the Possibility of Global Power shift. The paper adopts content analysis approach to explore data available for the study and used realist theory for the paper's framework analysis. The paper concludes that regional powers such as Turkey and Iran have in recent years sought to harness the prevailing fragmentation of the global order by asserting leadership role in their respective regions and beyond. For these states, the Covid-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to bolster their regional and global presence. While Saudi Arabia and Israel reliance on US protection eclipsed their prospect of been part of newly emerging regional powers in the region.

Keyword: Covid-19, Power, Pandemic, Order, Region, Shift.

Introduction

The advent of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 brings to fore the ever-known biggest global health crisis in a century as observed by the United Nations Secretary General. According to the International Monetary Fund, since World War II Covid-19 pandemic posed the harshest economic downturn since the Great depression as International trade is projected to fall by 24% in 2020 (Jorge, 2020). Since its identification last December in Wuhan, China, the corona virus (Covid-19) pandemic has spread to 195 countries around the globe infecting as many as 5 million persons and killing over four hundred thousand individuals worldwide. The fast-spreading virus clearly knows no geographic, ethnic, or political boundaries. Like other regions of the world, the Middle East has had its share of reported cases.

As a result of this, world politics has been confronted with an increasingly serious confusion while the desire for global governance have grown, the international order that is supposed to provide this global order governance has fall into dilemma (Hannss, 2018). For instance, since the end of cold-war era in 1991, the United States' unipolar hegemonic moment, the international order it presides over is now threatened as a result of multi-faceted issues and phenomenon which include among others the Covid-19 pandemic while at the same time has been, in part, self-inflicted as the United States engaged in unmanageable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as numerous foreign policy missteps (Duncombe & Dunne, 2018).

According to Fareed (2011:159), the erosion of US predominance and the shift of power 'from the West to the rest' has damaged the authority and effectiveness of the liberal international order championed by the United States couple with the fact that domestic challenges in many Western democracies and the disastrous effects of the international financial crisis of 2008 -2009 have undermined its legitimacy.

Consequently, the present international order has been decisively challenged and is now being superseded by the emergence of many state actors which is unconsolidated but much less robust order that seems likely to complicate the tussle in global governance (Hanns, 2019). In the new international environment, the United States will no longer have the capability to continue to behave the way and manner it used to be as the world's 'benign hegemon power' in the post-covid-19 world politics (Ellis & Hanns, 2020:159).

In casting glances at the Middle East geopolitics and considering the poor political and economic conditions facing the region including the daisy security situation in Iraq, Israel - Palestine status quo, and civil war ravaging Yemen and partly Syria, it is therefore expected that efforts to respond to the variables that the US as superpower is used to will be more hard to achieve. In order words, the Levant countries of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan with exception of Jordan were enmeshed in crises before the Coronavirus outbreak that include regional conflicts, large numbers of refugees, and inadequate public

services.

To this effect, the US dominance is receding and it lacks of willingness to bankroll activities in the international system. Moreover, the election of President Donald Trump further exacerbated the precarious situation upon which the US found itself in, which according to Barry Posen (2018, 20-21) argues that the U.S. grand strategy has now changed from “liberal” to “illiberal” hegemony: a strategy that makes the United States retains its superior economic and military capability and role as security arbiter for most regions of the world, but has chosen to let go the propagation of democracy and its ideals and shy away from many multilateral trade agreements.

But the cracking of the U.S.-led international order has also been aided by the emergence of challengers to the U.S. hegemonic power position, The Covid-19 pandemic has caused immense dislocation to life as we know it. Amid the devastation wrath by the pandemic, include infections and deaths as well as massive economic decline and also the issue of global power shift struggle (Ivo & James, 2018).

Hence, in the events of Covid-19 pandemic, some scholars and practitioners are calling for other viable state actors to step up and do more, and even assume the mantle of leadership that the US is no longer interested to uphold which is why this study aimed to assess particularly in respect to the Middle East region.

Justification for the Study

The Middle East is a region that is historically contagious to external powers influence before the advent of Westphalia in the 16th century. However, certain international events among them the Corona virus (Covid-19) pandemic forced a re-alignment in the global order which has recently begin to re-shape itself in many ways. The outbreak of Corona virus no doubt poses a disastrous threat to global governance, state's influence over others, public health and the world economy thereby created unforeseen conditions that could be both positive and negative.

Crises emanated as a result of Covid-19 raging pandemic hypothesized that political events will mark the departure of US-Western-led order and the shift to multipolar world order in which other emerging global players such as Iran and Turkey will have a greater role in exercising more assertive role in world politics and the Middle East.

Since Covid-19 pandemic created a global unprecedented health, socio-economic and political crisis, the success of its management has become a test for many states with certain countries having the prowess to scale through and as a tool for achieving regional and global support thereby increasing the potentials to entrench their national interest as potential world major players.

To this effect, this study assist in validating the claim that Covid-19 pandemic new challenges in the international system could result to the possibility of experiencing a new global power shift with new emerging powers taking the leads in Middle East politics. The study is expected to chart a new course on the impact of the pandemic at a global proportion with the veracity to influence change in the behaviour of state actors toward each other in the international system.

The study equally provides new areas that requires serious research in respect to the significance of international events such as the Covid-19 pandemic to the conduct of foreign policy. The study no doubt increases the volume of literature on global events and power shift in international relations.

Framework for Analysis: The Realist Perspective

In research of this nature, many theories are available that could give the work a sense of relevance. However, to this study, none is suitable than the Realist perspective (theory). The Realist Theory is a fixed doctrine in international relations with its basic assumption underlying the perpetual existence of conflict among nation states in one form or the other as a result of power interplay. It is therefore evident that a contest for power is going on in the world that cannot be controlled nor regulated by international law, world government or an international organisations. Thus, realism unequivocally accepts as its central assumption, the permanence of the struggle for power (Morgenthau, 1948).

The proponent realists include the classical theorists like Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli while in the 20th century include George Kennan, Hans J. Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger among other. Morgenthau has offered the best exposition of the realist theory of international relations. In his view, international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. When it comes to their nation's aim of foreign policy, power is always the immediate goal and are ready to exercise it at all cost with such political leaders may ultimately seek freedom, security, prosperity or power itself (Holsti, 1967).

However, the theory is criticized on the fact that power is not the only factor that determines states

foreign policy focus because of the existence of other factors that could influence and shape the direction of state's engagement with the international community.

In addition, the relevance of using this theory is that political leaders may define their state's goals in terms of socio-economic or political ideals with the sense that these ideals could materialise to achieve its national interest. States may also attempt to further their realisation through non-political means, such as technical cooperation with other nations or international organisations from non-active player to a more assertive player in international politics. Consequently, whenever states endeavour to realise their goal by means of international politics, they do so by exercising power.

Covid-19 Pandemic and the Middle East Conflicts

The dynamics of conflict prior to Covid-19 pandemic in the Middle East elaborated clear thought among regional powers, other national and international actors. While there was supposed to be a common interests in achieving regional stability yet, the possibility of such feat was marred by the security intrigues of conflicts during pandemic time which could encouraged escalation than cooperation.

Covid-19 pandemic has upset global health security, world economy and intensified great-power rivalry among powerful states. For instance, in Gaza, where the Palestine's healthcare system was weakened as result of blockade by Israel and Egypt, the sector is ill-equipped to tackle infections among the densely populated stripe even though the Health Ministry scrambled experts to halt contagion. However, medical suppliers serving the region told Crisis Group (2020) that there is the risk of short in supply prior to 21st March 2020 when first contact was confirmed.

Against expectation, Covid-19 outbreak failed to aid peaceful resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict viz-a-viz halting illegal Israeli annexation of Palestinian land, demolition of homes, and unjustified Israeli police raids on Palestinian towns like Al-Isawiya, human right abuses through arbitrary arrests, oppressive collective punishment and state-sanctioned settler terrorism against Palestinian farmers (Khalil, 2020). Hence, the joint cooperation in combating Covid-19 apparently was not effective enough to apply to all aspects of life in occupied Palestine (International Crisis Group, 2020).

In another situation, the application of sanctions by the United States' against its perceived enemies highlights its economic power and dominance of the international financial system specifically designed to avoid military options and are tailored to be cost-free for the US. Contrary to the above, there emerged unintended costs to both sides particularly when the sanctions are applied indiscriminately during a global pandemic, its effect knows no limit. This can be the consequence of Donald Trump administration's sanctions on Iran in Covid-19 era. The sanctions by international ramification are adjudged to be illegally imposed on Iran in 2018 in callous disregard for an international agreement reached under the auspices of 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with which Iran was complying and the sanctions impedes Iran's ability to actively mitigate Covid-19.

The resultant spread of the disease negatively impacts the Iran's neighbours and, in a chain reaction, public health throughout the world. In addition to the contagion blowback, the United States suffers drawback in the area of reputation and diplomacy by not taking reasonable steps to allow Iran to better equip itself to fight the pandemic (Fitzpatrick, 2020).

Competitive positioning as they try to create economic momentum likely would not spiral out of control or create heightened tensions. The need for economic growth could even catalyse some long moribund trade relations between countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. With the regional actors in a more constructive posture in ongoing public health efforts, and focused inward on their economies, reduction in proxy engagements in some of the civil war zones will prevail.

With the pandemic scenario, while the situation in Yemen does not condition peace for the time being, yet would likely shift away from a Saudi-Houthi conflict to conflicts among the indigenous actors. The populations of conflict-affected countries whether those in war or suffering its after-effects are likely to be especially vulnerable to outbreaks of disease. In many cases, war or prolonged unrest, especially when compounded by mismanagement, corruption or foreign sanctions have left national health systems profoundly ill-prepared for Covid-19.

Syria would likely move to a different phase of its war as proxy involvement by Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, and Russia might lessen, but ISIS could take advantage and launch an assault on the central governments in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, further threatening the stability of already weakened and unstable countries. Overall, in the conditions envisioned in this scenario, civil wars would persist but in a new phase with the regional powers' retrenchment.

Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and other regional powers could not afford an open confrontation with one another as attempting so would put their struggling economies at risk of stagnant which may affect

the region, international trade, and other essentials of their economic recovery to the detriment. At the same time, they would have no incentive to devote energy and collaboration to increase unrest in fragile states such as Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Consequently, the pandemic will accelerate the shift in the global balance of power from the West to the East.

In other words, the negative effect of the pandemic on the developed economies of Europe and the US may persist for a while as the emergency fiscal and monetary measures they put in place to support businesses and households will be hard to reverse with risk that many of these interventions will not materialise, raising the chances of sovereign debt crises in the medium term as in times of crisis which could exacerbate regional and global competition.

The Coronavirus crisis has led to a further deterioration in the already precarious relations between China and the US. As things stand, there seems little prospect that the damage can be repaired in the short term. The pandemic will exacerbate long-standing US-China frictions, undermining any stability that might have been achieved as a result of the unrealistic trade deal signed in January. Even in the midst of the coronavirus epidemic, tensions have flared and sabre-rattling has increased between China and the US in the South China Sea. Even though, the coronavirus pandemic is not the cause of the difficulties in US-China relations, however; it is exacerbating trends that have existed for years as both countries compete for global dominance (The Economist, 20th April 2017).

Moreover, it seems that the crisis will puncture the development of clearly demarcated Chinese spheres of influence in parts of Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and South-east Asia. China now has an opportunity to expand its influence by providing expertise and support to countries hard hit by the pandemic (Wong & Paul, 2020). It is not inconceivable, for instance, that China could launch a medical Belt and Road Initiative in some African countries, both to bolster its reputation on the global stage and to protect its investments there. Some of these places will become arenas for the playing out of great power rivalries and conflicts.

The 'America First' policy of Donald Trump, the US president, had arguably led to a dwindling of US power globally, as many countries increasingly feel that the US is not a reliable, trustworthy partner. In addition, the US retreat from the world stage has given China an opportunity to fill certain vacuums, particularly as the pandemic forced the US to turn inwards presently. It would be an error of judgement to underestimate the power and leadership of the US, which is certainly aware of China's intentions and is likely to fight back. Globally, there is a race to develop a vaccine which may turn out to be a sphere for potential collaboration between China and the US, but it could also be another means by which one or the other asserts its influence.

The failure to mobilise a pan-European response to the crisis and the tendency of member states to look after their own citizens has dealt a blow to the EU as member states did not act in concert when the crisis erupted in Europe, but unilaterally, closing borders, suspending free movement and stopping transport links without co-ordination. The lack of pan-European solidarity was striking, as Italy's appeal for assistance was initially ignored by other European states, which also blocked exports of medical supplies and equipment, allowing China to step in to offer help and therefore bolster its global influence (Nicholas & Tracey, 2020).

The EU belatedly offered more assistance to struggling member states and to aspirant member states in the western Balkans, but the damage had already been done as resentment is expected to grow. As the crisis spread across the continent, festering divisions within the bloc between North and South, East and West and so on, came to the fore. Coming after the sovereign debt crisis, the migrant crisis and Brexit, the Coronavirus crisis will further damage the EU.

On the whole, while the region likely would not be fully stabilized in terms of conflict mitigation, we could expect at least an unstable equilibrium. Many might fear that unrest would further destabilize already weakened governments and put effective public health and economic relief measures at risk. The resulting relative calm among most populations region-wide would help give government much-needed breathing room. Pressing short-term interests in cooperating on the health response, particularly among Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, could produce modest spill-over effects onto other issues requiring cooperation. These could include some winding down of proxy roles in Yemen and stabilizing the tense situation in Iraq.

Also, in this scenario we could finally see resolution to the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. While rivalry certainly would persist between these regional actors on a range of issues, the tenor of the relationships could be expected to evolve into something less dangerous. And if the worst infection and death outcomes were avoided, as the relatively collaborative health response would suggest, there would be less of a tendency for governments to play the blame game.

A chances of conflict incidence between the regional rivals also would be reinforced by a desire to begin reviving their affected economies and would be more focused on revitalizing their economies than maintaining legacy animosities with their neighbours.

Covid-19 and the Possible Reconfiguration of Global Power

Emphasizing on the possibility of a global power shift based on the present international events, Dr. Andreas Krieg, a strategic risk consultant working for government and commercial clients in the Middle East, made the following inputs that: "...the covid-19 pandemic is part of a new strategy to focus to the Middle East as the US and Europe are forced by the pandemic to relinquish more hard and soft power globally." The above elaboration cannot be seen to be restricted to the Middle East politics alone. The current pandemic which metamorphosed into a global economic and health crisis has greatly weakened the "powerful" status of US/Western states which emerged as result of colonialism and imperialism (Acharya, 2017:271-85). Therefore, many events pointed to the direction of possible reconfiguration of global power at the time being.

For instance, when the covid-19 takes its heavy toll in Italy, there was near absence or to some extent minimal assistance from fellow EU members. Tensions with Italy reached its peak when Head of the European Commission, Ursula Gertrud von der Leyen forwarded an official apology to Italy for the EU' poor response. In response, in early April, 2020 the less economically powerful EU member-states that include Italy, Spain and France conceived the notion of issuing joint bonds, tagged 'Corona-Bonds' in order to shoulder the economic burden posed by Covid-19. However, the idea was *quickly rejected* by economically buoyant EU members such as Austria, Netherlands, Germany and Finland (Ishaan, 1st April 2020).

In March 2020, Philippe Legrain, former economic adviser to the President of the European Commission, wrote in the *Brussel Times*, that "a corona joint bond would provide a secured asset for European and international investors, give the Eurozone greater geopolitical reach and provide immense protection against President Donald Trump's abuse of US dollar dominance for political ends that are detriment to EU economic well-being" (The Brussels Times, 30th November 2020).

Legrain's perspective is an indicator that there is strong divergence in geopolitical and economic vision among the West's ruling elites, but a growing agreement that US hegemony is in decline and other Western powers should carve a place for themselves in the world taking this reality into consideration.

Christopher Phillips, Deputy Dean of International Relations at the University of London, emphasize that "the US, like other Western democratic governments, looks set for a period of internal focus once the pandemic passes". In the [same vein](#), Phillips further argues that "it seems equally plausible that in the vacuum, states and other players, including the US, will continue to view the Middle East region as an arena for competition, subjecting it to more crisis and division. The post-US Middle East that Covid-19 could usher in, may prove no more stable than it was under Washington's failed bid for dominance" (Christopher, 21st April 2020).

While Phillips' perception is plausible, his narrative including that of many Western observers discard the fact that in order to create a new political structure in the Middle East, it will require the doing way with US era established order. Thus, the instability that might engulf the Middle East as a result of US/NATO's soft and hard power diminishes, will be a necessary discomfort in order to establish more people-centred governing systems within the region's religious and cultural paradigm. To others, the only way to make the post-US period in the Middle East region peaceful is to hope that a genuine and credible leadership emerges from among the people of the region which will have the political-will to take risks for positive development in all ramifications.

While critics ignore the experience of Iran and point to some of its administrative and managerial flaws, the reality is that it is the only power in the region that has managed to build a governing system independent of Western powers (*Iqbal*, Sha'ban 07, 1441). Thus, naturally the post-US drive for a new regional order could be Iran- and Islam-centred. Whether it is the resurgence of Muslim Brotherhood, the AKP- modelled Muslim governance or even of secular nationalists as exemplified in Turkey, whatever kind of new models emerges in the region will have to cooperate with Iran for the success of the new regional order.

In most scenarios, the relationships between the major emerging regional powers Iran and Turkey are pivotal. These relationships are a primary hinge determining not only how the region as a whole trends toward stability or conflict, but also the success of addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. The level of cooperation or hostility between these new powers also drives the civil wars in the region to either more or less intensity. The United States is putting in pressure in its effort to squeeze Iran,

while ignoring the excess of Saudi Arabia and Israel. This runs the risk of inflaming rather than dousing regional power squabbles (Ross & Paul, 2017). This is one of the factors undermining the response to Covid-19 in the region.

It is envisaged that a conflictual or self-interested response to the pandemic will in turn further fuel conflict in the vicious circle. While it is important to maintain U.S. alliances in the region for the time being, there needs to be a serious willingness in Washington's and other powers' foreign policies to soften their stance in difference. Deployment of pressure tactics against Iran with no diplomatic pathway runs a risk of reinforcing dangerous Iranian and Saudi and Israeli behaviour, and increasing the risk of negative Covid-19 outcomes in the region (Steven & Ross, 2020).

Conclusion

Regional powers such as Turkey and Iran and others have in recent years sought to harness the prevailing fragmentation of the global order by asserting leadership role in their respective regions and beyond. For some of these states, the Covid-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to bolster their regional and global presence. While Saudi Arabia and Israel reliance on US protection eclipsed their prospect of been part of newly emerging regional powers.

While Russia and China have sent medical aid to Italy against the Covid-19 onslaught ignoring European Union and other traditional allies' reluctance to assist the country. The two countries willingly announced their intention to send medical supplies to the United States.

Even though at the same period, some of these regional players were also battling with the Covid-19 crisis which might have shortened their capacity to extend their influence within the given time frame as the pandemic accelerated the fragmentation and re-alignment of the global order, to the benefit of other powers such as China, and Russia, and potentially the likes of Iran and Turkey.

While presently, agreement reached about the possible means to address socio-economic, political and health aspects of the Covid-19 crisis specifically in the Middle East, yet many international relation scholars, experts, analysts and state men agrees that the global order is heading towards dramatic changes in the post-coronavirus period. In the past two decades, US engagement in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and indirectly in Iran, Pakistan and Yemen show that it is incapable of achieving its national objectives as a world super power.

This was more evident recently when Russia and China vetoed the US sponsored resolution against Iran with both China and Russia equally vetoed Britain and France resolution that could have allowed the use of force in Syria in 2014.

Consequently, with the emergence of powerful alliance between the emerging Middle East powers Turkey and Iran with China and Russia, the global landscape is experiencing serious fundamental change which may force Saudi Arabia and state of Israel in the Middle East to rethink their policies, considering the fact that they cannot perpetually rely on US as usual. This is a major shift in global politics that is attributed to the confusion created by coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has also failed to bring about an end to the raging conflict such as the ones in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and the intractable Arab/Israeli crisis.

Taking into account the hostilities between the United States and Iran, also translate into crisis in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, countries with weak governments, restive populations and Covid-19 pandemic, foreign policy that encourages cooperation among the regional powers may be beyond the proclivities of at least some present leaders. But to avoid the worst scenarios and make the future to be optimistic, it is essential for the emerging states to avoid further polarizing the already fragile political situation in the Middle East and beyond.

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