
Challenges and Opportunities for India in the wake of Covid-19 Pandemic: From Geopolitical Point of View

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In the recent history, humanity is facing unprecedented never before health crisis posed by the growing Covid-19 pandemic. It is not only a public health crisis, but also a humanitarian crisis in the making. Covid-19 has increasingly exposed the weakness of public health governance systems whether of super powers or smaller nations of the world. The pandemic has shattered lives and livelihoods of people. It has weakened the foundation of relations among nations. Moreover, multilateral international institutions and democratic governance principles appears to be in crisis amidst corona virus pandemic. On the one, Covid-19 outbreak has predominates the global discourses, on the other hands, it has heightened the geopolitical contest between super powers. In fact, the Covid-19 pandemic has unfolded unspeakable miseries and challenges for each and every nation in every aspect of lives leaving very little scope of opportunity to tackle the crisis. As new challenges from the coronavirus continue to emerge India must reinvent itself to survive in the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Nevertheless, India must ramp up its public health care system in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic and as we all have to live with the virus so it must redesigned the financial architecture, and governance policies to cope itself with the fast changing geopolitical world order.

Earlier the world has seen a host of outbreak of viruses such as Swine flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola and Zika etc. The Covid-19-Corona virus Dieses of 19 which is also known as Novel corona virus spreads via respiratory droplets that are produced when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes. The droplets are supposed to travel no further than 6 feet distance and small droplets remain suspended in the air for 30 minutes while large droplets fall on the nearby surfaces. Thus, it can kill healthy adults in addition to elderly people with existing health problem. In fact, Covid-19 is very harder to contain than the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-1) of 2003, which were spreads much less and affected only 8000 thousand people worldwide and spreads only by symptomatic people. However, the SARS-CoV2 virus that causes Covid-19 first spotted in the Wuhan city of China's Hubei province in December last. In fact, China has stalled for at least

two weeks more on providing the WHO with detailed data on patients and cases. So delay response of the outbreak of Covid-19 from China has infuriated international communities. However, the novel corona virus has claimed over 5 Lakh lives and infected more than 11 million people, and spreading across 189 countries of the globe. The Director-General of WHO declared the virus a pandemic on March 11, said it was deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity of the outbreak.

Lack of Coordinated Response from Super Powers, Multilateral Institutions and India's Leverage:-

It has been learned from the past that cooperation and coordination among nations are very useful in dealing with global crisis. Here World's two super powers are engaged in ugly spat over Covid-19 instead of taking global responsibility. The pandemic crisis has seriously diminished America's credibility globally as the superpower always pushes its own America First Agenda. On the other hand, Beijing has become less likely to join International Community in tackling global problems. Owing to the Covid-19, China is facing global scrutiny from West and also from larger Asian countries as well. Undoubtedly, the US is the single biggest contributor of funds to the WHO. The United States of America gives 400 million dollars each year to the WHO. President Donald Trump has blocked funding to the WHO for colluding with China in keeping the Covid-19 facts hidden. So US claim that China must be held accountable for its cover-up of Covid-19 that allowed it to spread all over the world. However, China's counterproductive policies toward its neighbours and the United States are reactive and conservative rather than assertive. China's posture as a global power and its phenomenal economic growth has become major worry for the US. The intension of the US is not to allow China as a power or dominant forces in the Asian region, or Asia-Pacific or anywhere else of the world. The ongoing trade war between the two major powers and the recent Covid-19 pandemic has further deteriorated their relations. By its global nature, as a multilateral organization, the WHO has a constructive role to play in fight against Covid-19, particularly in countries that are currently being hit badly. Developing

countries need immediate support from the WHO and other to build up their public health systems. Moreover, most of the lower-income and middle-income countries requires technical and financial support to successfully respond to Covid-19 crisis.

The G-20 countries should come forward to support the UN's appeal to protect refugees and displaced persons and other vulnerable people who rely on humanitarian aid. India being a member of G-20 nations has a very positive role to play in fight against the corona virus given its population sizes and community health care facilities. India must stress on cooperation among the G-20 nations to support the developing nations in their fight against the Covid-19.

Due to Covid-19 outbreak, the European Union member states had closed their national borders and even stopped supply of medical equipments within its member countries. Most of the EU nations were badly hit by the corona virus, yet Germany, France, and Spain did better than Italy in containing the spread. Undoubtedly, India has very good relations with the European Union, and India should exploit the opportunities by cooperating with the EU to act together to overcome the impact of Covid-19 and by fostering research in innovation and coming up with coordinated response to deal with the economic consequences of the crisis.³ The EU is coordinating International Initiatives under the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Diseases Preparedness (GLOPID-R), which brings together 29 funding bodies including ICMR and WHO.⁴ In the wake of the Covid-19, members of the European parliaments and experts have expressed their belief that India is an alternative to China amid US-China trade tensions.

The UN has been strongly criticized for its inaction and lack of leadership in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and its failure to adopt even a single resolution on the global health and humanitarian crisis caused by the outbreak that has wrecked havoc across the world. In March, the UN lunches new report, 'Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of covid-19', in which it describes the speed and scale of the outbreak, the security of cases and the societal and economic disruption of the outbreak. Nevertheless, the UNSC, after nearly three months of differences and negotiations unanimously adopted the first Covid-19 related resolution, calling upon all parties to armed conflicts to engage immediately in a durable humanitarian pause for at least 90 consecutive days, in order to enable the 'safe, unhindered and sustained delivery of humanitarian assistance, provisions of related services by impartial

humanitarian actors', and medical evacuations.⁵ The resolution came after months of negotiations as the rifts between the US and China- Council's two permanent veto members hindered the attempts to adopt a resolution. This has left the UN rather helpless in its struggle to find a resolution to the global crisis.

In conflict zones, detention camps, refugee camps needs rapid action plans with isolation measures, hygiene improvement and supply of clean water, soaps and protective equipments. In Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Lebanon, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and in Mexico are facing health care problems. These developing countries need immediate support from the UN and WHO and other multilateral organizations to build up their health care systems. For years India has been working closely with the so called G-4 group, with Brazil, Japan, and Germany, to bring for structural reforms of the UNSC and sought the permanent membership as well. Recently, India has been overwhelmingly elected for 8th time as a non-permanent member of the powerful UN Security Council for a two-year term.

From the geopolitical point of view it would leverage India's power and position in global world order. India should utilize its 'soft power diplomacy' by providing health care equipments, medical supplies, and financial aid to the Sub-Saharan nations. India and Africa have a long-term cooperation in the field of health. India has been providing medicines and vaccines to African nations at affordable rate and in future India will continue to help African countries in their fight against coronavirus.

India's broader accommodation with US, Japan and Australia: - Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has stepped up its aggressive foreign policy towards India. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has built up several military and logistic facilities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh and intruded into Indian territory of Pangong Tso area. Here Chinese troops have occupied 8 km of Indian Territory between Finger 4 and finger 8. That leads to an unprecedented violent standoff with Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley where twenty brave Indian soldiers lost their lives. However, India immediately positioned itself and urged Chinese troops to disengaged and restore status quo along the LAC. The US President has condemned China's expansionist strategies. It is quite evident, whether it was the Covid-19 pandemic or the Indo-China border faceoff in Galwan valley of Ladakh, the United States of America would continue to stand behind India as both nations have very good cordial relationship. Indeed, New Delhi has

been extensively benefited by the US military help. With the outbreak of coronavirus India is supplying massive quantities of hydroxychloroquine to US and in return US also supplies essential medical equipments and ventilators to India. The Indo-US science technology Forum has always been instrumental in promoting excellence in science, technology and innovation through collaborative activities. Moreover, both countries are working together and engaged in medical research race to find out a vaccine for coronavirus. Most importantly, the US has a continued military presence in South East Asia long before. In the Asia-Pacific region US, India, Japan and Australia have formed the 'Quad' to counter the Chinese hegemony in the region.

Moreover, relation between India and Japan goes back to centuries. The rises of China in the Asia-Pacific region have forced both countries to club together and counter the growing Chinese dominance in the region. Japan had openly backed India in its border standoff with China, saying it oppose any unilateral attempt to change the status quo on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). So far coronavirus is concerned; Japan is also reels under the crisis. Though Japan has been criticized for slow respond to the epidemic yet the country with its robust health care system would able to contain the virus. It is an opportunity for India to work together with Japan in medical science and research in bringing out new vaccine or medicines to fight against the coronavirus.

Renewed Strategic relations with South Asian Nations: - The strategic significance of South East Asia to India's foreign policy is paramount. Undoubtedly, India position itself as a major power in Asia and to assert that consciously, India perused 'Look East' policy since 1991 to engage the countries of Southeast Asia as well as Northeast Asia. Under the Prime Minister of Narendra Modi, India's 'Act East' policies has given a new impetus to the Indo-Pacific strategies. India has very good long relations with major Asian nations like Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei and Taiwan and these countries have conflicts with China over the South China Sea and East China Sea. Now the ASEAN countries realized that China is an aggressor on land and sea and it should follow International conventions. Nevertheless, the recent Indo-China faceoff in the Galwan Valley of Ladakh region is a major shift in Asian geopolitics. Furthermore, New Delhi would be compelled to look beyond China and must focus much more on Taiwan and strengthened its ties with Mongolia and Vietnam. So far Covid-19 is concerned small countries of South Asia like Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea have quickly and effectively contained the spread of virus by rapid testing, isolation and contact tracing

measures. It is quite evident that India's immediate neighborhood nations like Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are being offered huge financial aids by China. Recently, India-Nepal relation has been strained just because of the border disputes. Nepal has raised objections to the road to Lipu Lekh Pass constructed by India. Recently, the Nepalese Parliament has unanimously passed a Constitutional Amendment Bill claiming Lipu Lekh Pass and Kala Pani and Limpiyadhura as part of the country.⁷ However, China has gained considerable influence in Nepal and that is a major worry for India. India must extend all possible financial help and other supports to Nepal to win her back for its security and restoration of balance in the Asian geopolitics.

India should take a cue from the South Asian nation's crisis management mechanism; in return, New Delhi must extend economic, technological and medical expertise to South Asian countries.

Covid-19 and BRICS, Advantage India: - India, Brazil and Russia are the worst Covid-19 affected countries in the world. Interestingly, within BRICS, China does not enjoy trust of other members. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China has witnessed criticism from International communities and from BRICS nations like Brazil and India as well. Moreover, African people have faced racial discriminations in China during the Covid-19 that has not gone down well for South Africa. Russia is not supporting China in international forums. Given their vast economies and populations, the BRICS nations do not share a common vision of world order. However, the Covid-19 pandemic appears to be a great advantage for India to bring Brazil, Russia and South Africa together into the board and to help the poor and vulnerable people of Africa and Latin America by supplying essential medical equipments.

India's Domestic factors and Health Care and Economic Challenges: - India's response to Covid-19 pandemic is rapid and decisive. It was very quick in its response to the WHO guidelines and strictly adhered to health care measures. The Director of WHO keeping in view of the Covid-19 situation in India said that it could be an opportunity for India to speed up the health insurance scheme Ayushman Bharat, especially with focus on primary health care.⁸ As per the government India, the Ayushman Bharat health Scheme has already been benefited one crore Indian families. And this scheme aims to cover more than 500 million beneficiaries and provide coverage of 5 lakhs per family per year. Before the outbreak of the Coronavirus India does not manufacture personal protective equipments (PPE), and N-95 masks. Today India produces two lakhs

PPEs and two lakhs N-95 masks in a day. To make rural India a part of the growth story, MGNREGA scheme must be extended to every villages of India. Generally, lack of employment opportunities in villages force workers to migrate urban cities leaving behind their family in villages. Nevertheless, for millions of people, to escape from abject poverty, the cities offered the opportunity of jobs that did not exist in their home district. Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, the government of India on March 25, suddenly put the panic button and clamped the most stringent lockdown in the world to contain the spread of virus. As a consequence economic activities, domestic and travel bans and curbs on individual mobility followed by night curfews within a short notices of four hours unleashed an economic crisis as well as the worst humanitarian crisis that India has never witnessed unfolded. Thus, the sudden lockdown ravaged the economy and ruined the livelihoods of millions of Indians- roughly one out of four Indians lost their jobs in March and April. According, to the 2011 census, there were 45.58 crore migrants in India who had migrated to different cities across India in search of jobs. And just three states of India that is Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan constitute 53% of the migrant laborers.⁹ Arguably, substantial portions of the migrant laborers are from dalita and Adivasis communities. As India announced a 21 days lockdown to combat coronavirus, lakh of migrant workers were rendered jobless and homeless in several states they were working. While Indian railways stopped all passenger trains, all forms of public transport were stopped, and inter-state borders blocked, thousands of hungry, jobless migrant workers steps out to walk thousand miles on Indian scorching highways.

From 1st may, the government announced Shramik special trains, which soon sparked complains of poor scheduling, mismanagement, payments for ticket and long hour journey without food or water. With the commencement of the 3rd lockdown the government has tried to ease some guidelines and lifted restrictions in green and orange zones just speed up economic activities. The Prime Minister of India has categorically claimed that India will turn this Covid-19 crisis into an opportunity. It has taught India to be self-reliant. The Prime Minister of India announced Rs 21 Lakh crore special economic packages for self-reliant India (Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan) to help the country tide over the corona virus crisis. Later the Finance Minister of India announced several measures for MSMEs, street vendors, migrant labourers, and farmers, while also announcing liberalization and reform in sectors such

as coal, minerals, defense production, air space management, airports etc. major reforms were roll out for the agriculture and allied sectors too with the aim to strengthen the sector which employs about 60 percent of India's population.

However, India should fasten the supply chains systems, boosts up its manufacturing and services sectors and must adopt ease of doing business principles that could invite and encourage foreign direct investments. In India, millions of people live in slums in an unhygienic condition without access to water, soap and toilets. And in this case it would be a major challenge for the government to adhere the basic principles of Physical distancing. For India, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is an opportunity and it would be instrumental in bringing health care awareness and hygiene campaign to the centre-stage. It would be prudent to engage community based health care worker and Anganwadi workers to educate people about hygiene and best health care practices.

In fact, the coronavirus crisis has shown vulnerability of the global health system and India is not at all exceptional. The government of India is adopting several policies to address the immediate economic fallout of Covid-19, by providing economic packages, stimulus and investments in public health care system and infrastructures. Coronavirus is a wakeup call for India to build an effective and well coordinated mechanism that could be well equipped to address the growing challenges in coming years. The Indian growth story requires domestic policy reform, rebuilding of public health care system and welfare services that would be the key imperatives for its geopolitical leverage.

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