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GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS IN THE POST-COVID WORLD: THE RISE OF CHINA AND THE CHALLENGE TO WESTERN HEGEMONY

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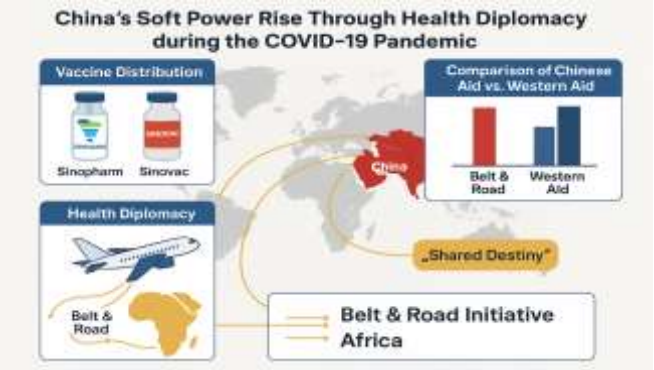
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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed a fundamental transformation in global power dynamics, challenging the longstanding hegemony of the West and accelerating the rise of China. This article explores the structural shifts in international relations (IR) theory and practice post-COVID-19, examining China's strategic leverage, Western vulnerabilities, and the reconfiguration of global governance. Drawing upon interdisciplinary and geopolitical analyses, the study investigates the emerging multipolar world order and the implications of China's ascendancy for liberal internationalism.



INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, in addition to being an unprecedented global health crisis, served as a geopolitical accelerator, revealing hidden vulnerabilities and hastening long-term global transformations. Western liberal democracies, particularly the United States and most of Europe, grappled with patchy pandemic management, overburdened health systems, and economic downturns. These mishaps shed light on systemic gaps in governance, political unity, and readiness (Mishra, 2020; Anisin, 2021; OECD, 2021). Conversely, China leveraged its centralized political machinery and technocratic rule to rapidly impose containment policies and mobilize colossal public health infrastructure. In doing so, China aimed not merely to contain a domestic crisis but to demonstrate authoritarian strength, thus undermining liberal democratic normative hegemony (Gill, 2020; Gauttam, Singh & Kaur, 2020).

Theoretical Framework and Post-COVID Geopolitics

The pandemic has necessitated a critical re-examination of International Relations (IR) theory. Realists contend that the worldwide rush for vaccines, medical equipment, and border restrictions confirms the state's centrality and national interest. The United States-China rivalry illustrates a power transition dynamic, in keeping with offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2020; Duran, 2020). Realists point out that under conditions of crisis, states fall back on self-help mechanisms, thus enhancing sovereignty.

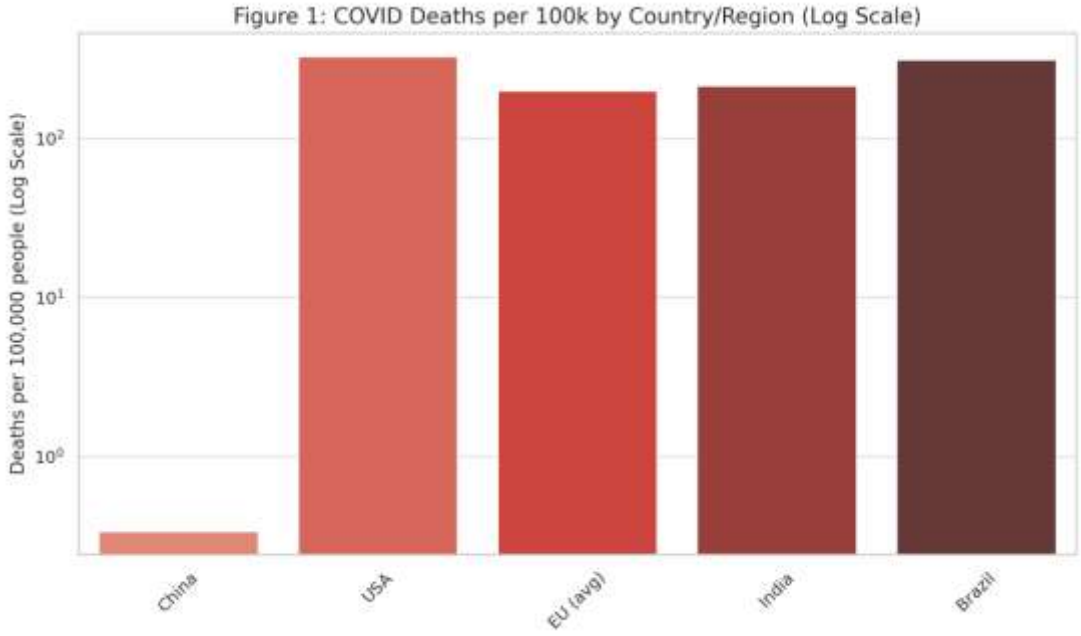
Liberals, however, have had to face the dissolution of multilateralism. Organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Trade Organization (WTO) were bypassed, with regional institutions like the European Union left to find ways to coordinate their internal responses. Vaccine nationalism, as witnessed in the 2021 hoarding by G7 states of more than 4.6 billion doses of vaccines (UNICEF, 2022), compromised the liberal notion of cooperation international.

Constructivists have particularly emphasized how the crisis has been discursively constructed and disputed using words and concepts. China's diplomatic rhetoric, usually labeled as "Health Silk Road" diplomacy, aimed to sell an alternative model of governance based on state-led efficiency (Yun, 2023; Schindler, Jepson & Cui, 2020). China's invocation of "shared destiny for mankind" was opportunistically utilized to recast narratives of leadership, responsibility, and resilience globally.

China's Rise and Strategic Engagement

China used the pandemic to intensify its global outreach. Through what analysts term "mask diplomacy" and later "vaccine diplomacy," China provided millions of PPE kits and over 1.6 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses to more than 100 countries by late 2022, particularly across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Halsall et al., 2023; Char, 2024). These efforts aligned with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy, wherein health infrastructure became a new vector of influence.

In addition, the Chinese government utilized surveillance technology, AI, and social credit systems to impose lockdowns and public health adherence. The "zero-COVID" policy, even if unpopular, was employed in order to show the ability of technocratic authoritarianism to suppress viral transmission—at least during the initial stages of the pandemic (He, 2021; Hagger, 2022). At the same time, state-owned media and diplomatic narratives depicted Western reactions as disorganized, divided, and morally tainted.



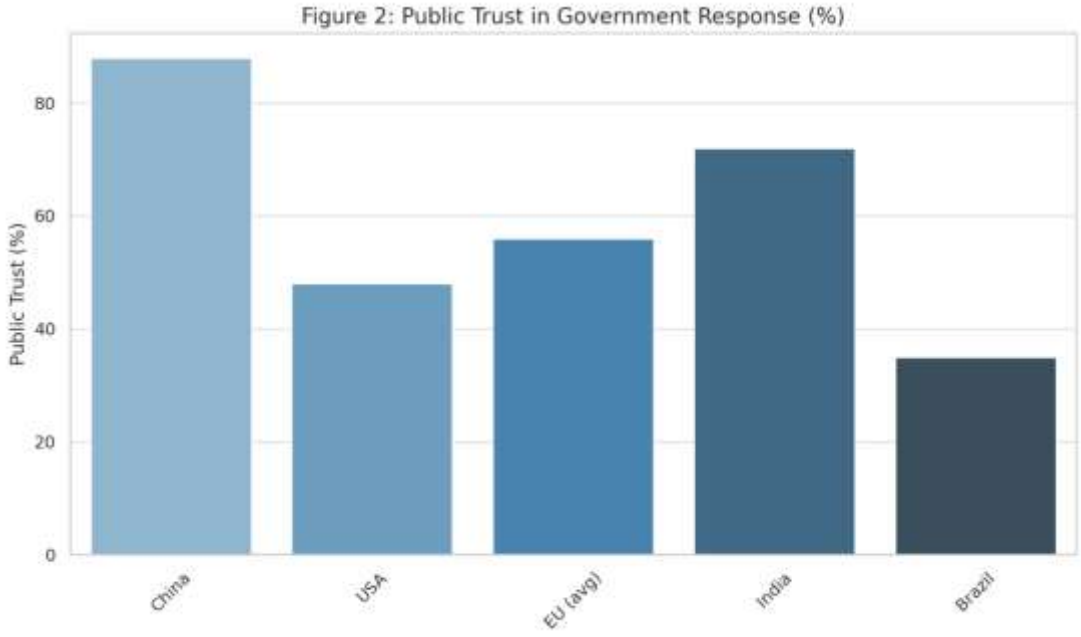
These efforts not only expanded China's reach but also reconfigured soft power, shifting it from cultural attractiveness to a template for governance achievement. The China Development Model became attractive in some of the Global South, whose governments share similar infrastructural and political challenges.

The Decline of Western Hegemony

The international order led by the West was already strained by growing populism, economic disparities, and foreign policy disaffection. COVID-19 served as a catalyst. The U.S. under Trump pulled out of WHO, slowed down aid to partners, and concentrated on vaccine nationalism—moves that sharply deviated from its post-WWII leadership vision (Mehmood, 2021; Jianying, 2023).

In Europe, there was disunity at the onset of the outbreak as border shutdowns and medical supplies restrictions broke up Schengen Area principles. The EU Recovery Fund, although an influential policy instrument, arrived late and did not tackle deeper institutional weaknesses.

While this was happening, Western nations were accused of "vaccine apartheid" as they managed to acquire over 70% of global vaccine supply by mid-2021 while low-income nations, especially in Africa, barely attained a 5% vaccination rate (WHO, 2022). Not only did this undermine the reputation of liberal humanitarianism but also revealed the moral failure of globalization (İbrahim, Yilmaz & Çemrek, 2023).



In addition, COVID-19 has reopened postcolonial critiques against knowledge systems, specifically those that positioned Western science and governance as universal. Academics like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) highlight how epistemic decolonization is key in dismantling the racialized global health order that excludes non-Western knowledge and leadership approaches.

Multipolarity and the Emerging World Order

Instead of toward a bipolar world, the post-COVID era is moving toward multipolarity, characterized by the ascendancy of regional powers such as India, Brazil, Turkey, Russia, and ASEAN nations. These players are adopting more independent foreign policies, frequently hedging between the U.S. and China to advance their national interests.

However, China is still the gravitational pole within this new order. China's GDP increased by 2.3% in 2020 and it was the sole major economy to expand in that year (IMF, 2021). China's investments in digital infrastructure, green energy, and artificial intelligence provide it with a long-term strategic advantage. Its dual nature—balancing inward-facing nationalism and outward-facing globalism—enables it to project influence while maintaining ideological insulation (Bennett, 2022; Hussain, 2021).

China's leadership in South-South cooperation, global digital governance, and climate talks makes it not only a participant but a shaper of global norms. Its Digital Silk Road targets the provision of 5G, AI, and cloud infrastructure to the developing world, pushing back against Western digital hegemony (Zeng, 2023).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a reconfiguration of global power relations. Far from announcing the end of Western power, it has seriously eroded its normative influence. By contrast, China has become a major global player, not just through economic power but by advancing a different model of governance and solidarity. This global shift requires scholars and policymakers to rethink liberal world order assumptions, adopt pluralistic narratives, and expect a future characterized by contested multipolarity.

As the world transitions into a post-pandemic era, the competition is no longer just between states but between systems, values, and visions of global governance. Understanding this evolution is critical for crafting informed, inclusive, and adaptive international policie

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