COVID-19 and Chinese Global Health Diplomacy: Geopolitical Opportunity for China’s Hegemony?

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Abstract
Health diplomacy has remained an important part of foreign policy of major countries to expand their geopolitical influence across the world. Given the outbreak of COVID-19, the inadequate healthcare systems even of the developed countries have been exposed. Although China was blamed for the origination of COVID-19, concomitantly, the same country had exploited the global health emergency by putting its global health diplomacy in practice as a soft power tool to expand its geopolitical influence in term of hegemony, vis-à-vis the USA. Whereas, on the contrary, the USA and European Union (EU) have been critically entrapped in the pandemic and remained at crossroads, how to deal with the same locally and globally. In these contrasting roles and reciprocation, the main argument of the article is that China had made the best use of its health diplomacy to expand its geopolitical influence, while the USA and EU did not rise to the occasion; rather, their roles and reciprocation have remained delayed and inert. In this backdrop, the main focus of this article is to examine how China used its global health diplomacy as a soft power tool? Second, would China become hegemon in the present scenario vis-à-vis the USA?

Keywords
COVID-19, healthcare system, health diplomacy, soft power, hegemony

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I. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted the world healthcare system, but it, rather, likely will change the post-COVID geopolitical world order. The scale and substance of the pandemic right now seem beyond the control of the impacted countries, maybe it is for the time being? Several conspiracy theories have been floated to make someone a scapegoat and divert attention from the gravity of the grim situation(s). Blame game has become the order of the day. The pandemic has caused a severe loss of men, materials and consequently a severe economic slump and stagnation in the geo-economic world order even critical than the 1930s. Concomitantly, the geopolitical world has become more uncertain due to the changing of power equations. It has become a double whammy for the people as well as for countries. The poor countries had not only seriously affected by COVID-19 pandemic, rather the developed countries were also become unable to provide the required healthcare facilities to the affected people.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic has put the entire world at an inflection point. The first case of the novel coronavirus was initially detected in late December 2019 in Wuhan (Duarte, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and WHO Director General recognized it as a ‘Pandemic’ on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020a). It has impacted 216 countries/territories worldwide, resulting in the death of 788,503 people by 21 August 2020 (Worldometer, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only exposed the status of the healthcare system of the world but also triggered a geopolitical debate about the hegemon of the world in terms of major powers. The term hegemony has been derived from the Greek word ‘Hegemonia’ that refers to the leadership and rule (Mowle & Sacko, 2007). Liberal theorists like Keohane (1984, p. 34) have defined hegemony, ‘as a situation, in which one state is powerful enough to maintain, and willing to do so, the essential rules governing inter-state relations’. He further argued that hegemony can be preserved less through coercion and more through consent by exercising the leadership in such a way. Cox (as cited in Schmidt, 2018) is one of the leading neo-Gramscians who had argued that coercion and consent are the two important characteristics of hegemony.

China’s hegemonic power has been expanding, given its massive size of economy, demographic dividend, large geographical size, modernized military, nuclear power, sophisticated science and technology, a large pool of human resources and its position as the world’s manufacturing hub. China has been expanding its hegemonic influence through the consent and coercive measures. The current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has created a strategic opportunity and the same was used by China to expand its leadership through the health diplomacy as a soft power tool. Moreover, health diplomacy has helped China to project its image as a benevolent world leader in many Asian, African and Latin American countries. Given this critical situation, many countries have been accepting the Chinese medical support without any coercion, giving consent to Chinese projects like One Belt One Road (OBOR) and market access. In this backdrop, the main
argument of this article is that China’s strategic influence has been expanding, thus, intensifying the battle for hegemonic influence between China and the USA.

A number of conspiracy theories have been doing rounds in the geopolitical narratives, particularly from the USA and China, over the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. The officials from China and the USA have been blaming each other for the origin of the coronavirus pandemic. The strategic competition between both the countries has been going on in terms of ‘Blame Game’ and ‘War of Words’. The Western media has raised suspicions on the Chinese rhetoric of emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic from the seafood market. They, however, claimed that the virus could have emerged and originated from the Institute of Virology (Wuhan) (Economic Times, 2020a). Moreover, President Donald Trump has also been using the term ‘Chinese Virus’ and has claimed China’s institute of virology as an epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic (Matthews, 2020). On the contrary, China claimed that the virus did not originate from Wuhan but, rather possibly from the USA as a bioweapon (Davidson, 2020).

Soon after the outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic had shifted to the USA; meanwhile, China has not only portrayed the image of a successful country to combat the virus, but, rather, it is also ready to help the world at large. The world has experienced the USA as a world hegemon since the Cold War, consistently providing leadership during the crisis/calamities/pandemics, etc. However, during the current situation of COVID-19 pandemic, both the USA and EU have been remained at the crossroads. Moreover, Trump's unilateral decision of imposing travel ban on the EU people further strained the Transatlantic relations. China has exploited the opportunity out of the emergency by providing massive healthcare and medical aid to more than 100 countries. In this backdrop, would the global health diplomacy employed by China likely provide an edge, that is, geopolitical space to change the existing status quo and turn China as a hegemon in the post-COVID-19 world order?

The main objectives of this article are, first, to analyse how China has made health diplomacy as part of its soft power diplomacy and, second, would the health diplomacy provide China with a geopolitical opportunity to expand its hegemonic influence? The article has been divided into the following sections: Section I discusses the introduction of the article. Section II examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the world’s healthcare system. Section III analyses the theoretical concept—how health diplomacy is embedded in the framework of soft power for a nation? Section IV describes and discuss the role of health diplomacy in China’s foreign policy pre- and post-outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Section V examines the response of the USA and the EU to deal with the pandemic in its own region as well as other affected countries. Section VI analyses the current status of China and the USA in the world, and how the pandemic has provided geopolitical space for the former’s hegemonic status? Section VII concludes the article.

II. COVID-19 and Healthcare System

The ongoing pandemic has undoubtedly paralysed the healthcare systems of almost all the countries around the world, but low-income countries have been critically
vulnerable to the pandemic. Unlike developed countries, the developing countries have already been facing woeful inadequacy of doctors, paramedics, drugs, medical kits and health infrastructures. According to the WHO data on density of medical physicians (per 10,000 population) in 2019, most of the developing regions, namely Asia, Africa and Latin America, are having less than 10 doctors per 10,000 population. On the contrary, the developed countries, particularly from North and South America, Russia and European countries, have a minimum of 20 or more doctors per 10,000 population. WHO’s statistics show that over 45 per cent of the member states have less than 1 physician per 1000 population (WHO, 2020). Moreover, many reports have highlighted that a substantial number of doctors and health professionals have been dying due to the coronavirus pandemic while treating the infected patients (Ing et al., 2020). Therefore, many countries have been facing huge shortage of doctors and medical professionals during the pandemic. It shows that the globalized world is already ill-equipped and ill-prepared to deal with any health emergency, and this pandemic has worsened the situation.

Global health issues have gained a significant place in global developmental dialogues and narratives since the establishment of the WHO. Achieving universal health coverage and providing access to safe and effective medicines and vaccines for all, used to be the significant objectives of WHO and the United Nations (UN) under the Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) (WHO, 2020). Although the aim of the WHO is to ensure health and well-being for all, the current healthcare scenario demonstrates that it has failed to achieve the determined objectives. In the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the countries have been facing a massive shortage of healthcare products like medical equipment and testing kits, and particularly health professionals, which were substantiated by the protests and deaths of the medical fraternity across the world. While developed countries have not been in a position to provide adequate medical care to the coronavirus-infected citizens, how can the same medical aid/support be extended to the poor countries?

The USA and Western Europe are still struggling to counter the COVID-19 pandemic in their territories. The USA and EU are still struggling to counter the COVID-19 in their territories. Whereas on the contrary, China has been successful in managing and controlling the pandemic as substantiated by the comparative infected cases and casualties. China has been taking over the command of the world by providing medical aid to the affected countries. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said (20 March) that the Chinese government has announced medical and economic assistance to 82 nations, including the WHO and the African Union (Foreign Affairs Ministry of the People’s Republic of China (FMPRC, 2020a). China has been exercising global health diplomacy as a soft power tool in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. How are health diplomacy and soft power interconnected? The same is explained in the following section.

### III. Health Diplomacy as a Soft Power Tool

Previously, the concept of power has always been defined in terms of hard or economic powers, but political scientist Joseph Nye had introduced the concept of
soft power and made a clear distinction between these two forms of power. Hard power is the ability to reach one’s goals through coercive actions or threats. Nye (2008, p. 94) had explained soft power as the ‘ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes which one wants through consent rather than coercion’. According to Nye, the resources of soft power lie in the country’s culture, political ideals and domestic and foreign policies in international politics. Wilson (2008, p. 114) has defined soft power as a ‘capacity to persuade others to do what one wants.’ Many other scholars, who had studied soft power in the aftermath of post-9/11, have also argued that the same is an outcome of behavioural influence (Arndt, 2005; Chong, 2007; Schneider, 2005). Therefore, soft power can ultimately be seen as an instrument of foreign policy to conduct international relations.

Labonté and Gagnon (2010) have clarified that global health diplomacy in terms of international relations theory is essentially the relationship between global health and foreign policy. Developed countries and international organizations are increasingly exercising global health diplomacy through providing medical assistance during emergencies. Thus, health diplomacy has become an important tool for improving the bilateral/multilateral relations (Drager & Fidler, 2007). Like soft power, health diplomacy also helps a country to build its ideal image through health aid programmes. Therefore, health diplomacy can be placed under the realm of soft power.

Soft power provides legitimacy to a country to exercise its hegemonic power through consent and consensus. Therefore, health diplomacy has become a tool of soft power, which plays a significant role in strengthening the hegemony of a nation over the other countries. According to Chattu and Knight (2019, p. 151), health diplomacy in its contemporary context is a ‘political activity that meets the dual goals of improving health while maintaining and strengthening the international relations abroad’. Historically, health diplomacy of states has focused on international cooperation and collaboration to protect national, commercial and human interests from the spread of a particular disease(s). It has been a strategy to prevent commercial interruptions rather than a tool to expand and encourage closer relations among the countries. Since World War II, global health diplomacy has been a vital part of the foreign policy agenda of a nation, and the same is involved in discussions on national security, trade and diplomacy.

IV. Global Health Diplomacy in China’s Foreign Policy: Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Scenario

Global health diplomacy has become the most striking feature of China’s foreign policy. Since 1949, China has been using health diplomacy as a soft power tool in its foreign policy. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (1978–1992), China has designed its comprehensive health diplomacy that includes both bilateral and multilateral medical and health cooperation. Fravel and Medeiros (2003, p. 22) have argued that under Xiaoping’s strategic view, ‘peace and development were the two major themes of today’s world…Beijing has embarked on a new road to economic modernization and reoriented its foreign policy to heighten the
diplomatic relations’. Under Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese foreign policy had stood for ‘a low profile, do something and concentrating on establishing a favourable external climate for domestic economic growth (Chang, 1991; Suisheng, 2010; Xu & Du, 2015). However, given the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome—SARS (2003) in China and its inability to handle the same had significantly dented its global image. Moreover, it had highlighted the major shortcomings of China’s healthcare system. Chan et al. (2012, p. 203) argued that SARS has caused a loss to the Chinese economy to the tune of US$ 6.1 billion or gross domestic product (GDP) contraction of about 0.5 per cent in 2003. It had compelled the Chinese government to increase its budget on public health.

President Hu Jintao (2002–2012) had played an active role in designing health diplomacy with the tag line of ‘Harmonious Society’ (Goldizen, 2016). The calls for ‘peaceful development’ and ‘harmonious world’ have been used by China to project itself as a benevolent country in the post-SARS world. The same was substantiated by the argument of Goldizen (2016) who noted that China’s improved preparedness had become evident, particularly in the context of an effective control of the 2009 H1N1 epidemic and 2013 avian influenza outbreak (H7N9).

Under the incumbent President Xi Jinping, the world has been witnessing a paradigmatic shift in China’s foreign policy from the strategy of low profile to strive for the hegemonic role (Jisi, 2011; Lanteigne, 2019; Pei, 2018; Rühlig, 2018; Xuetong, 2011; Yan, 2014). Under the incumbent regime, global health diplomacy has emerged as an important element of Chinese foreign policy. Although the Chinese healthcare diplomacy is veiled in altruism, the same is primarily used for expanding the geopolitical and geo-economic influences. Xi Jinping’s ‘China Health Vision 2030’, announced in 2016, has given pivotal importance to healthcare policies locally and globally (Tan et al., 2017). Along with these policy measures, President Xi Jinping had expressed his commitment in January 2017 to construct a ‘Health Silk Road’ (HSR) by signing a memorandum of understanding with the WHO (Lancaster & Rubin, 2020). The primary objectives of HSR include the organization of the high-level regional health officials’ forums, the establishment of a Belt and Road Public Health Network for coordinated response to public health emergencies, and capacity building and professional training (Bing, 2020). Therefore, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic paves the new roads for China’s global health diplomacy, which is, of course, a rhetorical extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, Lancaster et al., 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, China has been providing medical aid to many countries, including the USA and EU under its global health diplomacy to recast itself as a responsible global health leader.

Since 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been aggressively pursuing health diplomacy. The African continent was China’s first floor test for its health diplomacy to attain its geopolitical ambitions. China sent its very first medical team to Algeria under the direction of the former Premier Zhou Enlai on 6 April 1963 (Jing et al., 2011). Since then, China has been providing medical aid in terms of physicians, hospital buildings and clinic construction, and educating and training the African medical personnel. With the introduction of ‘African
Policy’ in 2006, China has highlighted again how health diplomacy has been figuring in its foreign policy in the twenty-first century vis-à-vis this region. The main focus of this policy included the promotion of effective malaria treatment, sending medical teams and equipment, training of physicians and supporting the research on traditional medicine to treat and prevent HIV/AIDS. During the 2006 African Cooperation Forum (CACF), China had pledged to double its aid to Africa by 2009 and also offered preferential loans of US$5 billion to the continent (Youde, 2010). By the end of 2010, China had sent 1,700 medical workers to 48 African countries (Wharton, 2011). From the earlier discussion, it is crystal clear that the Chinese government has been exercising its health diplomacy for the developing countries in general, and particularly in the African continent. Now, the question is what benefit does the Chinese government hope to gain from these soft power engagements with the recipient countries?

A Pew Global Attitudes Project Survey (2014) has shown that both the USA and China now have almost equal geopolitical influences in African states (Simmons, 2014). Sending doctors to African countries has helped China to build its benevolent image among the local leaders as well as with the common people. When Africans see that the Chinese doctors have saved the lives of their people, it creates a benevolent and favourable image of China in the hearts and minds of the common people. Indeed, in this background, it is a challenging situation for the USA to maintain its dominance in the region. Furthermore, through these medical aid programmes, the Chinese government has portrayed per se as the only country that can work in the interests of the developing countries.

Apart from bilateral cooperation, China has expanded its influence in international health affairs and further enhanced its cooperation with international and regional organizations, such as UNICEF, World Bank, ASEAN, Great Mekong Sub-region, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), etc. China had realized the power of WHO during the SARS outbreak in 2003, when WHO issued several travel advisories against unnecessary travel to Guangdong province without taking any prior consent of China and also put the latter in the spotlight for spreading infectious diseases in many countries. Chan et al. (2012, p. 4) have argued that ‘perhaps this stance has invoked the Chinese government to realize the political importance of the WHO and to increase its participation in global health governance’. China has nominated its citizen Margaret Chan for the election of the WHO Director-General held in 2006 and won the same. The victory of Chan was widely believed as a diplomatic triumph for China, as it was substantiated by the management of the Hong Kong issue and the successful implementation of China’s ‘One Country, Two Systems’ policy (Shen, as cited in Chan et al., 2012). Concomitantly, Beijing had also blocked Taiwan’s attempt to seek WHO membership. Given the importance of international organizations in general, and the WHO in particular, China had begun to participate more actively in global health governance as well.

Given the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has used global health diplomacy to build its benevolent image and to seek a fertile ground for its geopolitical influence in several regions such as Africa, Asia and Europe. China
has made the best use of its health diplomacy by providing medical aid to the African countries. As per the report of Mwangi (2020), China had sent 5.4 million facemasks and more than one million test kits and thousands of protective suits to African countries as early as March. China had also sent medical teams to several African countries such as Algeria, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Djibouti and Côte d’Ivoire to combat against the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, medical experts from more than 30 African countries have conducted webinars with Chinese counterparts on how to efficiently handle the coronavirus outbreak in the continent (Olander, 2020). Lina Benabdallah (as cited by Jevans Nyabiage in SCMP News, 2020) said that, ‘Covid-19 had provided an opportunity for Beijing to show it was not only a goods provider but also an expert on pandemic management and global health’. The above-mentioned developments show that China has been emerging as a high-profile humanitarian aid provider, which was at one point of time the monopoly of the USA.

Asian countries have remained an important part of Chinese global health diplomacy. Chinese medical experts had visited many ASEAN countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. A considerable amount of material aid has been provided by the Chinese government as well as private businessmen. Medical knowledge and expertise have been shared with the ASEAN countries via video conferencing. ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi had expressed appreciation by saying that, ‘With such aid, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, demonstrate that we support one another even at the community and individual levels in ensuring that we stay safe and healthy’ (ASEAN, 2020). The South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan were the major recipients of the medical aid. The list included the testing kits, personal protective equipment (PPE), masks and other medical supplies (Pal & Bhatia, 2020). Recently, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had joined a virtual conference with his counterparts from Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan to discuss a four-point plan to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, boost economic recovery and resumption of the BRI infrastructure projects (Times of India, 2020).

China has donated over 400,000 masks, 500 prefabricated rooms with beds, desks and chairs, and a waste disposal facility worth €1 million, and it has sent medical experts to Iran (Stojanovic, 2020). Moreover, China’s Foreign Affairs Ministry has urged the USA to remove sanctions on Iran by stating that it will hamper Iran’s response to the epidemic and also restrict delivery of humanitarian aid by the UN and other organizations (Economic Times, 2020). In reciprocation of China’s generosity, the Iranian Ambassador to China tweeted, ‘China is undoubtedly the most experienced in the fight against the coronavirus and is more determined to help us’ (Gupta & Singh, 2020). This shows the goodwill on the part of Iran for Chinese humanitarian aid. China has left no stone unturned to exploit the geopolitical opportunity, given the hostile relations between the USA and Iran.

Given the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European continent has been a battlefield for China and the USA. The USA had imposed travel bans on
the Europeans, whereas China had openly supported the cause of Europeans by providing substantial medical and financial aid. Under the global health diplomacy, not only China but also its company like Huawei and businessman Jack Ma have generously provided medical aid to several European countries such as the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, Belgium, France, Serbia, Hungary, etc. Stojanovic (2020) has observed that amidst the coronavirus pandemic, several Eastern European countries such as Serbia, Hungary and the Czech Republic had appreciated China for its medical aid. On the contrary, these countries had criticized the EU for its delayed, inert bureaucratism and the US isolationism apropos pandemic.

China’s medical aid to Serbia included a medical team with expertise in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, 1000 rapid test kits and other medical supplies in the first batch of 16 tons of donations (Xinhua, 2020). Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic had appreciated Xi Jinping for medical aid. He said that ‘They have proven as friends in the most difficult times when we fight for the lives of the Serbian people’ (Vuksanovic, 2020). He further made a statement that, ‘European solidarity does not exist. Only China can help’ (Vuksanovic, 2020).

The Hungarian government has acknowledged and appreciated the Chinese government for providing medical aid. According to Xinhua (2020), China has provided 80,000 + 41,000 surgical masks, 15,000 KN95 masks and 300 protective suits to Hungary. The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban had appreciated China and criticized the EU for the latter’s inability to fight against the coronavirus pandemic (Stojanovic, 2020). Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Slovakia have also appreciated China for its medical aid.

Beijing has offered medical aid to Turkey, which is the second most affected country in the Western region by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing had provided 50,000 rapid detection kits and has shared medical knowledge with Turkey via video conferences to treat the patients suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic (Gupta & Singh, 2020). However, the Chinese government had faced criticism from the Turkish people and health experts due to its faulty masks and equipment. Hence, unlike Iran, China’s medical aid had received a mixed response from Turkey.

China has been using the ongoing pandemic as an opportunity to push forward its ‘Health Silk Road’ diplomacy to expand its geopolitical and geostrategic influences. Moreover, the Chinese government has been using its global health diplomacy to overcome the allegations made by the USA for not preventing the virus from turning into a dangerous global pandemic. This kind of soft power projection by Beijing is further intensifying rivalry between the USA and China and also accelerating their race to win the title of hegemon in the post-COVID-19 world order. Recently, Chinese President Xi Jinping has expressed his desire in a telephonic conversation with the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte that he wanted to establish a ‘Health Silk Road’ as part of China’s ambitious BRI project (FMPRC, 2020). The Communist Party of China is well aware of the importance of Iran and Turkey as a gateway to Western markets for its BRI project. Therefore, China has been trying hard to expand its influence in both countries through its health diplomacy.
Wong (2020) has argued that notwithstanding criticism from some European countries, given the faulty and low-standard medical equipment, the contribution of healthy combination of medical supplies such as facemasks, sanitizers and financial aid has helped Beijing to curry favours and has won hearts and minds of one-half of a divided Europe. Consequently, several countries from the region have already extended their whole-hearted support to the Chinese BRI, which aims to expand China’s geo-economic influence in the European countries.

V. The United States and European Union’s Response

China has been successful in creating its positive image by exercising global health diplomacy. Many scholars and commentators have argued that the USA and the EU have failed to meet the pandemic emergency and have remained at crossroads on how to deal with the situation (Campbell & Doshi, 2020; Hernandez, 2020). The first priority of the EU was to help its member countries. The EU has released a €540-billion package to help its member states. This package provides three immediate safety lines for the working staff, businesses and EU countries (Europa, 2020).

The Balkan countries had criticized the EU for its passive response towards the pandemic as well as to extend health/financial aid to the former. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic had slammed the EU and appreciated the Chinese global health diplomacy (Outlook, 2020). Therefore, to extend its help to neighbouring countries, the European Commission has adopted a proposal for an overall package of €3 billion (US$3.25 billion) to benefit the 10 East European countries that included Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Western Balkan states (RFE/RL, 2020). On 28 April, the EU had announced a package of €350 million (US$378 million) to assist the ASEAN countries to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Later on, the EU had extended its financial support to the countries across the world and most importantly to vulnerable countries in Africa, the western Balkans, Eastern partner countries, the Middle East and North Africa, parts of Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean by pledging €20 billion fund under a programme called ‘Team Europe’ (The Jakarta Post, 2020). However, Ndengwe (Chairmen of the African Advisory Board) has criticized EU’s aid to African countries by stating that ‘even if they do come up with the money, 15 billion dollars cannot be enough for a continent the size of 1.3 billion people’ (Okello, 2020).

The US leadership has also remained at the crossroads on how to reciprocate locally and globally towards the pandemic, which signifies its isolationism. Being a world leader, the USA has been facing severe criticism across the globe for not helping the developing countries in this global health emergency. Consequently, President Donald Trump’s government had turned its attention towards the developing countries. Therefore, the State Department and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) pledged US$274 million international aid to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to help and assist approximately 64 countries and the world’s most vulnerable people in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic (Economic Times, 2020). This aid is provided to
the Middle East, North African countries, South Asian and Southeast Asian nations. Also, the USA has provided nearly US$18.3 million in emergency health and humanitarian assistance to ASEAN member countries (Ching, 2020). Apart from this, the US government announced an additional grant of US$3 million and promised to donate ventilators to India through the USAID to fight against the coronavirus pandemic (Haidar, 2020). Although the EU and the USA have extended their support to the needy countries, it was too late and too small with their major power status.

Domestically, the ongoing pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of the US healthcare system. It is widely reported that the USA has been facing an acute shortage of healthcare staff ventilators, facemasks, intensive care capacity and medicines. The front-line healthcare workers had also faced shortages of PPE, gloves, face shields, medicines and hand sanitizers. Many scholars such as Ranney et al. (2020) have observed that the USA is highly reliant on China for its healthcare products and pharmaceutical supplies. In an interview, Shobert has said that the USA has become overly dependent on China for a variety of healthcare and pharmaceutical goods (NBR, 2020). The USA is used to import half of the PPE items, 70 per cent of mouth–nose protective equipment and 57 per cent of goggles and visors from China. Additionally, the USA imports 39 per cent of gloves and 45 per cent of protective garments from China (Bown, 2020). However, China’s restriction on exports of PPE in the initial days of coronavirus pandemic outbreak and the unresolved trade war between the USA and China have brought the supply of healthcare products to a grinding halt. It shows that the USA is not self-reliant to fulfil its healthcare requirements, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further opened the pitfalls of its healthcare system. In this backdrop, the analysis of the Chinese role and its health diplomacy, vis-à-vis the USA and EU, has made it clear that the former has dwarfed the stature of the latter.

VI. China’s Hegemony in the Post-COVID-19 World Order?

The world economy has already been mired in crisis due to the trade war between the USA and China. The COVID-19 pandemic was seen as a black swan event that had left indelible imprints on the economy, including the leadership role of major powers like China and the USA. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), the global unemployment could increase by almost 25 million due to the economic and labour crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the global economy. However, China is getting an edge over many countries, including the USA and EU. A report published by IMF on 14 April 2020 has forecasted a contraction of GDP rate (2020) of the advanced economies such as the USA (−5.9%), Japan (−5.2%), the UK (−6.5%), Germany (−7.0%), France (−7.2%), Italy (−9.1%) and Spain (−8.0%), while China’s growth rate is projected to be 1.2 per cent in 2020 (Gopinath, 2020). In this background, China would remain a
strong competitor for most of the advanced economies and a ‘systemic threat’ to the USA and EU in the future.

The pandemic has resulted in a new great game between the USA and China. President Donald Trump has accused the WHO of being ‘China-centric’ and covering and mishandling the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. In his letter to the WHO, President Trump had accused the former for delaying ‘emergency declaration’ under pressure from President XI Jinping; appreciation for China’s transparency; and failing to comment on virus-related discrimination against Africans residing in China (BBC, 2020a). He further said that ‘Dr Tedros could have saved many lives if he acted more like Dr Harlem Brundtland, the WHO Chief during the SARS outbreak of 2003’ (BBC, 2020). Therefore, he temporarily suspended the US funds for the WHO amidst global health emergencies. The USA contributes nearly 22 per cent of WHO’s total budget, and it has been the largest contributor to the WHO. Last year, the USA contributed US$893 million to the WHO budget, whereas, on the contrary, China had contributed only about US$96 million (McKay, 2020). Nevertheless, China criticized the US move of withdrawal of funds by stating that it will weaken the capabilities of the WHO. Meanwhile, China pledged to increase US$30 million to its WHO budget (Shih, 2020a). Therefore, President Trump’s move to pull out of the WHO has, in fact, helped China to further expand its influence in the WHO.

China has been giving a tough geopolitical competition to the USA in the multilateral institutions. Currently, China heads four of UN’s 15 specialized agencies, whereas France, the USA and the UK have been leading one specialized organization each, even though they contribute funds three times the amount of China’s contribution to the UN budget (Sirohi, 2020). China’s collaboration with the IMF and World Bank in various programmes, such as the Technical Assistance Programmes and IMF country surveillance, is part of its efforts to weaken the US dominance in the Bretton Wood Institutions (Wang, 2018). Furthermore, despite its worst track record regarding human rights, China has been appointed to the consultative group of the UN Human Rights Council (Geneva), which is an influential panel that picks experts to investigate and monitor the freedom of speech, disappearances, detentions and the right to health (Sirohi, 2020). Apart from that, Beijing’s involvement in global politics through expanding its influence in the regional organizations, such as ASEAN, BRICS, and SCO, is also a serious threat to US domination in the world (Wang, 2018). These recent developments are showing that Chinese geopolitical influence has been growing exponentially in the international organizations in general, and particularly in the WHO, while the USA has been losing its influence in the international arena.

Gramsci’s ‘Theory of Cultural Hegemony’ has explained the significance of cultural institutions for the state and the ruling capitalist class to maintain its power in capitalist societies (Lears, 1985). The international organizations are often seen as components for preserving and extending hegemony and to legitimize the power of hegemony in the eyes of the subordinate states. Therefore, China’s increasing influence and role in the international organizations in general and WHO in particular symbolize the geopolitical and geo-cultural power of Beijing. Moreover, President Trump’s self-harming decision of withdrawing from the international
institutions/agreements/treaties has created the geopolitical vacuum and China used the same to make the best use of global health diplomacy for its geopolitical and geo-strategic interests. As Green and Medeiros (2020) pointed out that Beijing has seized the opportunity; launched an international campaign, highlighting the shortcomings of democratic governance; and positioned itself as a leader of global pandemic response through its health diplomacy.

President Xi Jinping and his top leadership have transformed Chinese foreign policy by prioritizing geopolitical dominance through its growing economic influence, following the ideological paradigm of the Marxist–Leninist and pursuing its soft power diplomacy. Some scholars (Asiryan, 2020, July 29; Marques, 2020, April 28; Mumford, 2020, June 4; Wong, 2020, March 25) have argued that Beijing’s soft power projection through its global health diplomacy has certainly helped China to expand its geopolitical influences in African, Asian and Latin American countries. As far as South Asia is concerned apropos global health diplomacy, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have been toeing the Chinese line and supporting the Chinese connectivity projects. Similarly, China has created enough geopolitical space in the EU member countries by providing medical assistance during the COVID-19 health crisis. Many leaders appreciated and acknowledged Chinese medical aid and extended their support to OBOR and Health Silk Road projects of China. On the other hand, President Trump had accused the Europeans of spreading the coronavirus pandemic in the USA and abruptly imposed a ban on the Europeans’ travel without any prior consultation with European diplomats (Wike et al., 2020). This move of the US government has seriously impacted the transatlantic relations. Satter et al. (2020) have argued that given the Chinese diplomatic pressure, the EU has redrafted its report, which has allegedly claimed that Beijing was spreading disinformation about the coronavirus outbreak.

The Chinese medical aid propaganda appears to be part of an organized effort to become hegemon in the coming times through expanding its geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic influences across the globe. However, the debate regarding China’s rise as a hegemon is not new. Many scholars have previously discussed that China is poised to become a global power and is likely to rise as a hegemon (Acharya, 2014; Holslag, 2010; Kai, 2016; Khong, 2014; Zhang, 2010, 2015). According to Ronald Seib (2009), China’s growing economic and political presence in Asia, Africa and Latin America is related to its emergence as a modern world force with the potential to challenge the USA for its global leadership. Mearsheimer (2006) has argued that China has been attempting to dominate Asia in the way the USA dominated the Western Hemisphere. However, he further argued that China’s rise as a hegemon will not be peaceful and easy because other regional powers such as Singapore, India, Taiwan, Australia and South Korea will join hands with the USA to contain China’s power. Jacques (2012) has also argued that China will rule the world and reshape it to represent its own values and interests. However, Breslin (2018, p. 59) acknowledged that domestic dynamics, that is, domestic financial problems could slow or delay the nature of China’s rise as a hegemon.

China’s coercive activities in the East and South China Sea, the Line of Actual Control and the Indian Ocean Region are becoming the subject of criticism and
concern for many countries. China’s aggressive behaviour in implementing its exaggerated maritime territorial claims has led to the maritime disputes with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia (Parthasarathy, 2015). Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines are aggressively raising their voices against China and simultaneously building up their militaries to push back against the Chinese expansionist designs in the South China Sea (Bengali, 2020; Haenle & Tcheyan, 2020). Another case of China’s arbitrary move can be seen in case of Australia, where China had publicly threatened with a trade boycott, given the latter’s proposal of an international inquiry in the context of origination of the global pandemic (Shih, 2020b). Meanwhile, some other countries such as Germany, France and the UK have also raised their voice for inquiry and pressured China for more transparency regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (AsiaNews, 2020). It shows that a number of countries have been criticizing China for mishandling the pandemic crisis.

In the current scenario of the pandemic, when most of the countries have been looking to the USA and the EU for medical assistance, the role and reciprocation of both were termed as delayed, inert and isolationistic gaffe. The Chinese global health diplomacy has created enough geopolitical space not only at the individual level but also at the global governance level. Taking advantage of the current situation, China has also expanded its hard power along with its soft power.

From India and Japan to the Philippines, China is being criticized for its ‘expansionist policies’. China’s recent expansionist move in Ladakh region led to an ongoing border clash between the Indian and Chinese armies. To counter China’s aggression, France has offered strategic support to India, and Australia and India have signed a deal to use each other’s military bases as part of their security cooperation (Bhinder, 2020). The growing anti-China sentiments among the countries are helping the USA to form an alliance with like-minded countries. In an interview, the US Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo (as cited in Bengali, 2020) called for ‘a new alliance of democracies’ to oppose China’s ‘new tyranny’. This alliance is evident in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the USA to counter China’s expansion into the Indo-Pacific region (Ford & Gewirtz, 2020).

Notwithstanding growing criticism against its hard power and given soft power, China had won hearts and minds of many countries and sought their cooperation. It can be seen in case of China’s detention of Uighur Muslim’s in Xinjiang and the enforcement of the national security law in Hong Kong. A group of 22 nations sent a letter to the President of the UN Human Rights Council calling on China to end its massive detention programme. On the contrary, a group of 37 countries submitted a similar letter in defence of China’s stand (Haenle & Tcheyan, 2020; Putz, 2019). One more diplomatic triumph that Beijing registered was when 53 countries extended their support for national security law for Hong Kong when the same was dropped by 27 countries (Lawler, 2020). According to Putz (2019), the first group that is against the Chinese policies is dominated by Western states, whereas African and Middle Eastern countries come under the group that supports China. It shows that China’s soft power in terms of its health diplomacy has been working exceptionally well to expand its geopolitical space/influence. Moreover,
the BRI project and the vibrant economy have been helping further to expand its substantial influence in many countries (Dunst, 2020). Kugelman (cited in Pandeya, 2020) also argued that, ‘The world may be unhappy with China, but it’s unwilling to disengage economically from Beijing. China’s economy is too powerful for that’. On the other hand, the USA is losing its position abroad due to its uncertain upcoming elections and President Trump’s ‘America first’ policies. Bengali (2020) has quoted Richard McGregor who said, ‘We know what China wants, and the unpredictable player is the U.S’. Therefore, by considering the above-mentioned developments, China’s salience and significance in the world cannot be denied. Using its hard and soft powers, China has been pushing other countries to toe its line. Although China has been using its power to gain the hegemon title for so long, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has further provided China a strategic opportunity to broaden its influences. In the absence of US global leadership, it is becoming easier for China to position itself as a global leader or hegemon in the post-COVID-19 world order.

**VII. Conclusion**

Although, the COVID-19 pandemic was originated in Wuhan (China), but very quickly, the epicentre of the same shifted to the USA and the Europe. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the ailing healthcare systems of not only developing countries but developed countries as well. In this background, the developing countries have been anticipating the USA and EU to play leadership roles and offer humanitarian aid; however, both the USA and EU have not risen to the occasion; rather, their role and reciprocation have remained delayed and inert. On the other hand, Chinese global health diplomacy has played a wonderful leadership role to curry favours and won the hearts and minds of several countries. Now, it seems that USA and EU’s passive response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has limited their geopolitical space in the international organizations and changing world order. These perceptible changes are likely to challenge the hegemon status of the former vis-à-vis China. On the contrary, China’s global health diplomacy helped the country to make the best out of a pandemic emergency to achieve a geopolitical opportunity to expand its influence in global world politics. Factors such as controlling the global supply chains, debt diplomacy and massive investment on connectivity projects—BRI, flooding the foreign markets with cheaper products, expanding influence in the international organizations and institutions, and aggressive and assertive Indo-Pacific policy would help China to move in the direction of a hegemon. The USA has been making efforts to garner the strategic support of many like-minded countries to counter China and has substantiated the argument that the former alone cannot deal with the emerging hegemon—China.

China has been catching up with the USA particularly in context of geo-economic and geopolitical influences. The economic gap between both countries has been diminishing very rapidly. The trade balance is in favour of China. China has extended substantial amount of loan to the US. China has also become the world
manufacturing hub and monopolized the global supply chains. In this background, China has played its role congruent to global stature whereas the USA’s reciprocation to the COVID-19 pandemic has not been congruent to its status of major power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China has taken very aggressive actions against neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea, it has a current a border standoff with India and territorial claims from the Eurasian countries like Russia and Tajikistan and it has limited the autonomy of Hong Kong and Taiwan. If a few countries criticized China for these actions, more countries have come forward to support these Chinese stances. The major crux of the analysis is that the soft power in terms of global health diplomacy pursued by China has been indirectly helping the country to expand its role, leadership and dominance vis-à-vis the major powers like the USA. In this way, soft power has become a tool to increase the hard power.

Finally, the article concludes that global health diplomacy has created an extended geopolitical space for China as a major power to be reckoned with, if not hegemon, at the moment. This argument can be substantiated by the two theses—first, Chinese global health diplomacy has created a benevolent image among the many countries. Second, Chinese criticism on the part of Western countries and arch-rival alliance under the US leadership vis-à-vis China have been outnumbered by supporting countries under the Chinese umbrella. Global health diplomacy has also convinced many countries to be part of Chinese key projects like BRI in the background of health diplomacy. Therefore, by taking into account the leadership vacuum and economic slump on the part of the USA and EU, while China’s emerging role at the global level with resilient economy and potential economic opportunities, due to its global health diplomacy, it is anticipated that the hegemon status quo would change in favour of China in the post-pandemic world order!

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