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## INDIA AND THE POST-COVID WORLD

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### Introduction

Over the last few years, the global situation has witnessed rapid flux, with geopolitical and economic contestations creating profound uncertainty. Key drivers of globalisation have experienced stress. International relations are increasingly marked by a proclivity to 'weaponise' trade and technology. An inward-looking USA, the world's flagbearer of democratic ideals, is trying to retain its position at the top of the international order while rejecting multilateralism. This has weakened the United Nations and its agencies, such as UNESCO, the WTO, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific partnerships. China, on the other hand, is determined to preserve the gains of a liberal trading order and canvas for a global endorsement of its systems of political governance and economic development, ironically, without being liberal or democratic. Eroding US primacy in global political, economic and military affairs is an abiding Chinese objective, beginning with China's periphery.

Today, the fragile international compact has been rendered a huge blow by COVID-19 - a fast-spreading and silent killer - which has quickly spread from China to the rest of the world. The pandemic has exposed flaws in multi-lateral structures and highlighted the lacunae in national capacities, particularly in healthcare. The great irony is that democracies appear to be lagging behind authoritarian countries like China.

Multilateralism has suffered retrenchment.<sup>1</sup> The UN Security Council must be faulted for its egregious lack of action in March of 2020 when China held the rotational post of President. It will remain one of the great ironies of history that China, which has increasingly sought to play a global leadership role, actively suppressed discussions in the face of a monumental threat to the lives and security of millions around the world. The withdrawal of nearly \$500 million worth of

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<sup>1</sup> Sujan R Chinoy, "India can absorb shocks of pandemic, take the lead in reshaping global order," *The Indian Express*, 04 May 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/covid-19-pandemic-unscc-china-coronavirus-global-cases-india-lockdown-sujan-r-chinoy-6392238/>.

### India and the Post-COVID World

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annual voluntary funding by the USA to the World Health Organisation (WHO) is clearly linked to WHO's questionable conduct and China-bias.

The global economy is beginning to reel under the unexpected effects of COVID-19, with the IMF predicting an impending recession.<sup>2</sup> The hardest hit, globally, are the services sectors and inter-dependent supply chains in the manufacturing sector. Global manufacturing has taken an unprecedented hit. One wonders if the current situation will strengthen the trend towards protectionism and emphasis on domestic manufacturing, even if it is against the principles of market forces. A febrile and debilitated globalisation featuring closed borders and disrupted trade and supply chains, ironically, coincides with a pressing need to evolve a fresh outlook on global interdependence and cooperation in dealing with pandemics and a host of other issues.

The daily information overload about the pandemic has created a surreal atmosphere within homes under worldwide lockdowns. Quotidian routines of work, leisure and human contact have been disrupted in myriad unrecognizable ways. 'Work from home' led to a surge in users and data flow in the digital space. This has put huge stress on existing bandwidth capacities, which are not easily mutable. The very notion of critical infrastructure in the cyber domain is changing with the growing dependence on webinars and online tasks, including hospitals, banks and providers of essential services.

These circumstances no doubt place a fresh premium on getting ahead in the race to develop a vaccine, and to move from 'lockdown' to 'open' in a graded manner with the least possible risk. Simultaneously, the race is on to develop AI and 5G capabilities to mitigate existing limitations in healthcare and the telecom sector respectively. The next generation of telecom infrastructure will have to cater, in terms of cost and scope, to the requirements of mass healthcare schemes.

The notion of national security, or global security, is also being reshaped by COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Armed forces everywhere, often deployed in confined spaces ranging

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<sup>2</sup> Sujan R Chinoy, "Covid-19 outbreak will bring lasting changes in healthcare, security, governance," *The Indian Express*, 25 March 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-lockdown-india-economy-impact-us-federal-reserve-6330070/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

from bunkers to tanks and armoured personnel carriers to naval ships and submarines, are facing tough choices in stemming the spread of the coronavirus without compromising national security.

The pandemic could have broader implications for military postures in the Indo-Pacific, as seen in the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus onboard the US Navy's *Theodore Roosevelt*, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier that heads the eponymous Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group, which had sailed from San Diego in January for a scheduled Indo-Pacific deployment.<sup>4</sup> It is at the centre of a controversy involving the sacking of its Captain and the ill-advised port visit of the vessel to Da Nang in Vietnam earlier in March, despite the high risk of contagion. Of course, China's PLA Navy could well be grappling with similar problems out at sea but, unlike in the democratic world, these facts will be treated as "state secrets" and the world will never be wiser.

Beyond hard power and the threats of hybrid warfare, nations will have to rethink possible future scenarios and create numerically adequate forces of well-equipped pandemic experts, doctors and healthcare workers, to be the new foot soldiers in this battle.<sup>5</sup> Healthcare has emerged at the top of critical infrastructure list in redefining the concept of national security.

### **COVID-19: India Can Lead**

Yet, the rapid spread of coronavirus around the world has created fresh opportunities for dialogue.<sup>6</sup> There is hope, and scope, for creating a new global compact. Contributions will be measured not in dollars and cents alone, but in the leadership that countries exhibit and their willingness to share ideas, best practices and available resources to develop an international mechanism for monitoring, verification, early warning and cooperation among nation states.

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<sup>4</sup> Sujan R Chinoy, "Coronavirus pandemic, slow to hit Japan, is yet another crisis that challenges country's resilience," *The Indian Express*, 08 April 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-pandemic-cases-deaths-in-japan-sujan-r-chinoy-6352238/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Chinoy, *op. cit.*, n.1.

### **India's Civilizational Ethos**

India's ancient civilization has given much to the world, among which Buddha's teachings of peace and non-violence stand out. Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy of a non-violent struggle for India's independence still resonates around the world. Gandhiji also spoke of moderation in the abuse of the earth's limited resources. He famously said that the earth has enough to meet the needs of each one of us, but not our greed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a staunch believer in the natural harmony that should exist between humans and Mother Nature. This is particularly true as we endeavour to create a new cohort for cooperation in dealing with not just the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the uncertainties surrounding economic growth, healthcare and food security in a post-COVID-19 era.

### **Scrutiny of Wet Markets**

In the light of COVID-19, there definitely exists a case for greater scrutiny of 'wet markets' in China, South East Asia, and in many other countries around the world.<sup>7</sup> With culinary traditions being a function of culture as well as geographical and climatic conditions, animals, from tigers, monkeys, donkeys and pangolins to snakes, bats, geckos and monitor lizards, have all been subjected to illegal poaching and trafficking around the world. These activities increase the potential for zoonotic transmission of unknown and deadly viruses.

The need of the hour is to devise means that can deal more effectively with the illegal slaughter of exotic animals for bush-meat and the use of animal-extracts for traditional medicine. Efforts must be made to strengthen the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a multilateral treaty with more than 180 member countries. There should be a renewed focus not only on the illegal international trade that is already covered by CITES, but also the hazardous exploitation of exotic wildlife species within national borders. All signatory states, including China, must pass and enforce legislation to control the domestic consumption of wild animals and shut down the dubious 'wet markets' and animal farms.

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<sup>7</sup> Chinoy, *op. cit.*, n.1.

India's record of legislation in conservation and enforcement of penalties for the killing and exploitation of protected wildlife is better than most countries. There is considerable scope for the Modi government to take the lead in proposing that CITES be given more teeth to conduct international scrutiny and inspections.

### **Reform of Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)**

Today, at a strategic level, the global opinion seems weighted against China, notwithstanding its efforts to salvage credibility by shifting focus away from the origins of the coronavirus to the 'superiority' of its system in tackling the pandemic. There is talk of the coronavirus having originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, with theories abound about biological warfare programmes and accidental release. This provides an opportune moment to turn the spotlight on the inherent weaknesses of the BWC of 1975.<sup>8</sup> It is a disarmament treaty that does not prohibit the retention and use of biological agents, including corona viruses, for prophylactic purposes, which encompass medical research for diagnosis and immunisation. It has no verification protocol to deal with any suspected use of biological agents. Indeed, the UN Security Council can investigate complaints in this regard, but the veto power enjoyed by the permanent members, including China, renders this a chimera. In the run up to the 9<sup>th</sup> Review Conference of the BWC in 2021, India could engage in consultations with other middle powers to evolve a regime that can provide better oversight.

### **Promote Holistic Health**

The COVID-19 pandemic, meanwhile, has brought across a home truth, that wealth is unable to protect even the most affluent people from a silent killer.<sup>9</sup> Individuals with higher immunity levels have a better chance of survival if afflicted with COVID-19. In India, despite spikes in infection rates, the death toll has remained low, possibly due to its youthful demographic profile and the naturally higher immunity levels of the less privileged sections of society, who are routinely exposed to higher risk of infections. The ancient Indian practice of Yoga is known to boost immunity levels through the cultivation of a healthy mind and body. This is the time to further reinforce the worldwide practice of Yoga under the banner of the International Day of Yoga, which is an initiative of Prime

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<sup>8</sup> Chinoy, *op. cit.*, n.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

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## India and the Post-COVID World

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Minister Modi. India should plan for special virtual events this year to encourage people around the world to practice Yoga as a means to promote holistic health.

### **India as *Vishwa Vaidya***

As the world's largest producer and exporter of cost-effective generic drugs, India's readiness to ship the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine to fight COVID-19 to others is a "good Samaritan" act in consonance with the ethos of *Vasudheva Kutumbakam*.<sup>10</sup> India has sent rapid response teams to several countries. India is also in the race to produce a vaccine. If China is a "factory to the world," India has the potential to be a "pharmacy to the world." It can take on a new and well-deserved moniker, that of *Vishwa Vaidya* (global physician). This provides an opportunity to promote Ayurveda, which complements Yoga.

### **Re-energise Multilateral Institutions**

At a time when the UNSC, G20, G7 and the EU were inert, Prime Minister Modi stood out with his initiatives to develop a joint response.<sup>11</sup> He convened a teleconference with SAARC nations, which led to the establishment of a SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund for rapid regional response. Since then, despite the great task of providing healthcare for its 1.3 billion people, India has despatched rapid response teams of specialists as well as medical equipment to several countries, including neighbours. As Prime Minister Modi said, "our neighbourhood collaboration should be a model for the world."

Similarly, Prime Minister Modi's proposal for cooperation among G20 countries led to an Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit on 26 March 2020 to discuss the challenges posed by the outbreak and to forge a coordinated global response. During this meeting, he underscored the need for "reformed multilateralism." He urged global leaders to usher in a new globalization for the collective well-being of humankind and have a multilateral focus on promoting the shared interests of humanity even when globalization had failed in many ways. Prime Minister Modi and Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar have been remarkably active in engaging counterparts from around the world to tackle the pandemic.

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<sup>10</sup> Chinoy, *op. cit.*, n.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

### **A 'Quad Plus' Approach to the Indo-Pacific**

On the geo-strategic front, the COVID-19 crisis has nudged many countries to engage in new formats. It is time for the Quad Plus, in which the US, India, Japan and Australia have recently engaged other countries such as the ROK, Vietnam, New Zealand, Israel and Brazil, to exchange views and propose cooperation with select African countries abutting the Indian Ocean. After all, the Indo-Pacific, which extends from the West coast of the USA to the West coast of India, straddles the entire maritime space of the Indian Ocean. A Quad Plus makes the structure more inclusive and acceptable. There is scope to work together to promote connectivity and infrastructure projects for the entire region's benefit on the basis of key principles of openness, transparency and UNCLOS, with development assistance governed by international standards, fiscal responsibility; and respect for the environment, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

### **A New Model of Internet Governance**

In cyber security, India must renew and drastically increase its efforts to push for a multi-stakeholder model of internet governance.<sup>12</sup> This is especially relevant at a time when cybercrime and malicious attacks by state and non-state actors, and threats to critical infrastructure, are on the rise. Post COVID-19, there will be even greater reliance on artificial intelligence and big data, drone and other surveillance technologies, and online platforms.

### **Conclusion**

A vaccine for COVID-19 will eventually emerge, but the world can avoid paying a heavy price by not treating pandemics as one-off events. Given the incidence of SARS, MERS and similar outbreaks in the past, COVID-19 is hardly an unexpected 'black swan' event. The human race may have to contend with many more of nature's calamitous challenges.

The outline of the post-COVID-19 era, particularly in relation to economic recovery, healthcare and food security, is far from clear. There appear to be no clear-cut winners at this stage. The pandemic has accentuated the rift between the USA and China. However, given the inexorable centrality of the Chinese economy

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<sup>12</sup> Chinoy, *op. cit.*, n.1.



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### India and the Post-COVID World

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in global supply chains, it is a moot question if the economies of the USA, EU or Japan can achieve a major decoupling. COVID-19 has shown how China's actions impact the entire world. Whatever the denouement in the matter of bringing China to book for its acts of commission or omission, its cooperation will be vital in reforming global institutions and practices.

Prime Minister Modi has done well to grasp the nettle and take the lead within SAARC and the G20 framework to forge a new global compact. India enjoys good relations with multiple powers and is well-regarded across the developing world. With excellent long-term economic prospects in the decades ahead, a confident India appears fully capable of absorbing the shocks of the pandemic and striding forth to engage a world riven by trade wars and ideological contestation. There is no room for despair. Despite hardships, India can, and must, take the lead in bringing the world together to practice a new multilateralism that places the common interests of humanity above narrow national interests. Arguably, multilateralism in a post-COVID-19 world provides a strategic opportunity for India to emerge as an independent pole. To use Prime Minister Modi's mantra, in this task too, India will be guided by the values of *Samman* (respect), *Samvad* (dialogue), *Sahayog* (cooperation), *Shanti* (peace) and *Samriddhi* (prosperity).

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