Shifting Hegemony: Crisis in the US hegemony and rise of China during and post COVID-19 world order.

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Abstract- Hegemony is an important concept which has been holding a special place in the discipline of International Relations. In the global order the USA used to enjoy the status of a hegemon for a long period time. Gradually challenges are coming up in the path of US hegemony. China which is always in a position to give tough competition to the US gets a good opportunity to increase its influence in the world during the recent pandemic. The pandemic triggered a geopolitical debate about the hegemon of the world.

KEY WORDS- Hegemony, COVID-19, USA, CHINA.

I. Introduction:

The outbreak of the COVID -19 pandemic has not only impacted the world health care system but also triggered a geopolitical debate about the hegemon of the world in terms of major power. The United States has unanimously been considered the most powerful nation in the world having a hegemonic status for a long time. However, in the recent decades there seen increasing emergence of limitations to American power. The COVID-19 pandemic is an event where US shows its inability to prioritize the country’s international responsibility in the time of crisis and gave a chance to put questions in its hegemonic status. On the contrary, China adopted a benevolent and collaborative approach to deal with it. Further, the country has made a strategic opportunity out of the pandemic to expand its influence and leadership in the international arena.

In the present study at first an attempt has been made to locate the concept of hegemony in the theories of International Relations. Thereafter the challenges that the USA is facing in maintaining its hegemonic status are studied. Moreover, it has also shed light upon the responses of USA during the pandemic. Last but not the least emphasis has been made to showcase how China takes the advantageous position both during and after the COVID-19 to exaggerate its influence in world politics.

II. Understanding Hegemony:

The word hegemony is derived from the Greek word ‘hegemonia’, which means leadership and rule. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines hegemony as "preponderant influence or authority over others". A more detail definition of the same has been given by the Oxford English Dictionary. It defines hegemony as the “leadership, predominance, preponderance; especially the leadership or predominant authority of one state of a confederacy or union over the others.” In short, hegemony is the dominance of one entity over all others. Rather than using force or explicit coercion, hegemonic power rested on the successful manipulation of cultural and social institutions which gave it a position to influence the preferences of others in favour of the existing order.

In international relations, hegemony refers to the dominance or leadership of one state or group of states over others. Hegemonic dominance can be economic, military, or cultural in nature, and can be exercised through a variety of means, including economic coercion, military force and ideological influences. Hegemony can have both positive and negative impacts on international relations. On the one hand, hegemony can lead to stability and cooperation, as the dominant state or group of states can provide leadership and set rules and norms for the international system. On the other hand, hegemony can also be controversial, as it can lead to imbalances of power and the suppression of the interests and autonomy of other states.

II.I Hegemony in the theories of IR:

There exists a bundle of theoretical literature on the subject of hegemony in world system when viewed from different perspectives in the field of international relation. Traditionally, through the two dominant schools in international relations- Realism and Liberalism, the concept of hegemony have been analyzed. A critical approach to hegemony can also be seen in the international relations.

The Realist perspective of hegemony:

The realists assume a state of power imbalance in the world system. One country, defined by its possession of material power has the advantage over the rest of states, enabling it to exercised leadership or domination over this international system (Gilpin, 1981). This inherently grants the hegemonic state a great capacity for coercion, influence and control over the international

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Hegemonic stability is considered to be the major contribution of the realist in the analysis of hegemony. Hegemonic stability theory is of the opinion that when there is the existence of one hegemonic state it leads to the stability of the international system. Furthermore, the fall or decline of this hegemonic state reduces the chances of stability in the international system (Kindelberger, 1973).\(^3\)

The realist analysis of hegemony only focuses on materialistic dimension of power as the sole indicator for a state’s survival as a hegemon or its decline in the international system. The realist analysis also criticized on the same ground that it only considers the material dimensions particularly military and economic by sideling the non- material dimensions such as cultural dimension in its analysis.

**Liberal perspective of hegemony:**
Liberal perspective of hegemony comes as a reaction to the hegemonic stability theory as propounded by the realist. From the liberal perspective mainly from the neoliberals it is pointed that the founding rule of the system created by the hegemonic state may continue even after the decline of that state. Robert Keohane in his book *After Hegemony* argued that an international system could continue to function through its international institutions even after the decline or collapse of the hegemon that had created it in the first place. According to this approach, although a hegemon is necessary condition for the construction of hegemony, hegemony itself can outlive the hegemon. In this perspective attempt is made to shift the focus of analysis from the subject of hegemony to the conditions and mechanisms of its operation.

**Critical perspective of Hegemony:**
The most important factor in critical perspective of analysis of hegemony is its prime focus on showcasing the important role of values and culture in building global hegemony. The critical perspective of hegemony draws its insights from Gramscian analysis. The prime focus of Gramsci is how hegemony works through a combination of coercion and consent. Hegemony signifies the process through which the leading group/ the ruling class of a society transform its own interests and values into “common sense” for all the members of the society. Along this line a group of new Gramscian scholars led by Robert Cox and Stephen Gill try to analysis hegemony in the global system. Robert Cox stated that global hegemony is a pattern of class forces, state structures and international organizations that maintain the control of capitalism not only relying on hard power, but recruiting the appeasing states, social movements that oppose the current global distribution of political and economic power.\(^4\)

This approach to hegemony tries to analyse not only the origin and development of a global hegemon but also its possible transformation. Hegemony continues through a close co-operation between powerful elites, and also a vast network of economic institutions and international politics known as global governance. In order to make a hegemon decline it is necessary for those who are subjects to hegemon stop believing in its principles and values.

**III. Crisis in the US Hegemony:**
Following the end of the Cold War, the United States of America became the sole superpower thereby getting the hegemonic status in the world. Motivated by its geostrategic interests it has been a meddler into countries’ internal affairs and a subverter of their governance. However the situation has changed that in the past two decades, the world has witnessed a series of major crises, perhaps the most important of which is the decline of American or US hegemony or what is called crisis of the US leadership in the global system. The decline of US hegemony was triggered by a variety of events.

The attack on the US by the terrorist group Al Qaeda famously known as 9/11 incident demonstrates it as a vulnerable superpower. In this regard Andy Hoffman stated “September 11 marked the beginning of the end of American hegemony, or the end of its role as superpower, not because of the damage caused by what the United States called Islamic Terrorism, but because of the damage done to the United States itself by its administration. Ever since, the attacks of September 11 I accelerated the forces that pushes the United States down the slope of the chain of world powers”.\(^5\) After the attack the US administration has increased its expenditure on military and security purpose and at the same time launches war on terrorism but all these bring negative repercussions to it. The global credibility of the US declined significantly. Moreover wars in the name of terrorism affected the American economy a lot and also increased the anti American sentiment when Bush administration shifted its counter terrorism efforts from Afghanistan to Iraq. The Guantamano prison scandal and Scorpio Scandal have further eroded the image of the USA.

The global financial crisis of 2008 forces to focus the inherent instability and risk underlying the international financial system and hastily rejuvenating the concept of a decline in US hegemonic power within the global political economy. The crisis shook the American administration’s perception that military power is the cornerstone of the US strategy to maintain hegemony. The key indicators of this crisis for USA were the US trade deficit with China, and huge amount of migration of investment to China. Moreover, the crisis raises the role of China and also its challenges to US power got a momentum because of the change in wealth and power balance between the East and the West after the crisis.

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De-dollarization is another trend which put challenge to US economic hegemony. A lot of countries are now seeking to reduce their reliance on the US dollar as the world’s reserve currency due to concern over potential vulnerabilities and risks associated and shifted to other currencies that would provide stability. For example in a recent regional meeting of the finance ministers and central bank governors of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) discussed to reduce their reliance on US dollar, yen, euro and British pound for financial transactions, and started to trade settlement in local currencies. Moreover, the market share of the US dollar in world’s forex reserve fell to nearly 58% in March 2022, which is lowest since 1994. Thus, once the undisputed sanctum for global monetary affairs, the omnipresent dollar is visible losing its grip.

America uses its soft power for a long time to maintain its cultural hegemony in the world. Although cultural hegemony of the USA has not been vanished altogether but it has faced a serious challenges. The pop culture and Hollywood are more or less produced out in countries mainly from Asia. South Korean kpop music, Turkey’s drama, and Bollywood are getting more and more popularity thereby challenging the once unchallengeable ‘American culture.’

III.I US hegemony and the COVID-19 pandemic:

The novel coronavirus outbreak in the late December 2019 is deemed to be one of the most consequential events in modern history. The pandemic quickly demanded leading states to rise to the domestic and international challenges it posed. In this juncture, the US’s lack of clear headed plan to combat the virus nationally underscored its inability to prioritize the country’s international role in the times of crisis, and put into questions its hegemonic status. Norrof stated that Covid-19 triggered the decline of US hegemony. USA has failed to contain the pandemic at home with more than 500,000 loses which exposes the structural weakness and eroded the legitimacy of the American system. It also shows that United States has expended enormous resources on keeping Americans safe from external military aggression but it has spent far less on generalized health care and society safety nets. This has caused irreparable damage to American authority and its liberal value system with a consequence of drastic lost of its soft power.

Another question on the US’s hegemonic position raises when President Trump ordered immediate halt of ongoing financial support to the WHO, while ordering a review to examine the role of WHO in ‘severely mismanaging and covering up the spread’ of Covid-19. This decision came at a time when WHO had launched an appeal for emergency funding of nearly 675 million US dollar to support efforts against coronavirus worldwide. Freeze of funding by the biggest donor of WHO has led to criticism of the US as the leading international power with the responsibility to lead international response against the pandemic. Thus it has showed a negative picture of US hegemony in terms of both US capabilities and US leadership.

One more point in the downward spiral of US hegemony is its failure in Afghanistan. Though this incident has no direct link with Covid 19 but the time frame of this incident is during the second wave of the pandemic. In August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan and began to negotiate on transfer of power with the Afghan government. Despite the presence of the American soldiers it was remarkable that the Taliban seized the country’s capital and demanded the withdrawal of foreign element and United States complied with this demand. The “fall of Kabul” marked a turning point of US hegemony toward decline which on the one hand demonstrates the Taliban as the winner of the 20 years war and on the other hand shows America’s declining international image and reputation.

IV. Rise of China:

The rise of China among the great powers of the world began in the late 1970s, particularly with President Deng Xiaoping. He started a series of reforms to drastically change the global position of China. With this starting point China is working hard to become a global hegemon and also showing some powerful results to the world. Military capability is one of the areas where China is raising fast. It has the vastest and advanced military forces in the world. A huge amount of capital is spend towards military and forces to make China the most secure and advance in forces. The country has already acquired modern military weapons like intercontinental long range rocket, supersonic journey rocket, current robots, and hypersonic weapons. As indicated by research organization worldwide establishment for vital investigations, starting around 2014 China has acquired a bigger number of submarines and maritime boats than were right now serving the naval forces of Germany, India, Spain, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom (Connolly, 2020).

Another arena in the rise of China is its robust economic development. China has followed the theory of economic interdependence which provides a vital source of soft power for the country in the economic and political domain. China has made impressive success in boosting GDP and getting rid of poverty with a 0.5 poverty rate in 2016. China has following a relatively steady trend towards relation with its neighbors through multilateral economic cooperation. In November 2020, China signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with countries of Southeast Asia and the Pacific area which is one of the most extensive trade agreements that carries a considerable influence on the Asia-Pacific area. This has made with an attempt to create a unified free trade market with zero tariffs among member countries. Moreover, China is focusing on delivering impressive economic consequences and producing great wealth by promoting Chinese business and investment opportunities overseas. For this, it has committed to the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) programme, utilizing infrastructure and funding as a soft power strategic attraction to recreate land and maritime trading routes in Eurasia and Africa.

In 2020, people around the world were shocked by the unprecedented global pandemic which struck most of the states internationally. Under the challenging COVID-19 pandemic, China shows more mature crisis management, robust resistance to the

economic crisis caused by the global pandemic domestically, and cooperative diplomatic strategies in dealing with this worldwide public health crisis. This efficient performance in the fight with COVID-19 indicates that China is collecting its soft-power strengths and advantages and cooperating with the rest of the world humbly through diplomacy on its path to gaining a hegemonic status in world politics. Though China was the hotspot of COVID-19 and one of the highest growth rates it has brought the pandemic under control and has fostered economic recovery by centralized domestic policies. Explicitly, it was effective for the Chinese government to adopt a strict lockdown of major cities at the beginning of the pandemic and mass testing among communities in response to even the smallest outbreaks (Bradsher 2020). This provides an excellent example of Nye's claim that soft power and hard power are closely interconnected, and the efficacious application of soft power can have positive effects on a state's hard power. With its impressive handle on the coronavirus, China has recovered back up to the roughly 6% pace of economic growth that was reported before the pandemic. Moreover, China has announced emergency support of 30 million US dollar to the WHO in support of its pandemic relief activities. This comes at a time when the USA, the largest contributor to the WHO has cut its fund and under such circumstances Beijing administration stepping up its role to expand its international influence.

Encountering the COVID-19 crisis, China seeks to cooperate and engage with its neighbors and the rest of the Western Hemisphere countries through health diplomatic strategies internationally. China had made the best use of its health diplomacy by providing medical aids to the countries of Africa, Asia and Europe. China has sent 5.4 million facemasks and more than one million test kits and thousands of protective suits to African countries. It has also shares medical knowledge and expertise with the ASEAN countries via video conferencing. Substantial medical and financial aids have been provided to a large part of Europe. China has used the pandemic as an opportunity in pushing forward its geopolitical and geostrategic influence.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a black swan event that had adversely affected the global economy. However, China got an edge over many countries. As per the report of IMF, 2020 there has been a contraction in the GDP rate of the advance countries such as USA (-5.9%), UK (-6.5%), Japan (-5.2%), while China’s growth rate is 1.2% IN 2020. Thus China’s economic dominance did not decrease in the pandemic also.

Even in the post pandemic years China is in an advantageous geopolitical position. Currently, China heads 4 of UN’s specialized agencies and thereby ahead of its biggest competitor the USA. China’s collaboration with the IMF and World Bank in their various programmes also increasing its dominance in the Bretton Woods Institutions. Furthermore, despite having bad records in terms of human rights violation, China has been appointed to the consultative group of the UN Human Rights Council. These recent developments showcase that Chinese geopolitical influences has been growing exponentially in the international organizations.

In the post covid period Middle East is reemerging as an arena of great power competition. Earlier Middle East is inclined towards US but the pandemic has made some changes in that scenario. China is now the only country which has significant economic and political ties with all of the most powerful actors in the Middle East. The most glaring example of the type of support that China in receiving in this region is the overwhelming endorsement of its Belt and Road Initiative programme. Countries of gulf are defying US pressure and hiring the Chinese giant Huawai to build 5G infrastructure in their respective countries. Due to increasing uncertainty about the US’s intentions as well as cooperation ability in the region, the leaders of the Middle East are progressively turning towards China to secure their economic and strategic needs. More it is China that comes as a rescuer to the Middle East to cope up with the pandemic. This also shows Chinese influence in its race to become a hegemonic power in the global order.

V. Conclusion:
COVID-19 pandemic though originated in China but quickly shift its epicenter to the US and Europe. This pandemic has exposed the ailing healthcare system of even the most developed countries in the world. The developing countries are anticipating to the USA to play the leadership role and offer humanitarian aids however the state fails to rise to that occasion. On the other hand, Chinese global health diplomacy has created enough geopolitical space both at individual level and at global governance level. It has also been coming up in the recent years that the economic gap between China and the USA has been decreasing very rapidly. The trade balance is in favour of China. In fact China has extended substantial amount of loan to the USA. Now, China has also become the manufacturing hub and monopolized the global supply chains which once hold by the USA. Moreover, China’s increasing influence and role at the international organizations which are often seen as the component for preserving and extending hegemony and to legitimise the power of the hegemony in the eyes of the subordinate states, is symbolizing the geopolitical and geo-cultural power of the country. Furthermore, the earlier President of the USA Trump’s self harming decision of withdrawing from international institutions and agreements has created some geopolitical vacuum which China has used to its fullest.

Finally it can be said that USA is not holding the same position in the global arena. Its hegemonic leadership has transformed and fragmented. With China’s leading response as global superpower in the pandemic, it heralds a wake-up call for the United States. It will be interesting to see in the coming days how both the countries will engage in international activities to prove oneself to be the most powerful in the world order.

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