THE POLITICS OF THE PANDEMIC

In the developing aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, both British and global politics face a range of urgent and drastic challenges. The unprecedented global health crisis been the catalyst for some extreme social, political and economic repercussions, with President Trump comparing it to a conflict with an 'invisible enemy', while the British media has made parallels with historical periods of wartime endeavour while referencing the 'spirit of the blitz'. Within such an uncertain scenario, the future alignment and direction of Britain's global status and key international relationships has become a pressing priority, which has been evident in various key speeches by Boris Johnson regarding future trading relations with the superpowers of the USA and China in particular, and specifically illustrated by controversial decisions involving Huawei's access to the UK's phone network. Relations with both of these superpowers was already of heightened importance for the UK government within the context of the post-Brexit political environment, but increasingly more so in the pandemic's wake.

The coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak can certainly be viewed as a major turning point of the past century, with a case to be made that it potentially transcends all previous comparative events (e.g. wars, recessions, terrorism) in terms of its broader destructive impact. This consequently represents a particularly severe challenge to the leading politicians and great powers in both domestic and foreign policy spheres. Indeed, the credibility and capability of such contemporary global leaders and various key institutions has been placed under intense public scrutiny during this crisis. On a broader structural level, the fall-out from the pandemic could also radically recalibrate the global political order, with countries potentially rising and falling in status in the pandemic's wake. This has been a notable consequence of previous international events of such significant magnitude, e.g. the emergence of the Cold War after 1945. Within such a context, there has been speculation as to whether the steadily narrowing hierarchical gap between the USA and China will finally be eclipsed due to such tumultuous events. There would be some irony in such a possible development, as it could ultimately result in China steadily assuming a heightened global ascendancy, which would be controversial given that the origins of the pandemic's outbreak can be traced to within China's borders.

We can subsequently analyse the pandemic's impact from a number of political perspectives as follows: (1) The impact on UK domestic politics, (2) The impact on foreign policy and international institutions, (3) The impact on the international structure and global politics.

The impact on UK domestic politics

Following the first reported cases in China in late 2019, by mid-2020 it was reported that approximately 14 million people across the world had been infected by coronavirus, with the death toll 600,000 and rising. This rapid escalation has meant few countries have been spared from its impact, with many evidently surprised by the speed of the pandemic reaching their shores, and experiencing similar 'lockdown' difficulties in tackling the outbreak. With unemployment subsequently booming on a wider international scale, there are clearly global trends in play. Yet in the UK, Boris Johnson's Conservative administration has faced specific criticism for being notably unprepared in comparison to elsewhere. In addition to this, it has been estimated that given the UK's comparatively high death rate, alongside the specific nature of its economy (namely its focus on the service/hospitality sector), that the impact of the coronavirus pandemic could be notably worse than other afflicted nations in both human and economic terms. The virus outbreak could therefore be the catalyst for Britain's worst recession in approximately 300 years[1], with a record drop in GDP recorded in April 2020, and escalating unemployment likely to exceed the most recent global depression of 2008-9 and during recurring periods of recession in the 1980s. The steep surge in UK unemployment and subsequent fall in economic output is predicted to take decades to recover from, creating bleak prospects particularly for younger age groups who've been disproportionately affected in the immediate socio-economic fall-out. The somewhat generous yet expensive commitment to furloughing employees of various affected businesses, as well as the inevitably expanding welfare expenditure, will create further longer-term economic problems for the country.

This grim scenario has therefore clearly created major political challenges for the government of the day, and some have defended frontline politicians in grappling with what

is a 'poisoned chalice' and an emergency situation that few others have ever faced. However, in various ways the Johnson administration does initially appear to have been found wanting. Specifically, with Britain recording what has been established as the highest numerical death toll in the whole of Europe, it is apparent that the existing domestic political processes were ill-prepared for such a pandemic, raising serious questions about the manner in which it has practically dealt with the outbreak. Indeed, in a similar vein to the criticism aimed at Donald Trump in the USA, various public remarks and actions by Boris Johnson during early 2020 have been highlighted to support allegations that he didn't take the threat of coronavirus seriously in the global outbreak's initial phase[2]. Subsequent policies such as the comparatively delayed lockdown, lack of patient testing facilities, and shortage of various medical equipment have added weight to such criticisms.

While there has rightly been much praise for the UK's National Health Service (NHS) in responding to the pandemic, there have nevertheless been significant concerns expressed about the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) available to those working on the medical frontline- resulting in over 200 British health workers subsequently dying. Such medical shortages have also been a factor in how the disease has rampaged through the country's care homes, which have suffered an approximate quarter of all UK coronavirus deaths. To critics, this reflects further evidence of fundamental structural problems within the country's domestic political framework, while also suggesting that a decade of austerity came home to roost in 2020. Serious questions have therefore been asked about how well-resourced the government machine was in terms of protecting its most vulnerable citizens from such an outbreak, with such criticisms heightened in the context of revelations of previous warnings dating back to 2016 that such a pandemic was likely to occur (Operation Cygnus), and which the Conservative government has been accused of ignoring.

The impact on foreign policy and international institutions

Global leadership at both an individual and institutional level has also been subject to much scrutiny during the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic. Within the context of foreign policy, the international relations theory known as 'neoliberal institutionalism' argues that global bodies and institutions will tend to positively generate co-operation and improve

relations between states. This reflects a more positive view of both human nature and the dynamics of the international order. On the basic premise of this liberal perspective therefore, key bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) should ideally work together alongside nation states for the common good in a constructive, co-operative and stabilising manner.

However there have been various concerns expressed as to how these bodies have co-ordinated their efforts and engaged with leading nation states in reacting to the coronavirus outbreak. As a high-profile example of such difficulties, President Trump has repeatedly attacked the WHO, which he alleges (in its role as a key UN agency) has positioned itself too closely to China and not sufficiently questioned about how and why the virus originated in the manner that it did. Trump subsequently threatened to withhold American funds from the WHO, called for it to "clean up its act", and eventually announced plans for the USA to leave the body. There have also been criticisms of how the European Union has co-ordinated its response to the outbreak, specifically how it reacted sluggishly to the worst cases within its jurisdiction, in particular regarding the high death toll in northern Italy during the earliest phase of the crisis. Indeed, within this context of such global institutional disarray, NGOs such as Amnesty International have voiced concerns about how such failings have resulted in specific groups across all societies being disproportionately affected in health terms by the pandemic- particularly the poorest, the oldest, and BAME communities. Such trends reflect inherent inequalities and a lack of global social justice, which both various international institutions and leading states must take collective responsibility for such evident failure in foreign policy terms.

From Britain's perspective, while the country is traditionally perceived as one of the leading world nations and economies (fuelled by its imperial past and reputation), in recent times it has struggled to influence global foreign policy, and a liberal analysis of international relations would claim it is best served to do so by its membership of various global institutions. Yet Britain voted the leave the EU in 2016, and has subsequently more closely aligned itself in foreign policy terms with the USA, with Boris Johnson cultivating a close 'special relationship' with Donald Trump. However, the leadership qualities of both men amidst this crisis has been a cause of significant concern for many political observers, and this revived

alignment with the USA has generated further concerns regarding Britain's future position of global influence. Given these specific developments, the coronavirus outbreak has also consequently resurrected anxieties from opponents of Brexit. They have highlighted perceived flaws in this re-emphasised Anglo-American connection, which in turn has led to lack of co-operation and poor communications between Britain and its geographical neighbours in the EU in the sharing of medical resources and equipment to tackle the pandemic[3]. Furthermore, many UK businesses have expressed concern that the urgent political demands created by the pandemic has clearly distracted attention from ongoing Brexit negotiations, making the prospect of a 'no deal' far more likely due to the stalled diplomacy on this matter. Prominent business groups such as the CBI have subsequently articulated collective commercial fears about how the toxic blend of the coronavirus outbreak and a no deal Brexit could be a most destructive eventuality, with calls arising for the transition period to be extended beyond the end of 2020[4].

The impact on the international structure and global politics

Since the end of the Cold War, various political commentators have observed the apparent rise and fall of American dominance and hegemony within the international arena. After an explicit 'unipolar' decade during the 1990s[5] when US strength was at its maximum capacity in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise, American global power seems to have diminished in relation to the rest of the world over the first two decades of the 21st century[6]. However, despite such fluid dynamics, the long-established American role as the premier global power appears to remain just about intact in terms of its economic, military and cultural status. Yet the extent of its hegemony of the 1990s has clearly faded, and the degree of relative American decline has been exposed by various booming economies 'catching up' from within the 'BRICS' nations, and in particular China, which has recently enjoyed rapid growth in its economic power and global influence.

Consequently, a crucial potential consequence to arise from the pandemic's outbreak is its likely impact on the international order, and whether the unipolarity of the 1990s will soon give way to either a resurrection of pre-1945 multipolarity, a renewed Cold War style bipolarity (between the USA and a rising China), or even in the longer term the possibility of

China as the dominant superpower. Within this context, how the major powers have dealt with the coronavirus outbreak could indeed prove critical to their longer-term global status. In particular, the somewhat complacent and casual nature of President Trump's initial response to the coronavirus threat has resurrected further questions about the USA's image and the extent of its relative decline on the world stage. By contrast, the Chinese government of Xi Jinping appears to have responded more efficiently than most western states, arguably to limit any longer term damage to its own regime. This may well stem from its authoritarian culture and more disciplined domestic political structures, although there has been global scepticism as to the veracity of the information regarding numbers of coronavirus deaths and infections that China has published, leading to allegations of 'cover-ups' from President Trump. British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has echoed such criticisms and warmed that it will not be "business as usual" between the UK and China in the post-pandemic era. While the Huawei ruling seems to reflect this, Sino-British relations will be tempered in reality by vital mutual trading interests.

It therefore remains to be seen as to whether the pandemic's most decisive impact will be the destruction of lingering US global hegemony, and also whether it has the potential to make the world a more dangerous and unstable place once the initial phase of the crisis subsides. This rather pessimistic viewpoint can be linked to neo-realist IR scholars such as John Mearsheimer[7], who has claimed that various global events will conspire to make the eventual conclusion of China's rapid rise far from peaceful. This can also be linked to associated theories of 'hegemonic war'[8], which claims that when one great (hegemonic) power falls and another threatens to replace it, then a military conflict is likely to resolve the new balance of power. Subsequently, such a realist outlook would warn that a prolonged moment of danger will exist in the pandemic's aftermath, arising from whether a weakened USA will be more likely to aggressively strike out at China, either via political, economic or even military means. A more optimistic (liberal) view of international relations would however advocate that the sooner these two superpowers reconstitute mutually vital trading relations via a process of complex yet peaceful interdependence, then a violent or destructive outcome to their international relationship is far less likely.

The new normal for global politics?

As the world adjusts to the 'new normal' in the wake of the pandemic's destructive outbreak, further challenges undoubtedly lie ahead for political leaders, key political institutions and globalised political structures. Pre-existing disputes between the superpowers have been heightened by the crisis and continue to simmer, with events in Hong Kong currently at the epicentre of such Sino-western tensions. Politics and political processes have ultimately struggled to adapt to the demands imposed by the pandemic, and various criticisms have been particularly directed towards how both domestic and foreign policy-making has been implemented across the international community and within interconnected nation states. Arising from such observations, it has been consequently highlighted by various commentators that the pandemic has the considerable potential to irrevocably alter the international balance of power, with significant implications for the structure of global politics in the long-term. The interconnecting dynamics between these three spheres of politics; namely domestic policy, foreign policy, and the international structure, have been fully exposed by this crisis, which clearly illustrates how each political sphere functions and interacts with the other.

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