

## Post-Pandemic World Order Possible Scenarios (The Post-New World Order)

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### Abstract

This article is an endeavor to illustrate the COVID-19 pandemic's future consequences on the world order. It focuses on analyzing current and past internal and external factors of the US and China as international great powers, without neglecting other powers, such as Russia and the European Union. The analysis explains the impacts on the economy, politics and international relations, which reflect new acts of active powers, such as attempts to expand the sphere of influence, which might be interpreted by the Offensive Realism theory. The

countries most affected by the epidemic have declined to put their trust in international organizations and allies; consequently, there are four potential scenarios that might be expected: the world may shift to the leadership of China alone; or alliances may be formed that lead to a new bipolar or unipolar world order; or global chaos and the destruction of the world order; or the continuation of US leadership. Finally, with the acceleration of international events - especially the war in Ukraine - extra factors are appearing that deserve study and analysis, as they may

contribute to reshaping the world order.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, world order, international system, global order, globalization, capitalism, neoliberalism, bipolar, unipolar, realism

### \* **Theoretical framework and research methodology**

This research stems from Mearsheimer's perspective of offensive realism, according to which the world is "anarchist", in which there is no supreme authority that leads the great powers, and power is a tool to achieve the end that is survival through hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). For a global hegemony to dominate, it is necessary to dominate in the region, and to prevent any state from dominating its surrounding region, because it will reach the other hegemonic state "you should not allow your competitor to show itself" (Mearsheimer, 2016). This perspective provides tools to measure the progress of both China and the USA, considering the Coronavirus epidemic, how they have dealt with it and its negative effects on both states. Thus, it is possible to visualize scenarios for the future world order and the states that will be more in control of it, with a

focus on China and the USA as competing players in the international arena and the two main axes in this research. In addition, to support each scenario, this research uses SWOT as a strategic tool to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities for each scenario through using the scenario planning strategic tool, which has been adopted by researchers to foster a more valuable approach to enable them to have an impact as a profession on significant policy spots (Bernstein et al., 2001, pp. 52–45).

### \* **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has been encouraging politicians and economists to analyze international relations because this crisis has affected all states on all sides; economic, political, and social. Besides the effects on human health, the Coronavirus has affected international relations because of the fast global spread of this disease and the need for cooperation among states to deal with it. However, that cooperation, especially among allies, was not as expected, and some states felt frustrated and isolated in the face of the epidemic (Kissinger, 2020). From this point, in the opinion of many, a change was expected in the

world order because of that negative impact. In March 2020, Foreign Policy magazine published the opinions of a group of scholars about the Corona epidemic's impact on the future of the world order, such as the shift of power from the West to the East, the shift to global disorder, or the continuation of the situation without change, etc. (Allen et al., 2020; Fukuyama, 2020). These opinions included indications about the expected scenarios, which are no more than indications, however, because they need further analysis and evidence for each scenario. Therefore, the goal of this research is to clarify the potential scenarios and collect evidence that supports or refutes each of them. This research stems from the hypothesis of the existence of four main scenarios, each of which was circulated through the opinions of experts published in academic references or the media. They are: first, the growth of China's international role; second, the collapse of existing orders; third, bipolarity or multipolarity; and fourth, continuity of the leading role of the US.

#### **\* The world order and the international system**

It is crucial to begin by noting that the concept of the world order is

not identical to the international system, although some theorists and experts mix the two terms, whether wrongly or intentionally, considering that they embody the same concept. Besides, some people think that there is no world order at all (Sorensen, 2006). The international system in this research indicates a group of international institutions, such as the United Nations and the Security Council, and the reflected international agreements aimed at controlling and codifying international relations in all their fields through what is called international law.

#### **\* The concept of world order**

The concept of the world order is more inclusive than that of the international system, as the latter includes internationally recognized states and organizations, while the world order may include all powers, even if they are not states or international organizations. On the other hand, the world order is the most profound aspect of global relations, interests and power. Therefore, it needs more in-depth analysis because its processes and institutions are not all explicit, visible, and publicized.

*“...The ‘world order’ remains a fuzzy concept, because theories do not*

*concur on the substantive content of world order defined as a governing arrangement among states. Realists will emphasize the balance of power; liberals will focus on international institutions....” (Sorensen, 2006, p. 344).*

The concept of the world order refers to the relations of states and international powers and their distribution, according to their strength and influence, into effective controlling powers, emerging or medium-strength powers, or weak forces, and the extent of their control throughout global events. The fact is that the world order has only been reflecting the active or most substantial and most controlling forces in the world, because those are the ones that determine the shape of the world order. Since the Westphalian Agreement, the international system was supposed to represent the will of states and regulate international relations. However, the world order and the dominant states throughout history since then have consistently demonstrated the impotence of the international system and correspondingly the effectiveness of the world order. Active states can control or alternatively even ignore the international system organizations and

move forward to achieve their interests. The 1990s brought about a shift in the world order from bipolarity to unilateralism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1989s, the term ‘new world order’ came to the surface as a new era began, with a new system based on American uniqueness leading the world and the dissemination of the West’s political and economic values. That resulted from the U.S superiority in power of all kinds, economic, military and political. This situation continues to this day to some extent.

#### **\* The pandemic brings the world order back to the table**

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, news channels and global websites have been ignited by political and economic analysts’ perspectives about the new world order, along with the extent of the impact of this epidemic and the necessary preventive and remedial measures on the world order and its future form. Most of the opinion has indicated an inevitable change in the world order and the possibility of the emergence of a new world order. However, if that happened, it would be a post-new world order, if we want to be accurate in defining the concepts

and terminology. This is because the concept of a new world order has not been the result of the Corona crisis (Mann, 2002), but rather it has been proposed since the 1990s after the Gulf War of 1991 (Bush, 1990) and was intended, as mentioned above, to be the beginning of a unipolar system built on the ruins of the old world order that was based on bipolarity.

In fact, the new world order (post-new) concept was raised again at the beginning of the third millennium because of the rapid growth of the economy of some states, especially China, where the rate of growth in the GDP increased from 8.4% in 2000 to 14.2% in 2007. By contrast, the growth rate in the US economy was declining from 4.2% to 1.8% in the same period (The World Bank, 2022).

From the above, it is evident that talk about a change in the world order is not new (Karaganov & Suslov, 2020, p. 59). It is rather linked to the rise, progress, development or decline of states, especially in the economic field. Nevertheless, it may be too early to talk about a new or post-new world order, as it has been ‘only’ about two years since the spread of the Coronavirus, and the economic statistics have not yet become evident. However, it must be

recognized that the impact of the spread of Covid-19 was and is still severe. The biggest problem has been the international approach to dealing with this epidemic and how far this approach has been truly international or just national.

#### \* **The world order scenarios**

From a strategic point of view, the world order may be exposed to one of four scenarios; first, the retreat of the US’s role as China advances; second, global disorder; third, bipolarity or multipolarity; and fourth, the continuation of US–Western sovereignty.

#### **First scenario: the growth of China’s international role**

Each period of history has presented some of the weaknesses of the Western-led world order. China tried to take advantage of that weakness and present itself as a better choice of leader. After the financial crisis of 2008, serious indicators hinted at a possible change in the world order (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 18). Therefore, China launched a new strategy of involvement in world leadership, but this strategy has remained soft, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the One Belt, One Road vision (Acharya, 2016).

At the beginning of 2020, the effects of the Corona crisis on economies began to appear. China's situation can be deduced from the size of that impact on its economy and growth compared to the impact on the American economy. Some indicators support the scenario of China's growth taking a leading role at the expense of the US role. The most important indicator, as mentioned, is the economic aspect, and it is not surprising that this epidemic has had a profound negative impact on all states' economies. The US GDP shrank by 9.1% in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same quarter of the previous year, and the situation was bad in China, but the contraction there occurred in the first quarter and at a rate 6.8% less than the United States. What supports this scenario is that the Chinese economy began to recover in the second quarter, when the growth rate was estimated at 3.2%, in contrast to the US economy for the same period as mentioned earlier. Moreover, China's GDP growth was 2.3% at the end of 2020, while the US GDP was back under zero at -3.6% (The World Bank, 2022). From those statistics, China's economy has shown a stronger recovery than that of the US, which, if

it continues, may lead to the superiority of China's economy and support this scenario.

Politically, besides the delay in diagnosing the threat and blaming China and the World Health Organization, the USA and Western powers seemed almost incapable of fulfilling their duties towards the allied states, which was a significant defect. Nevertheless, China is counted on for the extent of trust and continuity in alliances and the extent to which China meets their interests in times of great need (Zhao, 2021, p. 233). On the other hand, in the view of some scholars, China moved quickly in response to the need to contain the epidemic and get out of the crisis. It also provided medical aid and expertise to other countries using soft power, or so-called coronavirus diplomacy (Zhao, 2021, p. 233). In 2020, China assisted four international organizations and over 145 countries and sent 29 medical expert teams (State Council, 2020). China tried to win the confidence of many states when it showed its willingness to extend a helping hand and indeed extended that hand to not only allied states but even unfriendly states. China has created the Health Silk Road by providing medical

support to states including the US (Huang, 2020). Although what China has done and is doing is for political reasons, this momentum may support this first scenario and improve China's image with other states and peoples. Consequently, those states may prefer to enter alliances with China rather than continue the existing alliances that failed to help them at this critical time (Sharma et al., 2021, p. 37). As Chinese President Xi Jinping says, "global solidarity is required to eradicate COVID-19 from the world. By contributing a large amount of medical support, China has demonstrated her global role" (People's Daily, 2020).

Besides the Belt and Road diplomacy and the assistance provided to many countries in their infrastructure development, China has gained the confidence of some countries as a result of its medical aid diplomacy during this epidemic, which means, according to the offensive realism theory, that China has seemed to be trying to break free of the cordon imposed around it by the US. And it is still trying to win allies in the surrounding area in order to move from regionalism to a global role. Therefore, China's position may develop

internationally to achieve a global status at the expense of the US.

### **Second scenario: global disorder, collapse of orders**

This scenario completes the previous one in the event that the US role continues to retreat along with China's inability to fill the void and take the helm, which might lead to the collapse of the world order. Some scholars support the idea of the collapse of the world order, including Professor Zhang Baohui at the University of Hong Kong: "What people fear now is the prospect of a new Cold War, which would certainly imply a breakdown of that order," Zhang says (Drew, 2020). The world entering into what could be called global disorder means retreating inwardly and maximizing national interests at the expense of regional and international interests. In this scenario, the concept of the international system approaches the world order. States' confidence will be weakened on two sides; first in allied regional and international powers, and second in international organizations.

When the great powers are unable to meet the needs of their allies in a time of crisis, the allied states begin to think negatively about the

international system and world order. Equally, in the extent of that alliance that assigned them only obligations without benefits and interests, the Western camp, or specifically the European Union, for example, did not stand as a supporter of states that were about to be destroyed by the epidemic. Some powerful states, such as Germany, refused or procrastinated in providing economic support to states in the same union, such as Serbia. The US also cut off its support to the World Health Organization (WHO) (Sharma et al., 2021, p. 37). The epidemic has led to harsh national measures, and with the lack of international cooperation, countries have become isolated from each other, even within unions such as the European Union, which has led to the rise of nationalism. One of the issues was related to how governments responded to the pandemic; immediately or slowly (Goede, 2020, p. 314). Although some countries took immediate and strong measures, including going into lockdown, other countries preferred to ignore the WHO's overdue warnings and pursued what is called "herd immunity" (Harvey et al., 2020; Wilson, 2020), or responded poorly, such as the United Kingdom and the

USA (Sparrow, 2020). That may confirm the destabilization of the international organizations' credibility on the one hand, and of the confidence of governments in the organizations' decisions and analyses on the other hand, all of which may support this second scenario. The international organizations seem to have become weakened (Herteux, 2020, p. 132), but the most important one today is the World Health Organization, which seems instead to be confused. Many criticisms and accusations have been raised around it, largely because of the delay in declaring Covid-19 as a global epidemic, which in turn delayed the correct handling of the crisis. The situations of the international organizations and actions of the international powers have led to the adoption of national measures which were isolated from the world, even though the epidemic is global and needs global action to stop it. This rise of nationalism may threaten local peace and result in conflicts and international rivalries that destabilize international stability (Fukuyama, 2020).

Hence, considering the Western distrust of China, despite the aid it provides, states may judge it better not



to enter into unreliable alliances in times of need. In return, states will resort to strengthening their internal systems and self-reliance to face crises after international agreements, whether for mutual defense or mutual economic growth, given this position and that confidence rate.

Under this scenario, states will abandon the policy of interdependence. However, it is worth underlining that severe crises and disasters such as Covid-19 need international cooperation. Moreover, no country will be able to face it alone, not only because of the growing negative impact of this pandemic but simply because this virus is rapid in its spread across borders and continents; it is global. So, how can a national policy and an internal force face it? Therefore, with this preference for self-reliance, political disputes or conflicts based on the offensive realism theory and depending on national interest and actual power may arise, leading to global disorder. The goal of the state will be to survive, and to do so will bring the possibility of engaging in regional or international conflicts.

### **Third scenario: bipolarity or multipolarity**

This scenario relies on the decline of the US economy and its global political role on the one hand, and on China's current inability to lead the world alone on the other hand. This may cause some developed and developing countries to increase their competitiveness and contribute to reshaping the world order (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 17) and transform it from unipolarity to a multipolar or bipolar system.

The Corona crisis prompted most countries of the world to develop their internal conditions. This crisis awakened those countries from their slumber and was a reason for strengthening patriotism and their ability to choose and diversify their international relations (Degterev, 2019, p. 404). Within the framework of expectations of de-globalization and the decline of Western hegemony politically, economically and militarily, which had lasted for five hundred years (Karaganov & Suslov, 2020), some scholars' analyses and expectations have begun to focus on the pivotal countries that will form the poles of a multipolar world order. They expect that the power will shift from

west to east; from the western countries represented by the US to eastern countries. But a few countries will contribute to establishing the new multipolar world order, such as Russia, China and other BRICS countries, and some EU states (Dunford & Qi, 2020, p. 11).

This optimistic scenario includes going through a period of strong conflicts and competition between the US on the one hand and China and Russia on the other hand, which it is suggested may last four years after the Corona crisis. During this period, some countries will try to gradually disengage from both axes and rely on developing their own internal capacity and forming multiple alliances (Dunford & Qi, 2020, p. 11). Nowadays, China is testing the independence of Taiwan, with attempt flying corps missions near Taiwan. The biggest such invasion this year came the day after the US, alongside Japan, moved a flotilla of Navy ships into the Philippine Sea as a component of a training exercise. In the meantime, shut off from the world, North Korea has stepped up its rocket launches. So, each active power is trying to expand its regional borders to participate in reshaping the world order.

Some of the countries that are considered a basis for the Western alliance, such as Australia, the UK, and even the Arab Gulf states, have begun to abandon gradually (Raymond, 2018), or at least conduct a process of balancing the alliance, distributing their relations with China and Russia, and not waiting and limiting themselves to the Western alliance (Blagden, 2019). Despite the optimism in this scenario that the end of the unipolar world order is inevitable, the rationale has led many scholars to acknowledge that the world order will be bipolar and not multipolar. They base this judgement on hundreds of economic, military, political, technological and cultural indicators (Degterev, 2019, p. 414) that lead to results that prove that the two powers capable of competing and striking a balance are the US and China, which will reshape the world order as a bipolarity, while the rest of the emerging countries, including Russia and the EU will be allies of those two main poles. Russia, for example, does not have a strategy or vision for the future of the global system, while its internal and external crises may threaten complete collapse (Karaganov & Suslov, 2020, p. 75). Therefore, it

cannot be considered as a pole in a multipolar world. However, Russia might enter an alliance with China that enhances its position and strength, although in current times we are witnessing important alterations concerning Ukraine. Russia is trying to expand its regional vital space and break the cordon that was imposed by the US around it, because Russia knows well that it is necessary to dominate in the region if it is to play an international role. However, by using the military method, Russia may need to confront many states and international organizations, which may lead to limiting its vision. On the other hand, China has avoided choosing to go down this route not only by always verbally emphasizing international peace, but also by using political or economic methods to deal with its surroundings.

Among the effects of the Corona crisis, many of the emerging and developed countries' economies have declined, and the impacts of the lockdown, safety measures, and health and preventive expenses have had serious effects on these countries' position, so bipolarity may be the most likely outcome, in light of the threats of

Covid-19, Delta, Omicron and further viruses arising.

#### **Fourth scenario: continuity**

The scenario of continuing the status quo is supported by the possible answer to the following question: is China or any other country capable and qualified to lead the world or dominate in a similar way to the current situation of the US concerning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic?

The ability, as mentioned earlier, is economic, but despite the importance of this aspect, the other aspects of ability and power are of great importance and to them should be added the internal capacity. Many analysts and experts believe that China is still at a stage of incomplete growth and may be dysfunctional. In economic terms, and despite the remarkable growth in China's GDP, the size of the US economy still far exceeds it. The US GDP was about 21 trillion US dollars in 2020, while China's was about 15 trillion US dollars (The World Bank, 2022), so there is still an enormous gap between them, besides superiority in the military field and international influence.

Some scholars avoid talking about a new world order that might emerge in this period because the

United States and Europe are not prepared to participate all together in a structure with Russia, China, and other major non-Western players. They believe that the US will prevent any such attempts by using any method available to continue leading the world, at least for the next 20 years (Karaganov & Suslov, 2020, p. 60). Even those who support China's superiority and the possibility of its international role believe that the real Chinese economy will not outperform the American economy before 2030 (Economy, 2022, p. 53). More explicitly, even though America's domineering position might decline, its liberal advantages; global receptiveness, rules, and multilateral collaboration, are well established and liable to endure. Similarly, just as critically, rising states (driven by China) are not concerned with a front-facing assault on the U.S. While battles do really exist over directions, plans, and authority, the non-Western emerging nations remain attached to the standards of the liberal-situated world order. What's more, even as China looks for different ways to construct rival provincial organizations, there are obstinate cut-

off points on what it can do (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 18).

Besides, the change in the US from Trump to Biden's administration has led to an optimistic vision, since the US strategy during Trump's administration was focused on domestic affairs and abandoned international standing, while Biden is driving strategies to restore and strengthen the US's international standing after years of decline. That optimistic vision includes an expectation of stabilization of the world order by dealing effectively with the many issues that the world faces, such as economic recovery and COVID-19 (Struye, 2021, p. 130).

On the other hand, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which China is working to implement as a network connecting the countries of the world with it, is a vital project to maintain the momentum of its economic growth and ensure the smooth export of its goods to world countries, so it is considered an important part of China's strategy. However, BRI has been subject to many criticisms, such as the accumulation of debts in the partner countries and damage to the environment (Ruta, 2018), The Corona crisis added other negatives as a result

of the delay in implementing projects and the stagnation of most economic activities because of the repeated closures (Nedopil, 2021). China's foreign investment has declined by 54%, and this has led to the suffering of the Belt and Road countries (Zeng et al., 2021, p. 38). Therefore, the BRI, which was one of the factors supporting China's growth, may in fact burden China and become a factor in and evidence of China's decline.

However, America's unipolar world leadership is being tested once again on the Ukraine issue. In line with Russia's attempts to break the cordon imposed by the United States and NATO, it is trying to control and expand within its regional environment to secure the ability to play a global role (Collinson, 2022), especially in controlling and putting pressure on the European side in energy imports (Santora, 2022). The success or failure of the United States in preventing Russia from controlling Ukraine may be one important factor that contributes to either the reconfiguration of the world order or the continuation of its current form.

This scenario may also be related to the length of the crisis period, not only concerning the Coronavirus

and the new mutated generations, the effectiveness of vaccines and preventive measures, and the need for continued periods of lockdown, but also connected with the crises left by this epidemic at all levels.

#### **\* Conclusion**

The spread of the Coronavirus has left deep health, humanitarian, economic and political crises. Moreover, the crisis has come in a critical period that is full of complex international relations and causing the rise or decline of some global powers. Therefore, while discussing and analyzing the future world order resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic as a fundamental factor, it is impossible to ignore the other factors related to the current and recent period of history. The past and present international relations, including shaping and reshaping the world order, have emerged from many aspects in many fields, not only one. However, the Corona crisis may be a critical factor that has encouraged scholars to anticipate changes in the world order more than in the past. This factor could also accelerate the possible shift. Therefore, in this article, not only was an attempt made to monitor what the Corona crisis has caused as

indicators of possible international changes, but also some economic and political conditions, especially those related to the principal axes of competition, the USA and China, were analyzed. The economic factors in the first scenario of the growth of China's international role tipped the balance in favor of China because of its good growth before the Corona crisis and gradual recovery during the crisis, which are the same factors that might alternatively show the possibility of tipping the scales in favor of the US. Despite the economic decline of the US during the Corona crisis, as the fourth scenario of continuity showed, its total economic volume is still superior. This complexity of factors is normal in the field of international relations, and it cannot be judged in a hurry, because economic matters take a long time to evolve and become clear, which may take decades. Nevertheless, China remains superior based on the continuous growth index of its economy and the continuous decline of the US economy during the Corona crisis on the other hand. But other important factors, such as the medical and non-medical soft power exercised by China, and the Western retreat from the support of allies during the crisis,

can be shown to support the first scenario. But with the world accustomed to the liberal capitalist Western style, the transition to a completely different system will not be easy. Here it must be said that China is fully aware that communist or socialist ideas will not be accepted on the world-leading platform, so it is trying to create an economic system in line with the current situation, at least in a transitional stage. Therefore, it is necessary to talk about reshaping both the world order and the international system, because both have failed to meet the needs of the world's countries in crises. Likewise, the concept of a new world order may be proposed at this time in order to reshape the economic system to revive the global economy and save it from a potential recession - according to economists - which is dangerous for all the peoples of the earth. Nevertheless, the critical question here is: Will China have a significant role in this reconfiguration (if it happens)? If the aid provided by China in the medical and health fields, and its willingness to cooperate in controlling this pandemic, contribute to strengthening its position globally, will this be sufficient for it to play a global leadership role? On the other

hand, China kept the virus secret at the beginning of the pandemic, which negatively affected how it was dealt with in the rest of the world. Also, to this day, China remains accused of not cooperating in allowing experts and investigators to enter Wuhan to conduct investigations to find out how this epidemic started and spread. Most important of all is the question that has surfaced about the possibility of world leadership by countries with totalitarian regimes. In conclusion, the concept of internal capacity should not be confused with the concept of totalitarianism and dictatorship. Internal capacity does not mean authoritarianism and dictatorship, but on the contrary, capacity means the ability of governments to persuade people. In the same direction, this does not mean only the Western concepts of democracy and capitalism, but the most important of them is the term transparency and its application. Governments should be able to declare their failures or mistakes in the same way that they announce their success and achievements. Is China capable of this?

Finally, does China have the capacity, competence and perspective to lead the world? Or will it be unable

to do so and instead consider sharing the leadership with other countries? Or will it emerge that no-one, including Russia, has a perspective on how to lead the world, with the result that the world will enter into chaos, abandoning the world order and system or alliances? Incidentally, the Russian attack on Ukraine may be seen as the beginning of this end. Despite all the material and military aid to Ukraine from the West, this is not enough; it was expected that the US, Western, and NATO positions would be firmer in the face of Russian audacity. Bearing in mind that this Western position is based on the principle of avoiding a new world war, still what has been done has not been enough to deter Russia, and it is now emerging from its circle and expanding its influence. Will China take the same attitude towards Taiwan, hammering in the final nail in the coffin of Western–American leadership and supremacy?

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