

International Relations Beyond the Corona Crisis: Strategic Options for Gulf Countries



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Introduction

“As it has always been, history will be written by the victors of the Coronavirus crisis”, General John Allen, the president of the Brookings Institution and former commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, said in his assessment of the effect of the Corona crisis on the international system. His assessment is based on a realistic analysis from a historical perspective. The world order that has existed since the end of World War II was based on the policies and interests of the victors in that war. Major changes in the policies of countries are driven by crises, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001. However, transformation in international relations is not as simple as it looks, for two important reasons:

First: Although the major transformations in the world were due to changes in the balance of power at the international level, regional events have had a share in driving such changes. For example, the transformations that the Arab region has witnessed since 2011, have had an impact on the internal political systems in European countries resulting from the influx of migrants and refugees, as well being a reason for the Russian presence in Syria, which created a new regional equation.

Second: Reshuffles in the international power structure come always in the aftermath of wars, but the Coronavirus crisis has different characteristics: it relates to the scientific, medical, and economic capabilities of states, not only towards their citizens, but within the international context.

Based on the foregoing, it may be premature to talk about a specific pattern of international relations after the Corona crisis which may stay with us for many months and likely more, but one thing is certain: the world after the Corona crisis will not be the same as it was before it. Hence the need to discuss and analyze this issue from all angles. This does not mean that this or other reports foresee an inevitable major change in the international system, but rather it is part of the strategic dialogue that is now taking place in all parts of the world.

The Gulf and Arab regions are an integral part of this dialogue and discussions, especially in terms of **(a) the impact of the crisis on US relations with the rest of the world, China and the European Union, in particular, (b) how will Russia use the crisis to strengthen its role on the world stage, (c) the future of the European Union itself, (d) the possible changes in the international relations system and (e) the strategic options available to the Gulf countries in respect of the anticipated changes and transformations.**

First: The Future of US-China Relations

The Corona crisis presented an opportunity for China to make gains in the area of international relations, as the European territories became a battleground between the US and China for gaining favor with the Europeans. While the United States abandoned its traditional European allies and had no regard to its bilateral partnerships with them or to the defense framework represented by NATO, we find that China was prompt in providing aid and assistance to several European countries to the extent that it became a symbol of "humanitarian action" or for what is called "medical aid diplomacy". Indeed, these concepts and slogans formed the basis for Chinese policy during the crisis. China sought to formulate and promote a new concept of globalization to preserve the interest of all countries based on humanitarian and cooperative principles to protect the achievements and advances of the human race. This approach was helped by China's ability to manage and contain the crisis at the national level, although China was the origin of the outbreak of this pandemic. Developments have clearly shown that China was the "medical factory of the world" and a leader in knowledge and know-how. China had had detailed information about the Coronavirus, detection techniques and devices, and medical protection equipment. It also has 5G internet networks, smartphones, and the necessary applications as part of the all-out war on the pandemic. What was most significant, however, was China's willingness not only to share medical and scientific information with other countries, but to also help Italy, Iran, Serbia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Iraq by giving aid or sending medical teams. This had important implications for China's role at the global level. The Chinese behavior was not governed by the logic of profit and loss, but rather came from the standpoint of international humanitarian responsibility, and this was what many countries of the world were counting on: to have an international framework for responding to this common threat.

The following two indicators reflect the significance of the international role of China during the Coronavirus crisis:

First: China's production capacity of medical supplies increased tenfold during the crisis. It is worth noting that China has more than a 95% share of the US antibiotic market.

Second: The intense activity of Chinese diplomacy to communicate with other countries and exchange medical information about the pandemic, through the circulation of public videos and calls and contact with the Central and Eastern European countries of the "17 + 1" Group, the secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which is dubbed as the "Asian NATO" and ten countries within the islands of the Pacific Ocean, in addition to contact with many other countries in Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Based on the above, the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on US-China relations can be summarized in the following:

1. The Corona crisis added a new element to the powers of the state. State's powers are no longer limited to traditional elements such as the armed forces and weaponry etc., but now include science, education, and the health/medical system. This means the ability of a state to protect its citizens during outbreaks of epidemics, in addition to having sufficient stocks of strategic commodities during crises, especially if countries are forced to close their borders for months or possibly for a year. Therefore, this crisis will change the priorities of some countries when they realize that they are fighting a new war, a war that does not depend on conventional weapons and equipment, but rather on the power of science and knowledge.
2. Although the United States is still the greatest power in the world, thanks to its economic and military might, including a naval force deployed in strategic places around the world, the United States may have to answer the question posed by former US President Bill Clinton when he asked: "Should we cooperate with the world or lead it? And the answer should be "cooperation". According to experts, the United States' leadership of the world during the past seven decades was based on three pillars: (1) the legitimacy of the political system in the country, (2) US' ability to supply and provide commodities and goods to the global market and (3) its ability and desire to mobilize joint international responses to disasters and crises - including forming and leading an alliance of dozens of countries to fight the Ebola virus in African countries during 2014-2015. However, such a level of leadership was not evident in the world's fight against the Coronavirus. It is even too early to judge the ability of the US to overcome the pandemic on its soil, especially in the absence of a central mechanism for dealing with this type of pandemic that spread to fifty states.

The crisis showed that the health system in the US was weak, and it exposed the negative impact of the absence of a social support network. All this will not only cast a shadow on the upcoming presidential elections, but also on US foreign policy which may look inwards to focus more on domestic issues rather than international problems. Such a scenario will be a good opportunity for its competitors, especially China, to expand their sphere of influence.

3. This matter does not only help the rise of China, but also the anti-US bloc in general, as it is quite possible that there may be mutual understanding and cooperation in this regard between China, Russia, and Iran. Although there may be points of differences in the stances of the three countries, they would all like to end American dominance of the world order which has continued since the end of the Second World War. Let us not forget that the three countries are members of the Shanghai Organization, as mentioned before, the so-called "Asian NATO".

Assuming that there will likely be some sort of a change in the international system or world order, there are two other important questions that need to be answered:

First: What is the timeframe for that change?

Second: Does China possess the required attributes for becoming a superpower?

As for the time needed for that change to take place, there are no indications that it will happen in the foreseeable future. Certain analysts are tempted to compare the United States in the wake of the Corona crisis to the British after the intervention in the Suez crisis in 1956, which marked the beginning of the decline of Britain in the region and elsewhere. However, we think that this comparison is not correct both in terms of context or the nature of the crisis.

As for the attributes that China needs to possess to become a superpower, we can very briefly say that economic power is necessary, but it is not sufficient for making a superpower. The matter also relates to the values embraced by the political system, which China lacks. Furthermore, there is no comparison between the military might of the United States and China, nor its economic power. The US dollar is the currency of the world's trade and economy. Most importantly, the US has the capabilities needed to address or resolve crises that can cause instability in the international system or

regional order, like the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. For these reasons, China is often described as the “incomplete superpower.” What we can say is that the Corona crisis is a rare opportunity for China to increase its influence on the international stage, but this will not be easy.

Second: The Future of the European Union

The Coronavirus crisis was a real test of the European Union’s principle of solidarity as Italy and Spain found themselves fighting the pandemic on their own, with deaths in the latter exceeding that in China. Germany, along with nine other northern European countries, rejected the idea of collective borrowing through “Corona Bonds” to help mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic. In response, the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte warned that “If Europe does not show itself to be up to this task, the whole European Union risks losing its reason for existing”. French President Emmanuel Macron agreed, saying that, “We will not overcome this crisis without strong European solidarity in terms of health and budget”. The French Minister for European Affairs, Amelie de Montchalin, said that “If Europe is just a single market when times are good, then it has no sense”, adding that “Europe’s populist parties would be the winners if EU leaders failed to act together during a major crisis”. There are many indications of European disunity during this crisis, in terms of the unilateral decisions taken by the EU members and the focus of each country on its problems. The reasons for the individualistic behavior of European countries in responding to the Coronavirus crisis can be explained as follows:

1. The health sector is the responsibility of each European country and not the EU as a whole.
2. The severity of the crisis was greater than the economic and technical capabilities of the EU and the sudden outbreak of the Coronavirus took EU member states by surprise and did not allow them time to agree on a unified response to the crisis. It was only on 27 March 2020 that the leaders of the European Union decided to give their finance ministers fifteen days to come up with a unified mechanism to deal with the crisis.
3. There are differences between the member states of the EU on other issues. These differences were exposed by the Corona crisis though were not directly caused by it, such as the differences between the Southern and Northern countries of the European Union.

Despite the intensity of the differences between the EU member states during the crisis, it cannot be said that the crisis will be a reason for the disintegration of the European Union. The EU took decades of strenuous efforts to come into being and the member states are likely to take further measures to strengthen the Union. Furthermore, there still exist some concerns and issues that require the continuation of the EU, such as the Russian challenge and certain international issues that require a common European stance.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the crisis will have certain effects on the future of the European Union as a regional organization, as follows:

1. The European public, like the rest of the world, feels that some issues and challenges can only be tackled by the national state and not through blocs or regional organizations. Right-wing and populist groups will try to nurture this belief, which means that these groups may rise to power, especially if they rally behind a major issue such as calling for the national independence of states in the areas of medicine and healthcare.
2. In the wake of this crisis, there will be some important questions that need to be answered in many European countries about the reasons for neglecting the health sector. The severity of this negligence was exposed by the complete dependence of Europe on Chinese medical and personal protection products.
3. At the EU level, some articles of the incorporation of the Union may need to be reconsidered or a new European document may have to be issued on the concepts of collective action or national security after the Coronavirus. The functional integration, which was one of the main principles on which the EU was founded, may also need to be reviewed, especially after each country was seen to be focusing on its affairs and did not show a desire to help other European countries. In other words, in the aftermath of this crisis, European countries may see that the mechanisms mentioned in the EU Treaty document on cooperation, especially during crises, are insufficient and need to be reconsidered.

Third: The Future of US-European Relations

Although the Corona crisis was not the cause of the US-European dispute, the decision of US President Donald Trump to ban Europeans from entering the US, without consulting European countries (as part of the precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the virus), was a major escalation in this dispute. In a statement condemning the ban, the European Union said that, “The Coronavirus is a global crisis, not limited to any continent and it requires cooperation rather than unilateral action”, and that, “The European Union disapproves of the fact that the U.S. decision to impose a travel ban was taken unilaterally and without consultation.”

The fact of the matter is that there are deep differences between the United States and its European partners since President Trump came to power. These differences include **(1)** Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran, **(2)** Europe's efforts to form an independent security identity for the European Union, which was often voiced by France and **(3)** the call by the US president on the European NATO members to allocate 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) for defense, in addition to **(4)** trade disputes between the two sides.

Despite the significance of the above, the so-called “break-up of Western alliances and partnerships” is not foreseeable for the following reasons:

1. There is another defense framework that binds the two sides, the US and Europe, together; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which all parties want to keep.
2. The EU plays a major role in some crises that pose a challenge to both the US and Europe, including, but not limited to, the European Union's decision to lead a naval operation to enforce the United Nations' arms embargo on the warring factions in Libya.
3. Russia remains a common challenge to both sides, despite the developing Russian relations with several European countries, including Italy and Turkey - members of NATO.

Fourth: Russia's Use of the Coronavirus Crisis to Strengthen its International Role

Although Russia has remained silent for a long time about blaming the US for the spread of the Coronavirus, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated on 29 March 2020 saying that "Russia has no data on an alleged "US role" in the coronavirus outbreak, but there are some questions for Washington", adding that "the United States has for many decades been the main driving force of globalization, and has tried to use it to promote its geopolitical and economic interests. Now it can only blame itself because it has not considered the negative side of this globalization". The statement contains clear criticism of US policies in general.

Despite the telephone call that the US President had with his Russian counterpart on 30 March 2020, and the alleged reports about "the possibility of forging close cooperation between the two countries in the fight against the Corona pandemic", Russia has sought to use this crisis to promote its interests, as follows:

1. Despite the scarcity of official Russian statements on the Russian view of how to collectively confront the Corona pandemic, the sending of health and medical assistance by Russia to Italy - a member of the European Union and NATO, is significant Russian penetration of the Western alliance. Russia was also in the process of significantly developing its relations with Turkey, another NATO member, by providing it with an S-400 missile system, despite US opposition to the deal while Turkey also insists not to integrate it into the NATO missile shield system.
2. Russia's attempts to politicize the Corona crisis: Russia did not only offer to provide medical support to Iran, but the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman also called for lifting the sanctions imposed on Iran. He described the US policy towards Iran in light of the Coronavirus crisis as "inhuman", noting that US sanctions against Iran are an obstacle to effectively fight the infection. He added that "the reason for the many pandemic victims lies not only in the disease itself but also in the fact that the US purposefully hinders the fight against the Coronavirus", calling for the lifting of, what he described as, "unfair sanctions" against Iran. Furthermore, Russia and China have led a campaign

at the UN to lift European and US sanctions imposed on several countries, namely Syria, Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, and Nicaragua. A letter signed by the eight countries was sent to the Secretary-General of the United Nations saying that the lifting of sanctions will help these countries in the fight against the Corona pandemic.

3. Russia's systematic media campaign to use the repercussions of the Corona crisis to strengthen the authority of the Russian President. The Russian media focused on what it called, "state of the European collapse" and praised the "heroic role" of Russia in supporting Italy, a member of the European Union, and NATO. This campaign no doubt helped to boost the popularity of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, who was preparing to call the Russian people to vote on a referendum on constitutional amendments that would allow him to remain in power until after the end of his second and last term in office in 2024. The referendum was postponed indefinitely because of the Corona crisis. The propaganda that accompanied the campaign was not well received by European countries. In this context, the French Minister for European Affairs Amelie de Montchalin accused China and Russia of "instrumentalizing" their aid to other countries during the Corona crisis. They were "staging" their aid campaigns for propaganda purposes, she said.
4. Failure to reach an agreement on oil prices between Russia on the one hand, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and OPEC on the other meant dumping large quantities of oil in the markets, which in turn sent oil prices spiraling downward.
5. Attempts to show that the Corona crisis would have no impact on future Russian strategic projects. In this regard, the Director of the Russian Space Policy Institute said that the Coronavirus crisis will not reduce the Russian space program and that Russia intends to launch about 40 space missiles during this year 2020.

Fifth: The Nature and Pillars of Possible Changes in the International Relations System

As mentioned earlier, changes in the international relations system are not a simple thing, and they often come about in the wake of major crises that end up with victors and losers. However, the Coronavirus crisis, which is still ongoing at the time of writing this report, is unique both in terms of its nature and its impact that will spare no country. Therefore, coming up with one scenario or another may be deficient in analysis, but we can talk about two things: **First**: the nature of the change in the relations system and **second**: the basis of this change.

Regarding the nature of the expected change, we can say the following:

1. Given the economic losses caused by the crisis, stiff competition will most likely follow, especially between Europe and China over African and Asian resources; trade and raw materials particular. In Africa and Asia, we can find the least expensive resources and the consumer markets that are hungry for all products that come from East and West.
2. The possibility of expanding the roles of additional players within the framework of the international relations system. It is quite feasible to increase the role of the G20 in fighting the pandemic or in providing the necessary financial resources, especially that the G20 was established primarily to address a crisis; the global financial crisis.
3. The role of the United States in the international relations system. Whether it decides to adopt an introvert inward-looking policy or continues its present policies, will largely depend on its ability to address the economic consequences of the crisis, and on its success in forming international alliances to fight the pandemic.

Concerning the pillars of the change, these will be as follows:

1. **Scientific and technological capabilities.** The country that finds a cure for the Coronavirus will have a strong foothold in the new international relations system.

2. **Economic capabilities.** These are an important factor considering the losses suffered by all world economies as a result of the pandemic.
3. **Future directions of political groups in western countries.** Political groups may feel that now is not the right time to hold their governments accountable for what they may see as shortcomings in dealing with the crisis. However, once the crisis is over, they will have a major impact on the nature of the political systems in many European countries. Some groups may decide to continue with their existing partnerships and alliances, but with certain conditions such as seeking to make healthcare part of the collective function of the European Union, though it may remain the responsibility of individual countries. Other groups, especially those from the right, may see that there is no point in these alliances, which are becoming a burden instead of being a collective umbrella for joint action. Migration, which was one of the causes behind the rise of the extreme right in European countries, can be cited as an example of this effect.

Sixth: Strategic Options for Gulf Countries

The question that arises after these discussions is, “What are the strategic options available to the Gulf countries for dealing with the post-Corona world?”

Before answering this question, we must emphasize one important point, which is: The Gulf states are small countries and so one of their main challenges is to preserve their national security, especially given the prevailing regional instability due to Iran's interventionist policies and its pursuit to develop nuclear weapons. The Gulf states, therefore, still need international partnerships and alliances to preserve their security. At the same time, the Gulf states – similar to other countries in the world - face economic challenges due to the drop in oil prices, in addition to the security challenges caused by the continuing regional crises in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

Regardless of the nature of the international system or world order that might emerge after the Corona crisis, the Gulf states must prepare for the following:

1. Dealing with a changing world and globalization. The economy will continue to play a role in the new world, but technology and knowledge will have a prominent role too, and therefore technology transfer with big powers and defense organizations such as NATO, should be an

integral part of Gulf partnerships. GCC countries should place this matter on the agenda when discussing further development of these partnerships. The Gulf states need technologies that enable them to respond to crises such as Coronavirus. So the transfer of technology, especially in the field of medicine and healthcare, should be an essential part of partnerships with the Gulf states.

2. The emergence of the role of international groupings, including the G20. Countries of the world may also agree on creating a new mechanism to deal with disasters of this kind, or on reforming the World Health Organization. In all instances, there will be a focus on strengthening the frameworks of international collective action, and the Gulf countries must have a role in them. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Presidency of the G20 can be used to forge a major role for this important organization in managing the Coronavirus crisis.
3. Gulf countries should continue to diversify international partnerships. This option was adopted by GCC states over the past few years, but this crisis has underlined not only the importance of diversifying the partnerships but also enhancing the substance of the partnerships to include science and technology.
4. The inability of international organizations to deal with this crisis heightened the role of the national state and regional organizations in fighting the pandemic. This indicates that it is imperative to develop regional frameworks that will not only help in managing the crisis but also help provide food security at the regional level, in light of reduced imports as a result of geographical distancing and restrictions on movements and transportation.
5. Paying more attention to external scholarship programs, with a special focus on scientific and technological fields, in light of the biological warfare becoming a new cause of dispute and conflict between countries.