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Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global role of the US

Jelica GORDANIĆ¹

Abstract: Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump’s politics of unilateralism had cast a shadow on the global role and leadership of the US. The COVID-19 pandemic is the first global crisis since the Cold War in which the US has not led the global response. On the other hand, global actors, like China and Russia, have been using the pandemic as a strategic opportunity. Medical supply donations and vaccine diplomacy have become very important tools for China and Russia to improve their global role and influence. These states have enlarged their influence in the Balkans, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific region and improved their position as global actors. The paper examines why the US lost its global role during the pandemic and what the Biden administration can do to regain global leadership. The author considers that Trump’s handling of the pandemic has created division and confusion rather than an effective strategy on a national and global level. The author concludes that embracing the multilateralism of the Biden administration is a necessary step forward. Rejoining the WHO, cooperating with COVAX and Gavi, and forming the Quad Vaccine Partnership may be the best strategies for the United States to reclaim its global role and leadership in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: U.S., COVID-19, vaccine diplomacy, China, Russia, global role.

¹ Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade.

E-mail: jelica@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world unexpectedly. It affected all countries and international organisations. The pandemic did not only cause a health crisis. It has also caused many social, economic, political, legal, and strategic implications.

Since the end of World War II, the US has been considered a strong global leader and global actor number one. The world expected the US to take the global leadership role in the fight against the pandemic. However, the US has not led the global response. On the contrary, the US has struggled to manage the pandemic within its own borders. In one of his essays, Ed Yong, a science journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner for Explanatory Reporting for a series on the COVID-19 pandemic, wrote: “America has failed to protect its people, leaving them with illness and financial ruin. It has lost its status as a global leader. It has careened between inaction and ineptitude. The breadth and magnitude of its errors are difficult, in the moment, to truly fathom” (Yong 2020, 34).

The paper examines why the US, the most powerful Western country, lost its role as the global number one leader during the pandemic. Was it because of the embracing of unilateralism by the Trump administration? Or was it an inadequate and slow response at the start of the pandemic? Perhaps the other global actors have been better prepared? Or was it a combination of all these factors?

The first part of the paper analyses the US COVID-19 response of the Trump administration: ignoring the virus, slow response, and withdrawal from the WHO. The global reputation of the US has been damaged in this phase of the pandemic. After the initial failure of Trump, the second part of the paper examines the Biden administration and its task of regaining the lost global role through multilateralism and multilateral initiatives. The third part of the paper analyses other major global actors during the pandemic. Some of them took the role of global leaders and used the pandemic as an important strategic opportunity. Unlike the US, the global role and influence of some other countries have been significantly enhanced during the pandemic.

The U.S. response to the COVID-19 and the Trump administration

At the time of this writing, the US has more than 81 million people infected with COVID-19. Of this number, more than one million people died from its

consequences (Worldometers 2021). This is quite an unimpressive statistic, bearing in mind that the US has less than one-twentieth of the world's population. So far, more than 841 million people worldwide have been infected with COVID-19. This means that every tenth infected person is a citizen of the US. Also, having in mind that more than 6 million people worldwide died from the consequences of COVID-19, every sixth person was from the US (Worldometers 2021a). From these statistics, it is obvious that the US took some wrong steps when it came to pandemic management.

Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States in 2017. His election as President of the United States had as a consequence the “increasing chaos in international relations, due to unpredictability, or erroneous predictions of US foreign policy during his presidency” (Trapara 2021, 6). During his campaign, Trump implemented an “America first” strategy, which emphasises unilateral actions and nationalism. Scholars consider that the foreign policy of the Trump administration has the potential to cause “irreparable damage to America’s longstanding leadership of the international order” and “threatens the very existence of the post-war international order that the US created” (da Vinha 2018, 14).

The Pew Research Center, in Washington, D.C., has been conducting surveys on the global image of the US for more than two decades. A survey of 2017 has shown some interesting aspects of the global image of Trump. In 2017, just a few months after Trump’s presidency, many of his key policies were broadly unpopular around the globe. Ratings for the US have worsened in many nations. Results of the survey, which included 37 nations, showed that a median of just 22% had confidence in Trump to make the right decisions when it comes to international affairs (Wike, Strokes et al 2017).

This stands in contrast to the final years of Obama’s presidency when a median of 64% expressed confidence in the foreign policy of Obama. Close neighbors Canada and Mexico, as well as some European partners, had significantly lower opinions of US foreign policy. The impression of US foreign policy under Trump got higher marks than under Obama in only two countries: Russia and Israel (Wike, Strokes et al. 2017). Embracing unilateralism and “America first” has become an official policy doctrine of the Trump administration. But, how did America first fit into the pandemic response?

Ignoring the early warnings of the pandemic

In times of crisis, the leadership of the president is most important. Besides active presidential leadership, crisis times require capable and reliable advisors who

can provide information and expertise. Before and during his presidential campaign, Trump had been showing hostility towards the administration constantly. In the campaign, as well as a series of tweets, Trump promised deregulation and the deconstruction of the administrative state. An overly negative attitude toward the administrative state had caused one serious consequence – a dangerous trend of experts leaving the federal administration (Rutledge 2020, 505-506).

Trump's hostility toward the administration can be considered as one of the preconditions for an inadequate US response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In January of 2019, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's Worldwide Threat Assessment included a warning about the next global health pandemic, stating that the US might be extremely vulnerable to the next pandemic. In September of 2019, the President's Council of Economic Advisors warned that the next pandemic would cause economic damage and loss of lives. Also, between late November and early December of 2019, the Department of Defense's National Center for Medical Intelligence warned of a rapidly spreading and novel virus in Wuhan, China (Lankford, Storzieri and Fitsanaki 2020, 5).

Even the warnings of some close advisors have been ignored. Peter Navarro, the economic advisor to Trump, has been warning since early January 2020 that the virus COVID-19 has the potential to kill half a million American citizens and cause an economic cost of \$6 trillion. Also, since early January, Alex Azar, Health and Human Services Secretary, and Dr. Nancy Messonnier, an expert from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), have been warning the American public to be prepared for serious disruption to their lives and the possibility of a pandemic (Rutledge 2020, 506-507). Theorists consider that President Trump "clearly prefers making decisions based on gut instincts and on his hopes rather than on the results of careful research" (Christensen 2020, 28).

It is necessary to mention the Crimson Contagion simulation experiment as an indicator of the unpreparedness of the US for the pandemic. From January to August 2019, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) partnered with key federal and state agencies in a simulation which was exercised to test the capacity of the federal government and twelve states to respond to a severe pandemic of influenza originating in China. The simulation showed unsatisfactory results. It raised a lot of doubts about the ability of the US to respond to a pandemic. It pointed out gaps in coordination between agencies and problems with the domestic capacity to manufacture the necessary vaccines, staff and personal protective equipment. The report showed that "exercise participants lacked clarity on federal interagency partners' roles and responsibilities during an influenza pandemic response" and "confusion regarding the purpose of and target audience for national conference calls hampered coordination among state and federal response partners" (Crimson

Contagion Functional Exercise key findings 2019). The report based on the results of the simulation highlighted the steps necessary to respond effectively to a possible pandemic. But, as of January 2020, when COVID-19 was detected in the US for the first time, none of the recommended steps had been taken (Sekhri Feachem, Sanders and Barker 2021, 16).

“Nobody saw it coming”

The best response to the pandemic is an early response. In the US, that was not the case. The possible consequences have been ignored, and the problem has been avoided. According to American officials, the pandemic “came out of nowhere”, “nobody saw it coming”, and the virus was an “invisible enemy” that “nobody could have predicted” (Lankford, Storzieri and Fitsanaki 2020, 1). This, however, was not the case. The American government was well aware that a pandemic might happen and cause significant consequences. It seems like the officials were deaf to warnings about the pandemic.

Another side effect of ignoring the pandemic was considering the virus as a foreign one. US officials have spread rumours that the virus escaped from a laboratory in China and even intentionally spread to the rest of the world, which is unproven. In his speeches and tweets, Trump called the virus a “Chinese virus” or a “kung flu” (Christensen 2020, 26). Theorists consider that “politicized notions of COVID-19 as a foreign problem let pass a crucial opportunity to foster a shared sense of crisis and need for immediate action across subnational levels” (Carter and May 2020, 268). Using the politically incorrect discourse of “kung flu” and “Chinese virus”, Trump received a lot of criticism from the press, condemning him for racism and xenophobia.

The lack of centralised federal response

The US internal response to COVID-19 can be described as “a patchwork of responses by state and local governments, divided sharply along partisan lines” (Altman 2020, 1). States and their local authorities have the primary responsibility for public health emergencies. But, dating back to the establishment of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1950 and the establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1979, the federal government has significant responsibilities for managing national emergencies. Having in mind that no state has the capacity to manage the consequences of a pandemic nationwide, national strategies have envisaged a crucial role for the federal government. At the federal level, the problem of

pandemic response is an area of numerous bodies, including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Environmental Protection Agency, all of which require cooperation and coordination with state and local health authorities. It also includes thousands of hospitals and the participation of volunteer organisations. (Parker and Stern 2022, 6-7).

This system by itself is too complex, and it requires a lot of skill and leadership to coordinate it. President Trump announced that states had primary responsibility for the virus while the federal government was in a backup role. It was the first time in modern American history that the president decided to decentralise authority and responsibility during such a serious national crisis. The lack of a strong centralised federal response resulted in fragmentation and numerous national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic within states. This has caused not only public health problems but also economic consequences, bearing in mind that some states have opened their economies and schools before others. As a consequence of the unsynchronised health strategy, the number of infections and deaths from the pandemic was growing (Altman 2020, 1).

The collapse in employment and healthcare

The collapse in employment in the first months of the pandemic came as a consequence of inadequate response. In the 18 weeks from the week ending March 21, 2020, to the week ending July 18, 2020, a total of 52.7 million people filed for unemployment insurance benefits. Only in April 2020, the US economy lost close to 21 million jobs, which was more than double compared with the cumulative loss during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. The unemployment rate jumped to 14.7%, up from 4.4% in March 2020 (ECLAC 2020, 2). The unemployment rate was higher for Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians. The crisis caused by the pandemic raised a question about racial inequities in the US (Yong 2020, 35).

The US response to the pandemic was not considered a failure of healthcare. It was considered a failure of leadership and a bad political decision. Besides the initial ignoring of the pandemic, there was one more disadvantage that contributed to the number of infected and dead from COVID-19. That was the US structure of the health system. Despite having the most well-funded health system in the world, the US relies on fragmented employment-based private health insurance and the absence of universal health coverage. These were, from the very beginning, negative factors for achieving an effective, coordinated, and quick response to the pandemic. Hospitals were forced to limit access to insured non-COVID-19 patients,

threatening their financial solvency. At the same time, insurers debated whether the costs of testing were their responsibility or the responsibility of public health departments. Hospital treatment is only covered for uninsured patients with a primary diagnosis of COVID-19, ignoring the reality that a lot of infected patients often have other diagnoses which are ineligible for coverage. According to some researches, an uninsured patient could face an average bill of \$73,300 for a COVID-19 hospital stay (Sekhri Feachem, Sanders and Barker 2021, 24).

Withdrawal from the WHO

The United States is the backbone of the existing multilateral order. It played a key role in the establishment of international initiatives, including universal ones like the UN; security ones, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); global health ones, such as the World Health Organization (WHO); and climate treaties like the Paris Agreement. Its strong multilateral features contributed to the US becoming a global actor and the world's largest economy. The slogan of Trump's campaign was: "Make America great again". Trump has been focusing his presidency on the US and embracing unilateral political discourse. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, embracing unilateralism resulted in public criticism of NATO, the WHO, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and the International Criminal Court (ICC) (O'Rourke 2021).

The whole world was quite surprised in April 2020, when Trump announced that the US would halt funding for the WHO. Trump accused the WHO of being "China-centric" and making "wrong" recommendations in the beginning, which led to the worsening of the pandemic. In May 2020, Trump declared that the United States would terminate its relationship with the organisation. In July 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo notified the UN Secretary-General of the US decision to withdraw from the organisation, which, under the terms of a joint resolution adopted by Congress in 1948, would take effect on July 6, 2021. The decision on withdrawal came at a time when the WHO had launched an appeal for emergency funding of nearly \$675 million to support efforts against coronavirus worldwide. Leaving the WHO during a crisis has resulted in a lot of criticism of the United States as the leading global actor with the responsibility to lead an international response to a pandemic. Beijing used the opportunity and announced emergency support of \$30 million to the WHO in support of its pandemic related activities. This indicated that while the US was retreating from supporting international organisations, China was stepping up its role, using every opportunity to expand its global influence (Fayyaz and Malik 2020, 76-77).

The WHO was not the only international institution affected by the unilateral discourse of the US. In the cases of the Paris Accords and the UNHRC, the US also announced a full withdrawal.

What was happening with the global role and reputation of the US during this period? A survey by the Pew Research Center from 2020, in which 13 nations took part, showed that the reputation of the US has declined further over the years among many key partners. In several countries, the share of the public with a favourable view of the US has been at the lowest point since the Center began annually research on this topic. Results were (not) surprising – 41% in the United Kingdom express a favourable opinion of the US. In France, only 31% saw the US foreign policy positively. In Germany, that rate was only 26%. The public surveyed also see Trump more negatively than other leaders from the West. Among the six leaders included in the survey, Angela Merkel and Emanuel Macron received the highest marks. Ratings for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping were negative in the survey, but not as negative as those for Trump (Wike, Fetterolf and Mordecai 2022).

Supporting global efforts against COVID-19

Despite the inadequate inner response to the pandemic, the Trump administration made efforts to help developing countries. It has provided emergency funding, started numerous humanitarian initiatives, and financed and supported scientific studies to develop a vaccine. For this purpose, the US government provided between \$6 and \$10 billion in funding for vaccine research (Barham, Zukerman Daly et al., 2022, 10). The US government has provided funds to countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Until May 1, 2020, numerous US government agencies and departments have cumulatively committed nearly \$775 million to support global efforts against COVID-19. This includes \$99 million in emergency health assistance to USAID for Contagious Infectious Disease Outbreaks, \$100 million to support ongoing global health programmes of USAID, \$300 million to support humanitarian programmes of USAID, and more than \$150 million of economic support funds to government and civil society organisations in nearly 100 countries. Meanwhile, US funds included wide-ranging activities, such as training for healthcare personnel on the usage of personal protective equipment; protocols on cleaning and disinfection; and setting up isolation centres (Fayyaz and Malik 2020, 77). In some regions, such as Latin America, the COVID diplomacy of the US overlapped with the COVID diplomacy of some other global actors like China and Russia.

Thanks to Operation Warp Speed, a Trump initiative, two effective COVID-19 vaccines were approved for emergency use by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in December 2020 – Pfizer and Moderna. The US and other wealthy countries that had entered into contractual arrangements with these pharmaceutical companies were able to provide more than enough vaccine doses for their populations. This kind of practice has caused “vaccine nationalism” and left many poor countries without vaccine access.

Despite these efforts, there was an impression that the US, under Trump, was not interested in cooperation with other countries regarding the pandemic. Theorists considered that Trump “relished the opportunity presented by the pandemic to implement key elements of its anti-internationalist agenda” (Feffer 2021, 12). It seems that the highlight of Trump’s unilateral policy was the relations with the WHO, COVAX, and Gavi, and the rejection of any help from them regarding COVID testing kits, treatments, or vaccines. Highly criticised was Trump’s relaxed oversight by the FDA and encouragement of early authorization of drugs for COVID-19, such as hydroxychloroquine, which was later withdrawn as ineffective and had a high risk for sudden death (Geyman 2021, 190).

What was left to the Biden administration?

On the Global Soft Power Index, the US was ranked number one at the beginning of 2020. This was before the effects of the pandemic. Due to its poor response to the health crisis, at the beginning of 2021, the US was ranked 6th on the Global Soft Power Index (BrandFinance 2022). That was a huge and unexpected deterioration for a relatively short time period of one year. The politics of unilateralism and withdrawal from international health institutions were not adequate options for the global role of the US during the pandemic. The US had chosen sovereignty over solidarity (Feachem, Sanders and Barker 2021, 18). An unsatisfactory response to the pandemic might be one of the reasons why Trump did not win the second mandate as a president.

Biden inherited a chaotic system of Trump’s COVID management and foreign policy. What does Biden’s election as President entail for the United States’ tarnished international reputation? What kind of politics might be expected from the Biden administration in the context of the pandemic and rebranding the global role of the US?

Returning to the WHO

“National Security Memorandum on United States Global Leadership to Strengthen the International COVID-19 Response and to Advance Global Health Security and Biological Preparedness”, adopted on January 21, 2021, shows the determination of the Biden administration to leave behind the politics of its predecessor. It states that the Biden administration “will treat epidemic and pandemic preparedness, health security, and global health as top national security priorities, and will work with other nations to combat COVID-19 and seek to create a world that is safe and secure from biological threats” (The White House 2021a).

Working with the other nations is a significant step forward from “America First” to “America is back” on the global stage. In contrast to Trump’s trend of withdrawing from international organisations, on January 20, 2021, the US reversed its decision to withdraw from the WHO by submitting a letter to the UN Secretary-General informing him of the President’s decision that the US will remain a member of the organisation. According to the Memorandum, the US has new goals when it comes to the WHO:

- exercising leadership at the WHO and working with partners to lead and reinvigorate the international COVID-19 response;
- participation in international efforts to advance global health, health security, and the prevention of future biological catastrophes;
- active participation in strengthening and reform of the WHO (The White House 2021a).

The US is determined to become more active in global vaccination, research, and development. As part of America First policy, the Trump administration did not join COVAX because of its association with the WHO. The Biden administration joined COVAX. This decision was welcomed globally. The US is committed to leading an international and coordinated vaccine effort. Biden announced that the United States will provide 1.2 billion doses of safe, effective vaccines to meet global needs. As of April 5, 2022, through coordinated efforts with Gavi and bilateral agreements, the US has delivered more than 500 million vaccine doses to over 110 countries. Vaccines have been delivered to over 40 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, 30 countries in the Western Hemisphere, and to about 20 countries in Southern and Eastern Asia (US Department of State 2022).

Cooperation with the QUAD countries

At the beginning of the Biden presidency in March 2021, the “Quad Vaccine Partnership” was established with a focus on increasing the manufacturing capacity

of the COVID-19 vaccines and expanding manufacturing, procurement, and delivery. The US sees the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) countries – Japan, India, and Australia – as strategic allies in the fight against the growing global influence of China. At the Quad’s Leaders’ Summit (held on September 24th 2021), it was announced that the QUAD countries have pledged to donate more than 1.2 billion vaccine doses globally, in addition to the doses financed through COVAX. The QUAD countries have collectively delivered nearly 79 million safe and effective vaccine doses to the Indo-Pacific region. The Vaccine partnership intends to produce at least 1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2022. The Quad welcomed India’s announcement to resume exports of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, including to COVAX, beginning in October 2021. Through \$3.3 billion in the COVID-19 Crisis Response Emergency Support Loan program, Japan will continue to help regional countries procure safe, effective, and quality-assured vaccines. Australia will deliver \$212 million in grant aid to purchase vaccines for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In addition, Australia will allocate \$219 million to support last-mile vaccine rollouts and take the lead in coordinating Quad’s last-mile delivery efforts in those regions. The Quad member countries will coordinate with the ASEAN Secretariat, the COVAX Facility, and other relevant organisations. QUAD supports cooperation with international organisations such as the WHO, COVAX, Gavi, CEPI, and UNICEF, as well as national governments. At the same time, the leaders are fully committed to strengthening vaccine confidence and trust (The White House, 2021).

According to theorists, every Quad member has their own potential and assignments. India has low-cost medical prowess. This is important for the collaboration to achieve expanded manufacturing of vaccines, prioritising increased capacity for their exports. Japan has built hospitals and medical clinics. It also provides concessional loans for India to expand vaccine manufacturing. Australia and the US are funding the production and delivery of vaccines in Asia (Upadhyay 2021, 4).

“America first” is over?

In his first foreign policy speech as president, delivered at the State Department on February 4, 2021, Biden presented a vision of a return to multilateralism. As he explained, the US role and engagement is based on its global power, “our inexhaustible source of strength” and “abiding advantage” (The White House 2021b). Historically, the global power of the US has consisted of military force, economic pressure, and diplomatic engagement (Fefer 2021, 4). He promised to restore the US as a full participant, if not a leader, in working multilaterally to solve

global problems – the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, racial inequality, cyber security, the refugee crisis, attacks on vulnerable minorities, and the persistence of authoritarianism.

There is a disagreement among scholars regarding the direction of Biden's politics. Some scholars consider that Biden did not announce a radically new doctrine of his administration. His approach might be considered a "multilateral restoration" and a repudiation of the unilateral, inconsistent, and anti-global positions of Trump while placing his own administration in the comfortable, pre-Trump foreign policy mainstream that European and Asian allies have come to expect. Biden's foreign policy approach could be described as MAGALite: making America great again with the help of foreign partners rather than over their (Feffer 2021, 5-6).

On the other hand, some scholars believe that the political programme of Biden stands in stark contrast to that of Trump's, both domestically as well as internationally. The "America First" dogma has come to an end. The crisis of multilateralism and the rising global influence of China can be resolved with the return of the US to the global arena (Greve 2021, 2).

The Biden administration has made important steps toward returning the US to the COVID-19 battle. It has proven that America is back. Multilateralism has shown better results in the global role of the US in the context of the pandemic. The US has bounced back in the 1st place of the Global Soft Power Index ranking in 2022 after turning a corner on the pandemic. (BrandFinance 2022). When it comes to the post-COVID-19 global role of the US, the Biden administration should be aware of the more aggressive policy of China, the global ambitions of the EU and Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

Other global actors and the COVID-19 pandemic

The US response to the pandemic might be considered as a failure during the Trump presidency and gradually progressing during Biden's. Other global actors had difficulties as well when it comes to a pandemic response. The pandemic crisis was a serious test for the strength of the European identity. The COVID-19 response of Russia might be understood as "hardship at home, soft power flexing abroad" (Mikhelizde 2020, 3). On the other hand, China used the pandemic as a strategic opportunity. The pandemic crisis had shown the lack of international cooperation and deepened rivalry between the major global actors. The pandemic response by China and Russia can be characterised as "very assertive power politics" (Gordanić 2021, 80).

Also, it is an impression of different pandemic approaches when it comes to the traditional liberal democracies for the West and “autocratic regimes” from the East. Let’s see how the pandemic response of other global actors looked in practice.

COVID-19 and the EU

The EU has always been considered a strong regional actor. Its global ambitions have been challenged due to “a diversity of interests, the crisis of European identity, the inability of strategic coordination, the complex decision-making process, and the dependence on the US” (Lopandić and Gordanić, 2021, 184). The crisis caused by COVID-19 has put global ambitions and global development of the EU in danger. Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU states that “Union action shall respect the responsibilities of the Member States for the definition of their health policy and for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care”. Similarly, as with the response of the US, the COVID-19 response of the EU was a patchwork of responses by the member states. In the survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in June 2020 among citizens of almost all EU members, there was a sense that their country was left by itself in dealing with the pandemic. EU citizens reported that their perception of EU institutions has deteriorated, with those reporting that it has not improved outnumbering those reporting that it has improved (Dennison, Zerka et al, 2020, 2-3).

The COVID-19 crisis was not only a public health crisis for the EU. It was also a crisis of European integration, European identity, and European unity. Instead of growing European solidarity in time of crisis, citizens started to lose trust in EU institutions. The pandemic has shown that the EU is vulnerable. Having in mind that the US, its most important ally, was facing with pandemic difficulties, the EU was left alone and divided between responses of its members. Medical help received from China and Russia in the emergency phase of the pandemic was an indicator that the EU is not ready to be a strong global actor yet. Chinese donations of healthcare equipment to the EU member states might be considered a sign of European weakness and lack of power and crisis of Western values (Papanikolaou 2020, 11). Problems caused by Brexit overlapped with the identity issues and inadequate pandemic response. The EU has arrived to the point when it should consider future directions of its politics and reconsider its dependence from the other global actors, especially the US.

Russia and the COVID-19

Russia was among the countries which were gravely hit by the pandemic. Despite this fact, Russia did not have much time to waste. It had a strong motivation to rebrand its external image so that it could reduce tensions with Western states.

In the emergency phase of the pandemic, Russia delivered COVID-19 medical supplies to many countries worldwide, including Italy, Serbia, and Bosnia, as well as countries from the 16+1 initiative. The aid in the emergency phase implied donations of medical equipment, masks, and personnel. Russia's aid to Italy is an interesting case. Italy has traditionally had good economic, political, and cultural relations with Russia. This was an excellent opportunity for Moscow to present itself as a friendly and supportive country willing to help others regardless of their institutional belonging — for example, Italy is a member of the EU and NATO. Russian aid in Italy has caused disagreements and divisions. Some Italian political parties, particularly the League (Lega), supported Russian aid as proof of the EU's lack of empathy, unity, and extensive bureaucracy (Giusti, Tafuro Ambrosetti 2022, 7). Also, Russia has been very active in post-Soviet space, as well as in some African and Latin American countries.

The second phase of the pandemic for Russia was characterised by the first vaccine against COVID-19. Russia was the first country in the world to register a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Gamaleya Research Institute. The vaccine is authorised in 81 countries worldwide (VisaGuide 2022). Some of the countries that have purchased the Sputnik V vaccine have severely restricted access to Western-made vaccines. In these cases, Russia has boosted its anti-imperialist and anti-globalist image. In the EU, Sputnik V still has not received the European Medical Agency's (EMA) approval.²

Several EU members, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia (which were facing high mortality and infection rates), advocated for the use of the Russian vaccine and have held negotiations with Moscow about acquiring Sputnik V once it has been evaluated by the European Medical Agency (EMA). Also, the European Commission has been criticised for being too bureaucratic and focused on the Astra Zeneca vaccine, which has seriously defaulted on delivery to the EU (Giusti, Tafuro Ambrosetti 2022, 6). Sebastian Kurtz, then Chancellor of Austria, accused the EMA of being too slow to approve the Russian vaccine (Adler 2021). Russia's aid to the EU members, as well as the vaccine, has caused turmoil in the EU and indicated the fragility of European identity.

² Having in mind actual conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Sputnik V probably will never be approved for use in the EU.

The Pandemic as a strategic opportunity- the case of China

The start of the pandemic was very negative for the image of China. While the first case of the pandemic occurred on December 8, 2019, in Wuhan city, the municipal government officially recognised the existence and danger of the virus on January 20, 2020. Due to its slow reaction and miscommunication between Wuhan and Beijing officials, China has received criticism all over the world regarding the origin of the virus (Kato 2021, 414). China's government used the pandemic as an opportunity to exert its international leadership and influence. This was actually the only option China had. Beijing did not truly want to face a situation in which the international community collectively concluded that the coronavirus originated from China and then forced China to take full responsibility for the outbreak and spread of the virus inside and outside its borders. If this scenario became a reality, China might even possibly have to pay huge amounts of compensation for lost growth and lives around the world under the pandemic (Kato 2021, 419).

China was using a powerful informational campaign called "us vs. US" to boost and improve its image around the world. The aim of the tactics was to emphasise information positive about "us" (China) and negative about the "US" while suppressing information that was positive about the "US" and negative about "us". On the way of constructing a negative "US," China's state actors have been using numerous information strategies focused on the US's irresponsible actions to manage the pandemic (Zhao 2020, 453-454).

In the emergency phase of the pandemic, China sent experts to Italy, accompanied by the Chinese Red Cross. It provided 31 tonnes of medical equipment. Also, it offered help to many other EU members, including Estonia and Lithuania, with whom it had complicated relations due to the 16+1 initiative. China sent medical aid to Africa. Medical supplies from China arrived in Ghana to be distributed to 17 other countries. As a part of its strategy as a "donor savior", China waived some African loan payments due in 2020, extended loan maturities, and urged creditors to expedite debt relief to Africa (Ameyaw-Brobbe 2021, 273).

Beijing entered the second phase of the pandemic prepared with its own vaccines. China's vaccine diplomacy started in July 2020, when in Brazil commenced the first Chinese vaccine trial outside China. Since November 2020, Chinese vaccine companies have signed deals with dozens of countries, mostly lower and middle-income, to supply them with Chinese vaccines. Chinese vaccine diplomacy started much earlier than the US'. The destinations of Chinese vaccines are consistent with Beijing's public diplomacy efforts, including development aid and business activities since the mid-1990s. China's vaccine diplomacy is focused mostly on Asia, Africa, and Latin America – areas often neglected or isolated by the US and Europe

because of their repressive regimes (Lee 2021, 1). So far, the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine is recognised in 102 countries for travel purposes (VisaGilde 2022a).

China and Russia have used the pandemic as a strategic opportunity since the emergency phase through medical supply donations. In the second phase, these countries had one significant advantage compared to the US – vaccines. There has been a profound difference in the morphology of the production and distribution chains of a “Western Economic Vaccine” and an “Eastern Geopolitical Vaccine” (Pellicciari 2021, 268). Western vaccines were inspired by commercial logic and conditioned by declared primary economic-social goals. The commercial logic was attributable to patent holders and those primarily responsible for its production, i.e., pharmaceutical companies of large dimensions. These were private entrepreneurial subjects driven by declared goals of profitability and, by definition, scarcely sensitive to a political rationale. Unlike them, the Russian and Chinese vaccines were created as state products. The state determined its fate from research to distribution. China and Russia have enabled immediate and almost unlimited public resources for research, free from cost-benefit considerations typical of the private market and with the possibility of enjoying unmediated political support and greater operational freedom. Beijing and Moscow were able to start national campaigns for mass immunisation earlier than the West. Vaccines have become a very powerful geopolitical tool for Russia and China. These countries started using vaccines as a geopolitical tool earlier than the US (Pellicciari 2021, 268-270).

Conclusion

The pandemic has shown that even the most powerful actors, such as the US, can be very vulnerable without adequate leadership and strategy. In the context of the pandemic, ignorance of early warnings and ignorance of the pandemic’s existence can be considered inadequate management. On the other hand, withdrawal from the WHO and refusal to cooperate with COVAX and Gavi can be considered as acts of unilateral politics. Emphasising “America first” was not a good approach during the pandemic. Perhaps unilateral politics would produce better results in some other emergency. In the case of a public health emergency, the whole world has expected leadership from the US. Instead, the US was watching the growth of the global influence of some other actors — China and Russia. Unlike the US, these actors were using all phases of the pandemic to grow their influence — from medical supply donations to vaccine diplomacy.

Trump had a bad reputation in the media. Russia and China were using all possible media and informational campaigns to enhance their success and to decrease the role of the US during the pandemic. After China and Russia had started the geopolitical COVID-19 battle, it was too late for the US to show up with a winning result.

Returning to multilateralism, as Biden's approach, is a good mechanism for the US to come close to China and Russia in the context of global influence. Returning to the WHO, initiatives and cooperation with COVAX, Gavi, and the QUAD Vaccine partnership are positive steps forward. The US is not a winner of the COVID-19 battle, but, currently, it is not a loser. In the current context of the Ukraine crisis, the global downgrade of the US during the pandemic will be forgotten quickly. Russia's special operation in Ukraine quickly degraded influence and the geopolitical success this country made with the Sputnik V vaccine. The Ukraine crisis might be considered a lucky coincidence for the global role and influence of the US after the crisis period of COVID-19.

The main concern for the global role of the US after COVID-19 is going to be China. The US should make a lot of geopolitical efforts to stop the rise of Chinese global influence. For that purpose, the US should encourage and revive its ties with the EU. The global ambitions of the EU are not good news for the US. On the other hand, an alliance with competitors of China – Japan, India, Australia, i.e., the QUAD countries – is a good mechanism for fighting against the global rise of China. Great global actors such as the US cannot lose their global influence over night. The ineffective pandemic response is one example from which the United States should learn a lot, particularly about avoiding inconsistent foreign policy.

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Jelica GORDANIĆ

UTICAJ PANDEMIJE COVID-19 NA GLOBALNU ULOGU SAD

Apstrakt: Trampova politika unilateralizma proizvela je mnogo kritika na račun globalne uloge SAD i pre početka pandemije COVID-19. Ujedno, COVID-19 je prva globalna kriza od Hladnog rata u kojoj SAD nisu predvodile globalni odgovor. S druge strane, akteri poput Kine i Rusije su iskoristili pandemiju kao stratešku priliku. Donacije medicinske opreme i diplomatija vakcinama su postali važno sredstvo ovih država u borbi za poboljšanje globalne uloge i uticaja. Ove države su povećale uticaj na Balkanu, u Latinskoj Americi, Africi, Aziji i Pacifiku i učvrstile svoje pozicije globalnih aktera. Rad razmatra zašto su SAD izgubile globalnu ulogu za vreme pandemije i šta Bajdenova administracija može uraditi da povрати globalno liderstvo. Autor zaključuje da je vraćanje multilateralizmu neopodan korak napred. Ponovno pridruživanje SZO, saradnja sa COVAX, Gavi i QUAD državama mogu biti prave strategije za oživljavanje globalne uloge SAD u kontekstu pandemije COVID-19.

Ključne reči: SAD, COVID-19, diplomatija vakcina, Kina, Rusija, globalna uloga.