



The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Hegemonic Power Shift

Seda Gözde TOKATLI¹, İrem TABİRLİOĞLU²

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated ongoing shifts in the global balance of power, creating profound transformations within the international order. This study aims to analyze the declining hegemonic position of the United States and the concurrent rise of the People's Republic of China by examining the transformative effects of the pandemic on global leadership. Drawing on A. F. Organski's Power Transition Theory, the article provides a theoretical framework for assessing hegemonic change and discusses these developments within the context of realist international relations theory. The pandemic has exposed significant limitations in the United States' governance capacity, global image, and economic resilience. In contrast, China's centralized and pragmatic crisis management strategy allowed it to emerge as a more assertive and influential actor on the global stage. This study examines how the COVID-19 crisis has reshaped leadership structures in the international system by comparing the changing roles of China and the US and exploring the broader implications of this shift within theoretical paradigms. In conclusion, the article assesses the structural transformations within the international system catalyzed by the pandemic and examines the evolving balance of power in the post-pandemic era. The findings reveal that COVID-19 has not only challenged public health systems but also disrupted the established global power hierarchy, paving the way for a significant transformation of hegemony.

Keywords: *Hegemony, Power Transition Theory, Realism, COVID-19, United States of America (US)*

Jel Codes: N95, F53, F55

Covid-19 Pandemisinin Hegemonik Güç Kayması Üzerindeki Etkisi

Öz

COVID-19 pandemisi, uluslararası sistemde halihazırda süregelen olan güç dengesi dönüşümlerini hızlandırarak küresel düzende derin etkiler yaratmıştır. Bu çalışma, özellikle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin hegemonik konumunun zayıflaması ve Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'nin uluslararası sistemde artan etkisini ele alarak, pandeminin küresel liderlik üzerindeki dönüştürücü etkilerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, A. F. Organski'nin Güç Geçiş Teorisi temel alınarak hegemonik dönüşümün teorik çerçevesi sunulacak, aynı zamanda realizm kuramı bağlamında büyük güçler arasındaki rekabetin güncel görünümü tartışılacaktır. Pandemi süreci, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin yönetsel kapasitesine, küresel imajına ve ekonomik dayanıklılığına yönelik ciddi sorgulamaları beraberinde getirmiştir. Buna karşın, Çin'in kriz yönetimindeki merkeziyetçi ve pragmatik yaklaşımı, küresel anlamda daha etkin bir aktör olarak öne çıkmasına zemin hazırlamıştır. Bu çalışma, COVID-19'un uluslararası sistemdeki liderlik yapısını nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini; Çin'in yükselişi ile ABD'nin göreceli güç kaybını karşılaştırmalı olarak ele almakta, bu sürecin uluslararası ilişkiler teorileri açısından ne tür sonuçlar doğurduğunu irdelemektedir. Çalışmanın sonunda, pandeminin tetiklediği uluslararası sistemdeki yapısal değişimlerin hegemonya kuramları ışığında genel bir değerlendirmesi sunulmakta; özellikle pandemi sonrası dönemde güç dengelerinde gözlemlenen kaymalar analiz edilmektedir. Bulgular, COVID-19'un sadece sağlık sistemlerini değil, aynı zamanda küresel güç hiyerarşisini de derinden etkileyerek hegemonik bir dönüşümü mümkün kıldığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Hegemonya, Güç Geçiş Teorisi, Realizm, COVID-19, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD)*

Jel Kodu: N95, F53, F55

¹ Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding Author: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, İzmir, Türkiye. E-Mail: sedagozde.tokatli@idu.edu.tr Orcid no: 0000-0002-1880-1338

² Arş. Gör., İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, İzmir, Türkiye. E-Mail: irem.tabirlioglu@idu.edu.tr Orcid no: 0009-0000-6450-6260

Atf/Citation: Tokatlı, S. G., Tabirlioğlu, İ., (2026), The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Hegemonic Power Shift, Kastamonu Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi, 28/1, s. 30-47.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, a zoonotic disease that emerged in China, has led to numerous changes and transformations in the field of international relations and the global context. COVID-19 affects everybody, regardless of identity or status. Even the main actors in international relations—people, states, and world society—have been affected by the course of events. The US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, explained the post-COVID-19 world, stating that the international order will wake up to a different world in the aftermath of the pandemic (Kissinger, 2020).

This article will examine the decline of the US and the US-China rivalry, particularly in areas such as geopolitical affairs, diplomacy, and dialogue, following the COVID-19 period. The primary purpose of this paper is to determine whether COVID-19 has led to a hegemonic power transition in the system. The post-COVID-19 period has become a stage for media manipulation and propaganda; instead of direct military confrontations between states, coercion has become more effective through winning the hearts of other states through aid, vaccines, masks, medical supplies, soft power, and diplomacy.

Given the US-China global leadership rivalry, this study aims to breathe new life into the discussion of hegemonic changes brought about by COVID-19 within the theoretical framework of realism. This paper will seek to answer the following question: *What are the multidimensional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on hegemonic shifts in the international system?* To answer the main research question, this study will conduct a deep analysis of the challenging authority of the USA and, in contrast, the rising power of China, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also provided an opportunity for China to showcase its social and political capabilities, grounded in economic strength, as it vies for leadership in the world order. China's economy has shown increasing prosperity since the last decade of the twentieth century, reflecting its growing inclusion in the world economy as an industrialized core country (Xing & Bernal-Meza, 2021). The analysis conducted for this purpose necessitates the establishment of a new world order and a shift in power dynamics within the system.

This article consists of the following parts. The first part aims to explain the power transition theory, which describes how economic and political power shifts through changes in the international system. This section will focus on the economic and political power of the US, which is declining due to the wrong policies implemented during and after the COVID-19 period. The necessity of a world leader, also known as a hegemon, is a primary aspect of the international arena, particularly in the absence of the US, which has created a significant opportunity for China. China stepped in to fill the gap created by the US. The second part aims to provide a theoretical explanation of what realism is, focusing on key elements such as survival, state, security, and rivalry. The third part will focus on the concept of hegemony, which is simply the primacy of leadership.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on a theory-driven analytical approach, utilizing documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, government publications, think tank reports, and international organizational data. The research employs a case-based comparative framework to evaluate the differential responses and strategic behaviors of the United States and China during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on governance capacity, diplomatic activity, and economic performance.

The theoretical backbone of the providers is grounded in A. F. Organski's Power Transition Theory and Realist International

Relations Theory, which jointly provide a lens to interpret the shifting dynamics of global hegemony. Through these theories, the study analyzes structural changes in the international system, particularly the erosion of US dominance and the strategic rise of China as a leadership contender. The methodology follows a deductive path, applying existing theories to explain the empirical phenomena observed during the pandemic.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Realism Theory

Realist theory sees states as the leading actors, and their behavior is analyzed in depth. In the realist approach, the main priority of states is power and security. Due to this prioritization, states often overlook cooperation because they hold selfish and pessimistic views. The stability and order provided within the international system deteriorate when the power that dominates the system begins to lose power or when a weak state gains power within the system (Roskin, 2014:30). According to this theory, within the international system, states act within the framework of benefit and cost, focusing on the principle of relative gain rather than absolute advantage (Waltz, 1979:106).

John Mearsheimer (2001), a representative of offensive realism, argues that states should pursue a path of increasing power to secure their existence in the system or become a leading power. By highlighting the existence of a competitive environment, they can become more aggressive than necessary. Offensive realists see the growing and rising power as a threat to the international system.

In the absence of a global authority governing international relations, the nation once again demonstrates that it remains the primary actor in global politics. Concepts of zero-sum game, which means one side's loss is another one's gain, power maximization, the principle of self-help, and "US first" mentality are currently on display. The COVID-19 crisis further demonstrated that realist theory is still the dominant paradigm in international politics. Realists also emphasize that once a risk materializes, authoritarian governments like China can swiftly curtail it. COVID-19 not only hindered the spread of democracy and democratization waves but also contributed to the resurgence of authoritarianism and the rise of populism worldwide. At the beginning of the crisis, governments quickly closed their borders and imposed trade restrictions due to fears of the virus spreading rapidly. In the age of globalization, multilateralism was eroded because concerns over national security and survival were considered the primary interests of the states.

In general, realist thinkers argue that bipolarity offers more stability compared to multipolarity; however, during the COVID-19 period, the US-China bipolarity was quite dangerous. In this context, Mearsheimer (2001) states that China cannot rise peacefully within the system. According to Mearsheimer, if China's dramatic economic growth continues in the coming decades, it is likely that America and China will enter an intense security competition with the potential to turn into a major war (Arrighi, 2010:313). COVID-19 has demonstrated that states remain the most significant actors in world politics. If a dangerous crisis that requires rapid intervention and substantial resources emerges, to effectively address the problem, only the states can be the primary actors with the necessary capabilities. The fact that states conflict with each other within the system is not due to human nature, but due to the anarchic structure of the system (Waltz, 1979:188).

According to the realist perspective, states exist in an anarchical international system that has limited resources and capabilities to function within it. This leads to competition among nations and a security dilemma (Waltz, 1979). In other

words, when one nation arms itself, another nation may perceive this as a threat, and due to distrust, this nation can also increase its armament. Randall Schweller, a key representative of neorealist theory, stated in his article "After Unipolarity" that China played a competitive role in the international system, challenging the hegemonic order and rediscovering its own goals and plans within the complex world order (Schweller, 2011).

1.2. Organski's Power Transition Theory

Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski's *Power Transition Theory* is often associated with the Realist school of thought (Organski, 1968). The theory of 'transition of power' was first put forward by Organski in 1958. The concepts of hierarchy, power, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction related to the status quo constitute the basis of the theory. According to Organski, the distribution of power determines the position of each state within the system. The position of states varies according to internal capacity. The main factors that determine the internal capacities of states are also the material forces that come to the fore. According to Organski, the hegemonic state or the state challenging it is expected to have industrial economic power. The hegemonic power at the top of the pyramid, which represents the distribution of power on Earth, is the state that establishes the status quo (Organski, 1968:364).

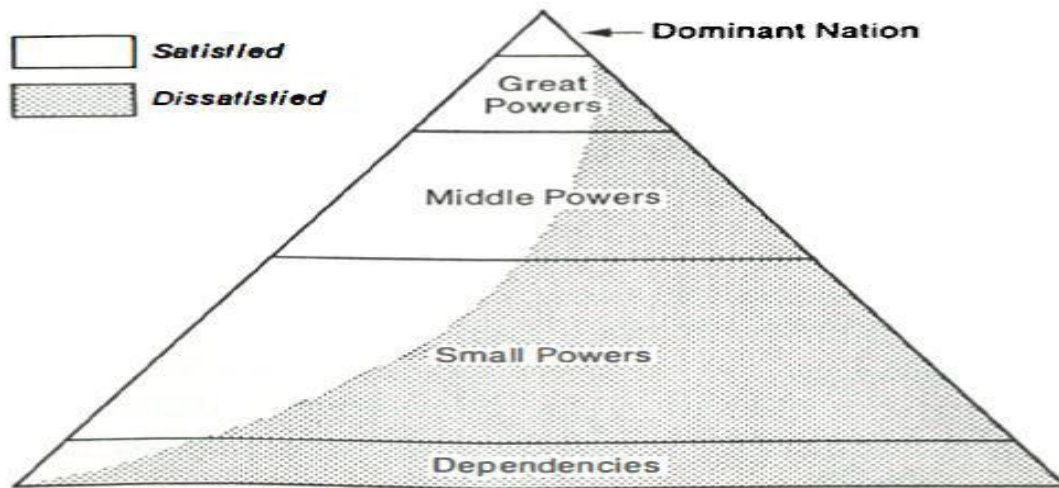


Figure 1: The Hierarchy of Power According to the Power Transition Theory

Source: Organski, A. (1968). *World Politics* (2nd Ed.). New York: Knopf, 364.

According to Organski's power transition theory, a hierarchy of nations exists. A hegemonic nation or superpower is generally satisfied with the existing order because it directly serves the country's interests. An example of a superpower could be the US and the major powers in the 21st century, such as the United Kingdom, China, and Japan, as well as the European Union (EU) countries such as Germany and France, and then the middle powers such as India, Turkey, South Africa, and South Korea, and the small powers such as Nigeria and Ethiopia. According to Organski, three states could challenge the dominance of the US: the Soviet Union, China, and India. However, this prediction was partially unsuccessful because the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, even before it reached parity. However, China is still assertive in this regard. It seems like China will surpass the US; however, the question is whether this scenario will come true and when it will happen. The transition of power is caused by dissatisfaction with the balance of power within the system of the sovereign power and the powers defined as rivals to the sovereign power (Kai, 2017:34). In terms of power transition theory, some scholars are more optimistic about their understanding on China's rise and argues that China wants economic collaboration

and does not wish to become the global hegemon. They even go so far as to say that China is currently experiencing its own “Great Renaissance.”

Today, China is the United States' most significant competitor. The answer to the question of whether China will attempt to challenge the world order established by the United States within the international system has been brought to the fore with the ‘transition of power’ theory. Within the scope of power transition theory, as China continues to rise in the economic, military, and political spheres, its growing power is considered to pose a future challenge to the hegemonic power in the system, potentially leading to conflict with the United States. Within this framework, it is also perceived as a threat (Fravel, 2010:505). When the capacities of states are similar, the transition of power becomes more dangerous, and the possibility of war also increases.

1.3. Conceptual Framework of Hegemony

The term "hegemony" refers to the concept of addressing global sovereignty and control systems. The concept of primacy has significantly impacted hegemony. Historically speaking, the term "hegemony" was first used to describe the relationship between Athens and other Greek city-states in their alliance against the Persian Empire (Demir, 2021:8). Athens had constant political power over other city-states, possessed an organizational capacity, and held leadership roles. However, the term hegemony does not involve annexing other countries’ territories. The discipline of international relations has yet to provide definitive answers to questions about hegemony. Those questions include the following: How does hegemony emerge? Which capacities or abilities create a hegemon? Under which circumstances do a hegemonic power emerge? How can hegemony be built or lost? International relations theories all explain the concept of hegemony from different perspectives.

According to realists, imperial power can have an impact on the behavior of other states, as well as the capacity to influence others through either coercion or the creation of consent. The hegemony approach of realist theory derives its source from the fields of military and political power. The stability provided by hegemony based on material capacity within the system is interpreted as a relationship of domination. The change in the power hierarchy within the system leads to the reformation of the balance of power.

According to Susan Strange, four structural power elements can be named as the global condition of hegemony. The first one is security, which is about threatening a country’s physical safety through force or the ability to protect. The second one is the production, which is the ability to control the global goods and services production. The next one is financial, which is related to production, to shape international trade and loan capital markets. The last one is knowledge, which is the ability to encourage the improvement, collectivization, and transfer of knowledge. These were all power elements that the US had between the years 1945-1970 (Demir, 2021:10).

Liberal theorists approach the concept of hegemony in different ways. John Ikenberry states that there are three characteristics of hegemony: the leading state should conduct its own actions in accordance with previously stated rules and institutional systems, the leading state should provide some public goods and must provide channels for mutual communication and meetings (Ikenberry, 1989). In this classification, Ikenberry emphasizes that the hegemon should consolidate power by creating consent among other actors rather than through strong coercion. Hegemonic control occurs

when the political elites of dependent states conform to the norms, principles, and values created by the hegemon.

Charles Kindleberger states that the stability of the global economy depends on the benevolent leadership of the hegemonic state (Kindleberger, 1981). According to Hegemonic Stability Theory, developed by Kindleberger, an open and liberal world economy requires the presence of a hegemonic or dominant power to maintain stability in the international order. This thesis was later developed into a general theory by Stephen Krasner (Krasner, 1983:2). This theory further elaborates that the hegemon provides public goods, such as stability, peace, security, and economic prosperity, in line with its own interests to establish an open and liberal economic order (Demir, 2021:11).

According to Marxist Theory, the concept of hegemony is interpreted from a critical perspective. For example, Antonio Gramsci, who endured imprisonment due to the rise to power of fascist leader Benito Mussolini in Italy, states that hegemons utilize cultural institutions and ideology to garner the consent of others (Gramsci, 1971). He emphasizes the importance of historical blocks and civil society. According to Robert Gilpin, for a state to achieve a hegemonic position, the dominant power must establish a world order consisting of universal norms and rules (Gilpin, 1999:186-187). In other words, cultural diplomacy manifests the superiority of a social group in two ways: domination and intellectual and moral leadership (Sarica Kelle, 2024:187). Neo-Marxist thinker Immanuel Wallerstein defined hegemony as “a situation about the rivalry of two great powers that is overly unbalanced, the power of one state is *primus inter pares*, which means that this state can impose its wishes and rules in the political, military, diplomatic, economic, and cultural areas” (Strange, 1987:557).

In this context, hegemony does not always equate to material capabilities. Hegemony may not be the totality of all the capabilities of a state, but a title or power given to the said state and recognized by other nations. Once a hegemon reaches its goals, it works to ensure the status quo. Power distribution is also a vital aspect, along with the power shift that creates a dilemma for the hegemon. To illustrate this, hegemonic stability theory leads us to expect the hegemon to mitigate the adverse long-term effects of COVID-19 on other states and public goods. As a result, the dominant power will succeed if it follows a new path by harmonizing the interests of other states with its own, rather than ruling over them through exploitation.

2. RISE AND FALL OF US HEGEMONY IN THE SYSTEM

The Monroe Doctrine aimed for non-intervention in European affairs, allowing the US to focus on its own nation-building process. Between 1823 and 1939, the United States chose to isolate itself from the European state system and pursue a decolonization policy in the light of the Monroe Doctrine (Ambrose & Brinkley, 1938). This paved the way for the US to complete its dominance on the continent. The principle of unilateralism of the US administration is based on the separation of the old-world order, Europe, and the new world, America (Gültekin, 2008). The US has played an integrative role in the national structure, despite adopting an isolationist foreign policy culture since its establishment and has benefited from increasing its power on a continental scale.

The geography of the US also granted it a significant advantage, as the oceans allowed the US to remain distant from the territorial conflicts that took place in Europe and Asia. Since its founding, the US was never involved in a significant conflict for 137 years, until the outbreak of World War I. After World War II, the US was accepted as a hegemonic power by other Western states and emerged as the leader of the liberal Western bloc.

During the Cold War period, the US administration built hegemonic power within the system and its understanding of consensual governance through international institutions, rules, and values. A wave of institutionalization processes began with the establishment of financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, and the signing of GATT. International organizations (IOs) with military aspects, including NATO and SEATO, were also formed. This allowed other nations to access public goods through the distribution of US resources. The political and economic orders established by the US do not have another similar example throughout the course of history.

With the end of the Cold War period, the US declared its victory within the system, and the transition to a unipolar structure accelerated. The bipolarity of the Cold War ended in 1990, which paved the way for the emerging US unipolar world order. George Helbert Walker Bush, in his National Security Strategy Document published in 1991, defined the post-Cold War era as the “New World Order” (NSSR, 1991). The emergence of the concept of global governance also had significance for the improvement of the US hegemonic role. Global governance consists of elements such as norms, principles, values, belief systems, and institutionalization efforts worldwide.

The war on terror policy of the US, which included interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, hurt the power of the US. In the national security strategy published by the Bush administration after the terrorist attacks, it emphasized policies that support the concept of unilateral, hard power-oriented, and preventive strikes. The Bush Doctrine, which was changed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and transformed from a ballistic missile problem to a counter-terrorism problem, consists of three different components: the *principle of unilateralism*, the *preventive war doctrine*, and the *spread of democracies* (Akçay, 2013:20).

In addition to reducing the financial and diplomatic maneuvers of the US during the 2008 mortgage crisis, these wars also had adverse effects on the US hegemony. They caused other nations to doubt the credibility of the leading liberal economic order. Following the 2008 economic crisis, the US began to lose control over its national and international economic systems. Instead of minimizing the role of the state in free trade circulation, state interventionism gained momentum during this period. Due to the shift in security perceptions following the end of the Cold War, the concept of national interest has gained increased importance; new forces have emerged in response to the current order, and alternative formations have been established in opposition to the Western order. After the 9/11 political crisis and the 2008 economic crisis, the United States lost its dominance in the system, and its hegemony started to be more questionable. While the US was attempting to overcome the structural problems, it faced following the 2008 economic crisis, it also began to lose its dominance in global politics.

During the presidency of Donald Trump, elements such as the system of alliances, multilateralism, and national interests started to be prioritized. Donald Trump’s management, cost-benefit policies, the national interest’s emphasis, and the policies of the increasing demands for countries within the EU, built on the values of the present, resulted in catastrophic damage to the structure. For example, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger emphasized the increasing importance of liberal values, stating that ‘the United States has pursued value-based goals rather than forming coalitions in search of a balance of power (Kissinger, 1969:65).

The decrease in the US’s influence within the system, the erosion of the liberal order’s protective role, and the abandonment

of the concept of value in favor of the concept of interest have led to the expansion of the field. China, which takes on more participatory roles in the international system, has been the country that has benefited the most from the changing conjuncture in the system. Hegemonic power must consider common goods in its policy-making process. Common goods include global problems such as the common currency, climate issues, migration or refugee problems, disease, or pandemics. The hegemonic state must be stronger than other states to fulfill its duties in the face of everyday problems (Webb & Krasner, 1989:185). For example, during the Trump presidency, he was unwilling to play a leading position in addressing the global problems in the system, such as withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2017, anti-immigrant/discriminatory policies in the US, rising “America First” slogans in foreign policy, and withdrawing from the nuclear agreement that was signed with Iran (Trump, 2017).

One of the factors that has become a catalyst for the erosion of liberal values is the growing resentment towards liberalism as an ideology, even in the domestic affairs of the US. The US’ liberal state model is no longer seen as an example for other nations to imitate during state-building. Liberalism’s legitimacy crisis increased due to the 2020 US Congress ambush by Trump supporters. According to Ikenberry, this is the first time since the 1930s that the United States has elected a president who openly opposes internationalism. To say differently, the liberal world order was eroded harshly under the Trump administration. For instance, during the presidency of Donald Trump, transatlantic relations between the EU and the US became loose and even shaken. The relations between the US and China have become increasingly tense, which has strengthened the possibility of a new Cold War emerging between these two countries (Tokatlı, 2022:188). The US has become an “actor that is being humiliated in diplomatic affairs” because close allies, such as the UK, South Korea, Germany, and Australia, have started to strengthen ties with other powers that challenge American hegemony, including China. These countries have also begun to join other institutional structures that serve their own national interests.

Amitav Acharya, in his book *After Liberal Hegemony* (2017), argues that the international system is built on four core pillars: free trade, multidimensional institutions, democratic governance, and liberal values. However, in the current order, there is an apparent stagnation in those aspects (Acharya, 2017). Not only is there a stagnation, but the Trump administration has also facilitated the erosion of these core components. Acharya argues in his book *The End of the American World Order* that the order led by the US serves only the interests of the US and is far from being a universal system (Acharya, 2014).

The Trump administration's reluctance to engage as a stakeholder in global governance, the growing influence of nationalist ideologies, and the trend towards interest-driven policies have contributed to the erosion of the spirit of global unity and common struggle. The US administration has failed to manage public goods effectively and has been unsuccessful in securing the health of its citizens and its economy. For example, Dr. Anthony Fauci, a member of the coronavirus task force, admitted that the US does not yet have an efficient way of managing the coronavirus (BBC, 2020). Another example is Matt Rowan, president of the Health Industry Distributors Association (HIDA), who states that Trump’s tariffs would harm the American healthcare sector. Medical products are essential to protect healthcare providers and their patients every single day. The healthcare products on the proposed list are used widely throughout healthcare settings and are a critical component of our nation’s response to public health emergencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made global governance necessary as it is one of the most widespread problems affecting the

entire world. In this respect, COVID-19 threatened US hegemony in terms of its capabilities to address the crisis during that period. Donald Trump's accusations against China are clearly visible in his rhetoric. For instance, during a rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he referred to the COVID-19 virus as “Kung Flu” (Zhang et al., 2020). He even, without a second thought, said that even the Chinese “would agree” with his choice of words; meanwhile, Chinese authorities clearly stated that they were disturbed by the name-calling from the US.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Donald Trump pursued protectionist measures and prioritized American interests in all aspects of policymaking. Trump’s understanding of foreign policy consists of ignoring global interests, avoiding the culture of negotiation, and discouraging cooperation, which raises questions regarding common values, democratic governance, and collective security within the Western Bloc. Initially, he cut off American funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) during the pandemic. The US’s contribution to the WHO’s budget accounted for fifteen percent of the total, and the US argued that the WHO was biased in favor of China (Dozier, 2020). This act lowered the prestige of the US in the eyes of the world. Secondly, during the COVID-19 period, Trump restricted human mobility into America (BBC, 2020). To illustrate this, foreign nationals who wish to become permanent residents of the US must refrain from applying for sixty days. He also announced that he was going to sign an executive order suspending all immigration to the US. The US initially focused on ensuring the welfare and security of the state and subsequently prioritized the welfare and security of its allies.

China has emerged as a new rival power to the US, and it is being questioned whether this rise could lead to a shift in the global balance of power. China is using different methods from the US in its system during the COVID-19 period. During Donald Trump's presidency, the US did not take the seriousness of the situation or its profound consequences seriously. However, during Joe Biden's presidency, rigorous vaccination efforts and successful diplomacy helped mitigate the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed to the world many examples of liberal capitalist failure. Furthermore, the geopolitical importance of China has increased, along with the rise of competition in a multipolar world order. Despite the US claiming that the country is the protector of peace and freedom all around the world, it has been acting unethically with remarkable disregard for communities that it regards as “the other.” A clear violation of universal values is apparent. For example, regarding the export of vaccines, the US and China in 2021 allocated 330 million (99%) doses of the 3 million (1%) COVID-19 vaccines they produced for their own use, while exporting only 7.5 million of them to other countries. On the other hand, China has used 345 million (58%) of the vaccines it produced for its own citizens, while exporting 252 million (42%) to other countries (Benninghoff, 2021).

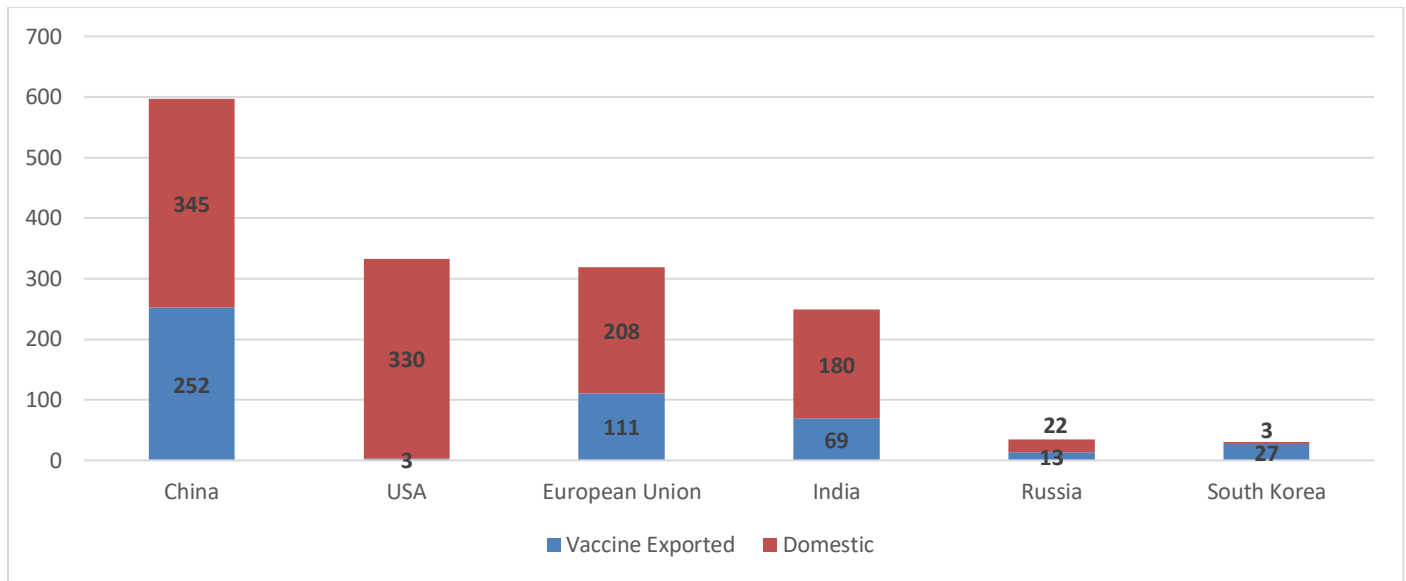


Figure 2: Number of Vaccine Doses Produced and Exported (2021).

Source: Airfinity (2021). Handelsblatt, China Exportiert Viel Impfstoff, Germany.

Suppose the US wants to regain its former normative power. In that case, it must pursue multidimensional foreign policies, promote international peace, emphasize the principle of reciprocity, and play a leading and pioneering role in conflict resolution. In particular, the hegemony of the US is linked to the hegemony of the dollar as the currency. (Baykal, 2021:18).

3. RISE OF A NEW HEGEMON: A PATH TO TRANSITION OF POWER IN THE SYSTEM

Former French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte said, " *Let China sleep, for when she wakes up she will shake the world*, This seems to have become a reality because the rapid rise of China is one of the debated issues in the current world politics. The old understanding of China as the "sick man of Asia" is undergoing rapid change. Deng Xiaoping has been steadily rebuilding China's economy since 1978, in the process of reconstructing the country. He also stated that China had been poor for thousands of years; however, it would no longer remain poor, and if it ignored the importance of science, technology, and education, China would be defeated again (Geeraerts & Jing, 2001:254). Ever since the presidency of Richard Nixon, the US has aimed to strengthen ties with China to integrate the formerly impoverished empire. China aims to ensure its peaceful development while refraining from interfering in the politics of other states. China also follows the slogan of "entrepreneurship saves China." Since 1990, the People's Republic of China has been pursuing regional institutionalization initiatives based on the principle of multilateralism (Tokatlı, 2022:59).

It is worth noting that "China's peaceful rise", now referred to as "China's peaceful development," is an official policy and political slogan in China, implemented under former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu Jintao (Liu, 2003:101). He sought to rebut the "China threat theory" and reestablish the view of China as a non-threatening world power, as historically, Chinese empires were regarded as less aggressive. Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" is in line with this approach.

The concept of the Chinese Dream, which was first mentioned by Xi in 2012 in an exhibition called *Road to Renewal*, suggested that "realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese nation in modern times" (Tokatlı, 2023:464). The Chinese Dream refers to the construction of a wealthy, strong, democratic, and harmonious

modern socialist nation. China aspires to achieve this goal by 2049, marking the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Especially during the 2020 BRICS Summit, Xi stated that “history showed us that multilateralism, equality and justice kept war and conflict away; however, unilateralism triggers misunderstandings and conflict” (MFA, 2022). In addition, not obeying the rules and breaking the law, following the path of unilateralism, bullying, and withdrawing from IOs and treaties, is against the general will of the people and undermines the dignity and legitimate rights of all nations.

3.1. Dragon's Footsteps

China has accelerated its efforts in addressing common global problems, such as COVID-19; this period has led China to rationalize human rights violations under emergency measures. While the US was unable to play a leading role in confronting the crisis during its search for a solution, China invented a vaccine and functioned as a responsible state in the global arena. China is leading the global response to the crisis, for example, through its “Mask Diplomacy” initiative and providing medical assistance to the WHO and the EU. For example, China sent aid to Italy, which was severely affected by the pandemic, and China aimed to alleviate Italy's concerns about China's rise as a threat to the system (Chen, 2021). Other countries that managed to receive aid from China are Serbia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, and Spain. During the pandemic, Brussels and Washington's ties were strained, while China sought a rapprochement with the West. China is a major global supplier of various medical eyewear, masks, and protective products worldwide.

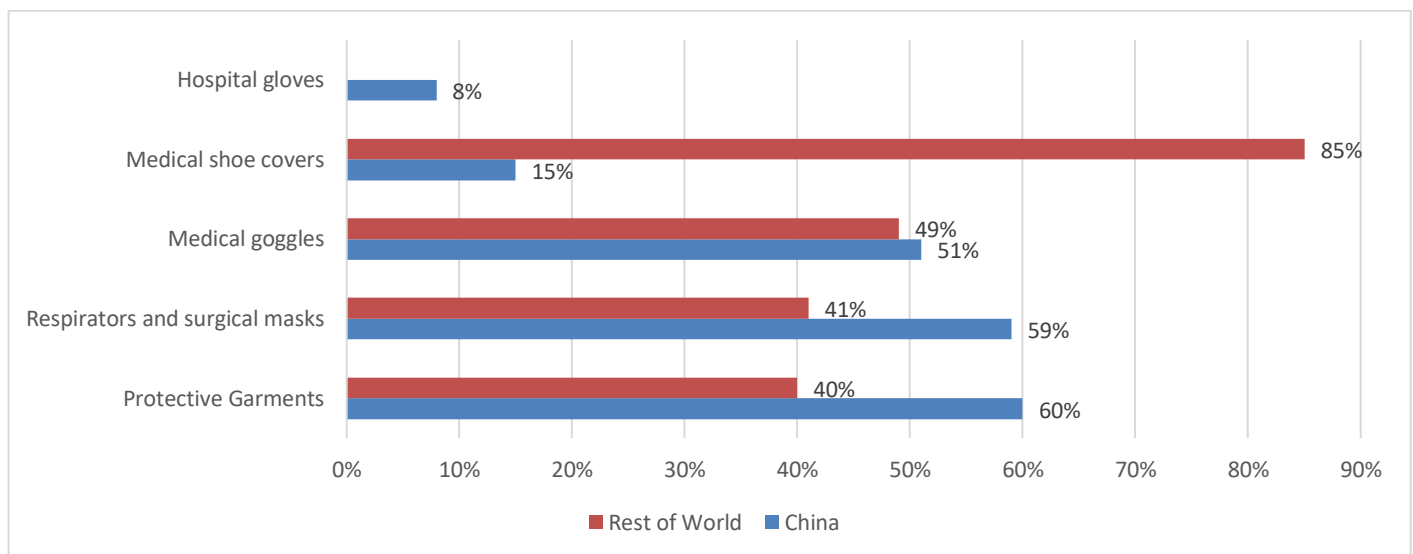


Figure 3: Much of the World's Import of Personal Protective Equipment Comes from China (2020)

Source: Bown, C. (2020). China Should Export More Medical Gear to Battle COVID-19. Peterson Institute of International Economics. China has started to pay more attention to developing its Soft Power Strategies, aimed at achieving soft hegemony, attracting policy methods by consent, and exerting smooth geopolitical and military influence within the system. The term "soft power," which refers to a country's ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure, was introduced by political scientist Joseph Nye in the 1980s (Nye, 2004). The rationale behind the fact that if you are admired and respected, it is easier for you to work with others, plus advancement on foreign policy issues with willing partners is far cheaper than pressuring others through coercion. When countries employ soft power in conjunction with other foreign policy tools, they can advance national interests in a meaningful and seamless manner.

The reason China began to pursue public diplomacy actively has its roots in historical processes. In 2003, during the SARS outbreak, China did not share accurate statistics with other countries, resulting in a lack of information and reduced transparency, which threatened public health. This also eroded China's global prestige. To avoid making the same mistake, China has taken a more responsible and reliable stance on the COVID-19 issue, thereby increasing its international prestige among other states. In the past, China has focused on increasing its material resources, such as economic tools, but aspects of soft power, including culture, dialogue, and interaction, have been areas that have lagged.

COVID-19 has presented China with an opportunity to regain its image in the eyes of Westerners. During the crisis, China's aid extended to the entire world, including the Middle East and North Africa region. To demonstrate this, Jack Ma, the founder of the Alibaba website, promised to send 100,000 masks and 200,000 testing tools to Africa, and even promised medical assistance to Middle Eastern Countries. Chinese aid around the world has come to be labeled as a "humanitarian offensive." China has deployed medical experts and resources to various countries, including Italy, African nations, and Latin America, thereby enhancing its global standing and influence. In Fareed Zakaria's words, this process can be described as the "rise of the rest" (Zakaria, 2008).

The clash of civilizations was Samuel Huntington's thesis about the post-Cold War era. He argues that a universal Western civilization is at odds with the specificity of Asian states and that the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. Instead of a global liberal world order, as Francis Fukuyama envisioned in his book *The End of History*, the New World Order will be shaped by the cultures and differences of nations (Fukuyama, 2003). US State Department Director Kiron Skinner's Office wrote Letter X, inspired by George Kennan's Article X, which was about containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. Similarly, Skinner describes this situation for China as "a fight with a different ideology and the US has not had that before. China poses a unique challenge because the Beijing regime is not a child of Western philosophy and history" (Cage, 2019). Especially during the presidency of Donald Trump, China was seen as the "other." Donald Trump also sought to follow a policy of decoupling China, rather than the rapprochement strategy that has been on the agenda of US policymakers for the last fifty years. In 2018, US Vice President Mike Pence stated that regarding China, "We will not be intimidated, and we will not stand down" (Rampton, 2018). Also, American sinologist Orville Schell said that Trump's "America first" and Xi's "Chinese dream" ideologies would be difficult to reconcile.

NATO 2030: United For A New Era Report (2020) clearly explained that China is a "strategic competitor of the US" (NATO, 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese response to US-China strategic competition had remained more cautious than confrontational. However, Trump's pugnacious rhetoric surrounding China steered both countries into what Ryan Haas describes as a tit-for-tat pattern. The need for "hanging tough on China" was increasing (Hass, 2020). One of Beijing's foreign policy goals has become to reduce its dependence on the US. In 2021, during a speech on the 100th anniversary of the CCP, it was stated that Chinese leadership will never tolerate any effort to "bully, oppress or subjugate China," adding that any outside powers attempting so "will have their heads bashed bloody" (Washington Post, 2021). Disagreement or rising threat perception between China and the US has been increasing, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Rising tension between states has paved the way for the transformation of the balance of power in the international system.

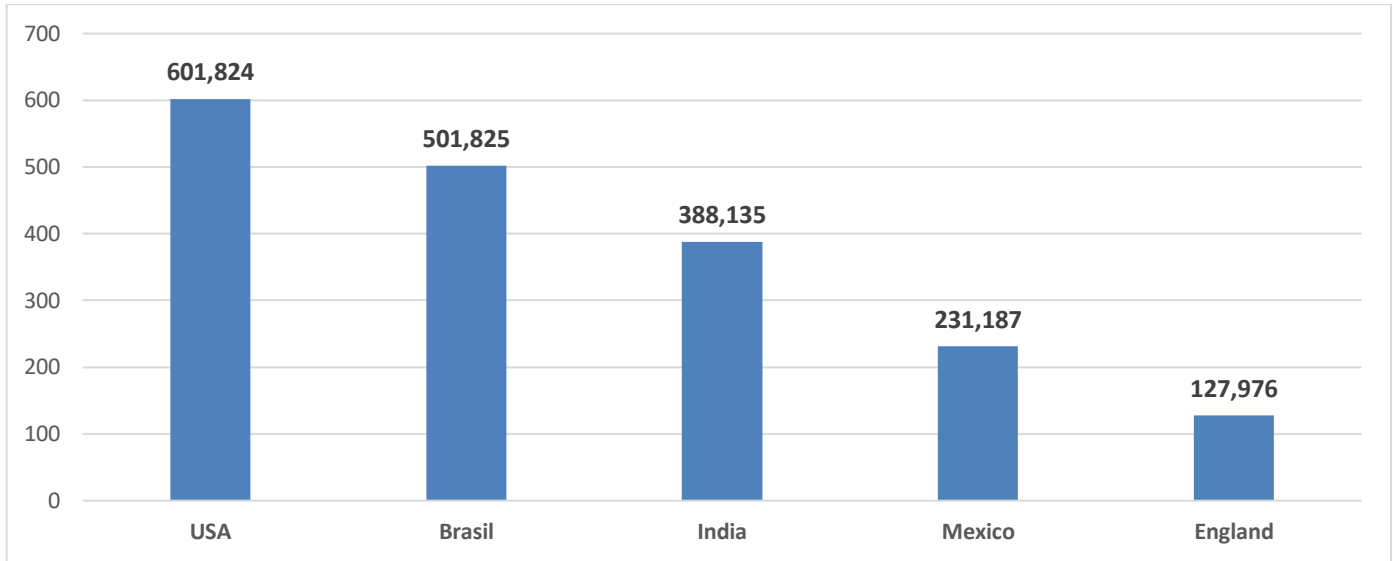


Figure 4: The Countries with the Highest Covid-19 Death Toll (2021)

Source: World Bank. (2021). The Countries with the Highest Covid-19 Death Toll.

WHO aimed to minimize the health, social, and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and promote a coordinated global response. However, the organization also faced criticism for its handling of certain aspects of the pandemic, especially in the initial stages, which sparked ongoing discussions about its future role in global health emergencies. Especially, rich countries managed to follow effective vaccination policies along with maintaining cooperation with IOs. However, when it comes to poor countries, vaccine distribution errors were evident. This is also connected with failed vaccine diplomacies and vaccine nationalism. In this case, vaccine nationalism refers to countries prioritizing local vaccine distribution over global distribution efforts. This has led to a decline in international cooperation and solidarity, as access to vaccines has become a contentious issue (Khan, 2021).

Vaccine distribution is also correlated with geopolitical tensions and has increased the hostile sentiments among existing rivals. To illustrate this better, high-income countries have managed to reach 80% vaccination levels and have vaccinated all their citizens with at least one dose of the vaccine. Wealthy countries, such as the United States, the EU members, the United Kingdom, and others, made large advance purchases of COVID-19 vaccines. These countries secured billions of doses for their populations, often locking up supply chains for vaccines well in advance of their availability.

During this period, vaccines became diplomatic bargaining chips for partners or allies only. Disputes created another source of diplomatic tension for policymakers. Hesitation and public skepticism, combined with logistical difficulties and regulations, have delayed vaccination campaigns and reduced confidence in the initiatives. While rich countries have focused on providing vaccines for their own citizens, the global response has underscored the need for solidarity to truly control the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the state became more pronounced in foreign policy decisions. More roles were given to states to gain their power and self-determination in their national decisions. The global liberal world system

was eroding as nation-states gained more power in the system after the COVID-19 era. Especially, globalization has deteriorated due to the increased protectionism of states. As the US-China competition has intensified, mistrust among states has become more pronounced. Currently, there is a remarkable rise in China, especially in aspects of soft power. During the COVID-19 period, China's stable, rapid, and efficient handling of the virus through mask and vaccine diplomacy, as well as the provision of aid to various parts of the world, significantly contributed to its prestige, which led to China filling the power vacuum created by the US. Meanwhile, the US was pursuing isolationist, self-interest-driven policies that were eroding American credibility on the international stage. Withdrawing from the WHO and the rise of conservatism, along with a one-dimensional foreign policy, have caused the US to become a deteriorating hegemon in the eyes of other states.

Moreover, the COVID-19 period highlighted the relevance of the realist theory of international relations to today's world, which forms the legal basis for the behavior of states in an anarchic international system, particularly in issues such as survival, the security dilemma, and the zero-sum game. Countries focused on vaccinating their own citizens first, sometimes disregarding the broader global consequences. Notably, China engaged in vaccine diplomacy by offering its domestically produced vaccines to other nations, often as part of a broader geopolitical strategy. In the post-COVID-19 era, significant changes are occurring in the system, with economic and political power shifting eastward. To be more precise, Chinese power is increasing, while US power is decreasing. China's vaccine distribution efforts were part of a broader geopolitical strategy. This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the struggle for global leadership.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the global balance of power, with its effects being particularly pronounced in the rivalry between the United States and China. The pandemic exposed weaknesses in both countries, but it also accelerated shifts in the global order, contributing to China's growing influence and raising questions about the future role of the United States. On the other hand, China was among the first countries to face the COVID-19 outbreak, but it quickly implemented strict lockdowns, mass testing, and contact tracing, which helped contain the virus. By contrast to the US and other countries, China's early and efficient response was seen as a success, and its containment of the virus reinforced the image of a powerful, centralized government capable of managing crises. Many countries began looking to China as a more dependable partner for economic recovery and global governance. As a result, the US hegemony, along with Western-led institutions, is being questioned more.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep-seated cracks in the global order, particularly in the US-led system. While China's rise was accelerated by its effective pandemic response and vaccine diplomacy, the US struggles with internal divisions, economic difficulties, and a decline in global leadership. While the US struggled to lead during the crisis, China capitalized on its efficient response, economic recovery, and global outreach, positioning itself as a leader in the post-pandemic world.

ETİK BEYAN VE AÇIKLAMALAR

Etik Kurul Onay Bilgileri Beyanı

Çalışma, etik kurul izni gerektirmeyen bir çalışmadır.

Yazar Katkı Oranı Beyanı

Yazarlar tm alıřmaları birlikte yrtmřtr.

ıkar atıřması Beyanı

alıřmada potansiyel bir ıkar atıřması bulunmamaktadır.

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