

Power play as Covid crisis snowballs

Instead of bickering, major global powers – the US, China, Russia and the EU – must join hands to deal with the virus



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The coronavirus tragedy should normally have forced world powers to set aside differences in a statesmanlike manner and jointly deal with an existential challenge that confronts mankind. Sadly, this has not happened. Virtually every international organisation from the World Health Organization to the UN Security Council, has remained gridlocked and the subject of bitter controversy and strife.

Amidst these developments, has been some unseemly squabbling between major producers of oil in the world, and ugly manifestations of racism in China, against African students. The Chinese have historically believed that they are civilisationally superior to others. But racism appears to be an added characteristic that they have recently acquired. This is alongside China's strongly anti-Islamic biases, manifested by their holding over one million Muslim Uighurs virtually imprisoned, in their Western Xinjiang Province. Adding to China's "image problems" is the widespread belief internationally, that it was China's actions and subsequent "cover-up", that led to suspicions and allegations, worldwide, about their actions, leading to the emergence of the coronavirus.

Oil prices

Even as the lives of millions of people across the globe have been under threat, the world's major oil producers have been involved in an

unseemly and almost self-destructive struggle, about world oil prices. These recent developments will hopefully give oil importing developing countries like India, some comfort and respite, from the ever-present threat of surging oil prices.

Russia has now joined the traditional, long-time oil producers, all of whom are members of the OPEC Cartel. OPEC members have colluded for over four decades to fix prices of oil and gas globally. Russia is now a major exporter of oil and gas, with huge unutilised capabilities. It, however, refused to abide by recent OPEC demands to reduce its oil and gas production, significantly. Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent the UAE, thereafter, bit off more than they could chew, by ramping up production, believing that sharply lowered prices would force the Russians out of the market. Global prices fell drastically to around \$31 per barrel and were set to fall even more.

Alarm bells started ringing in Washington as oil prices fell drastically. The US is now a major producer and growing exporter of oil and gas, including to India. The falling of oil prices globally was making shale oil production in the US unprofitable. President Trump, whose electoral financing is increasingly dependent on "goodwill" of the American producers of oil and natural gas, was alarmed.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE were told by the Trump Administration to curb oil production and reach a deal with Russia, to cut their oil production. Russia agreed to reduce its oil production, once OPEC members led

by Saudi Arabia restricted their oil production, and conform to previous norms. While Trump is predictably triumphant about this "deal" on oil prices, oil industry members across the world are sceptical about the commitment of all oil-produ-



Falling short President Trump does not seem to have any long-term strategy to deal with challenges the US faces AFP

cing States in the world, to adhere to their pricing commitments to the US. Two countries, which will definitely not shed any tears about the fall in world petroleum prices are India and China.

Role of WHO

There has been widespread international concern ever since the coronavirus crisis broke, about the role of the WHO, and particularly about its Ethiopian Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who is accused of being ineffective. He is also regarded as a virtual apologist for China. The Chinese refusal to accept any responsibility for the impact of transpired in Wuhan is unfortunate, and for many, unpardonable.

In response to US queries and requests for samples of relevant material from Wuhan, China blandly claimed that it had "no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission." It denied US experts any access in Wuhan. President Trump has faced considerable criticism that he

was "taken for a ride" by the Chinese, who stalled his Administration's efforts to ascertain the full facts. Moreover, according to *The New York Times*, around 430,000 American citizens and residents were flown back from China to major American cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco, in the weeks following the Wuhan shutdown. This was inexplicably done, without any serious, or comprehensive medical checks, of returning passengers.

Under severe domestic pressure for his "mishandling" of the coronavirus crisis, President Trump responded by a dramatic move to suspend funding of the WHO.

Many in the US have serious reservations about this White House decision. Trump has also faced opposition from America's European Allies and developing countries, particularly from Africa, for acting against the WHO. Interestingly, with his mind occupied on signing a trade deal with China, Trump had initially praised China's efforts to

deal with the Wuhan situation, stating that he "greatly appreciates" China's efforts, to stop the crisis from spreading.

It is clear the US President has no long-term strategy to deal with challenges his country faces. He also astonishingly appeared to have no clear understanding of the Federal Division of powers between the Union and States, in his own country.

Chinese assistance

Even as the US and European democracies were in no position to offer any meaningful assistance to developing countries, or to OPEC's leading members like Iran, China has been very forthcoming with its assistance in machinery and even expert manpower, across Asia and Africa, apart from European countries like Spain and Italy.

China's supply of equipment to European countries was a hurriedly arranged public-relations exercise. Much of equipment supplied by China was found to be defective. India has been very careful in limiting its assistance in the face of the coronavirus crisis to its SAARC partners – Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

Sadly, the international community seems to be paying hardly any attention to the growing menace of the coronavirus in Africa. In the meantime, India needs to ensure that it does not get drawn into the vortex of the growing bitterness and rivalry between the US and China. Modi took the initiative to ask Saudi Arabia to convene a meeting of the G20. It would be useful, if major global powers – the US, China, Russia and the EU – joined hands to deal comprehensively with the coronavirus crisis, instead of resorting to the bickering that the US and China are currently engaged in.

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