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Analyzing Covid-19 Crisis from the Realism lens

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of realism theory. Specifically, the paper represents a test of the persistence of the realism theory in providing an objective and solid analysis of the reality of international relations and the states' behaviour and policies after the Cold War by applying to the Covid-19 crisis. Especially in light of the many criticisms that the theory was subjected to on the grounds of its inadequacy in analyzing the new reality of international relations after the Cold War. The study reached several main results, the most important of which is that the Covid-19 crisis has come to confirm the continued solidity and dominance of the realism theory in the interpretation of the international system and the behavior of states. But this realist mentality that dominates state behavior becomes greatly apparent when the international community confronts a very serious global threat like the COVID-19 virus. Hence, the study argues for the persistence of the centrality of realism theory in the field of international relations.

المخلص

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تحليل أزمة فيروس كوفيد-19 من منظور النظرية الواقعية. إذ تمثل الورقة تحدياً اختباراً لمدى استمرار ملاءمة ورسوخ النظرية الواقعية في تقديم تحليل موضوعي لواقع العلاقات الدولية وسلوك وسياسات الدول بعد الحرب الباردة بالتطبيق على أزمة كوفيد-19. لا سيما في ظل الانتقادات الكثيرة التي تعرضت لها النظرية على اعتبار عدم صلاحيتها في تحليل واقع العلاقات الدولية الجديد بعد الحرب الباردة. وقد توصلت الدراسة لعدة نتائج رئيسية أهمها، أن أزمة كوفيد-19 قد جاءت لتؤكد استمرار صلابة وهيمنة النظرية الواقعية في تفسير النظام الدولي وسلوك الدول، لكن تظهر هذه العقلية الواقعية المهيمنة على سلوك الدول بجلاء عند مواجهة المجتمع الدولي لتهديد عالمي شديد الخطورة مثل فيروس كوفيد-19. ومن ثم، تجادل الدراسة باستمرار مركزية النظرية الواقعية في حقل العلاقات الدولية.

Introduction

The covid-19 virus is considered one of the most serious threats that faced the world since World War II. Almost all countries have been greatly affected by Covid-19. The death toll from the virus in the U.S, for example, has exceeded half a million. After the cold war, especially with the prevailing globalization and interdependence, as well as the rise of non-state actors (NSAs). a lot of IR scholars argued that the realism theory is no longer the suitable approach to understanding the world. Some even argued that realism is dead.

This is partly true in light of globalization, and the growing role of NSAs and international economic organizations after the Cold War. Further, the termination of the Cold War per se, the ethnic conflicts that erupted after that, as well as the new serious challenges like international terrorism, cannot be explained only by Constructivism.

Nevertheless, realism and the realist mentality continue to dominate the interpretation of international relations and the state's behavior after the Cold War. Evidence for this is the continuation of the conventional and nuclear arms race, the security dilemma, geopolitical conflicts and wars, the weakness of the UN, and the distorted international cooperation.

The Covid-19 crisis has come to clearly demonstrate the continuation and dominance of realism in the interpretation of the international system and the behaviour of countries. In particular, when states face a very serious threat like Covid-19, the realist mentality overwhelmingly dominates their behavior and policies. In other words, these kinds of crises clearly prove the overwhelming superiority of realism theory over its competitors. For instance, since the outbreak of the crisis, states acted selfishly with the logic "Us-first". Also, states have shouldered the brunt in the face of the crisis rather

than international organizations. Furthermore, due to border closure, international cooperation has been highly receded.

Study Problem

The main aim of the research is to answer this question, "to what extent Covid-19 crisis proved the continuation and dominance of the realism theory in explaining the interactions and behaviours of the international system?".

Sub research questions:

1. What is the perspective of other international relations theories, especially liberalism and constructivism of the Covid-19 crisis?
2. How Covid-19 crisis confirmed the continued complete domination of the role of the state at the expense of non-state actors and transnational relations?
3. How Covid-19 crisis asserted the domination of anarchism, survival and self-help in the international system?
4. Do the serious repercussions of the crisis have permanent impacts on international cooperation and the global liberal order?
5. What are the long-term implications of the crisis on the international system?

Study hypotheses

The main argument of the research is that the Covid-19 crisis has revealed that the realist behavior and mentality still greatly dominate the states and international relations after the Cold War.

Lastly, the research assumes that the realist implications of the Covid-19 crisis, particularly on the global liberal order are not temporary. But they will last in the long run. So that we will witness almost complete dominance

of the realist thought on states' policies and the interactions in international relations.

Study methodology

The study uses descriptive and analytical approaches to describe the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences, and then analyze and explain the states' realistic behaviour and policies during the crisis.

1. Literature review: Covid-19 From the Lenses of IR Theories

The covid-19 crisis has fueled a sharp debate among IR theories. As it caused sudden and major changes in the appearance of the global system and states' behavior. While realism posits that states' main priority is power, security, and hegemony, and hence they don't tend to cooperate. Neoliberalism asserts that states are extensively tending to cooperation through organizations to achieve absolute gains. Especially, when they face a huge global crisis like Covid-19 with a huge cost to be addressed and require effective and strong coordination and solidarity to be effectively countered. Neoliberals cite the increased cooperation between international organizations, and the powerful role of WHO during the crisis to prove their perceptions about the reality of the world during the crisis (Ghincea, 2021). For instance, the rich countries have cooperated effectively via international organizations in the issue of distributing the Corona vaccine, especially to poor countries. Because they found that this is beneficial for the continuation of international cooperation and the strength of the global economy (Fay,2021 pp.209.210). Accordingly, neoliberals argue that the crisis is nothing but another capitalist crisis that will be adjusted through the mechanisms of capitalism and liberalism, including democracy. The proof of that is that markets and borders lockdown was just temporary required by the utmost necessity (Sumonja, 2021, p. 220).

Constructivists have viewed the reality of the world during the crisis from a different angle. Constructivism holds that norms, ideas, identities and ideologies motivate and determine the states' behaviour, rather than material factors or economic and geopolitical rivalry. Thus, it does not refuse power, interests and anarchism, however, instead, it views them as constituted or determined by norms and ideas. Consequently, constructivists have opposed that states' behavior during the crisis has been selfish. As well as, they opposed the lack of cooperation, and undermining of the role of international organizations as realists claim. They, in return, affirm that the world, including NSAs, was very cooperative motivated by the shared perception of the grave threat of Covid-19 on the future of mankind. Thus, states have been motivated by an interest to face the crisis, but this interest is constructed by negative ideas or perceptions about the virus. That is a non-traditional or material security threat (Sun, 2021, pp.195-201).

In this regard, realism's opposers argue that the crisis has forced the states to cooperate motivated by survival. Also, NSAs, especially international companies played a vital role during the crisis. Additionally, several small states and periphery states extended their influence during the crisis. Accordingly, they believe, that the crisis is establishing to a new international order more liberal within very loose globalization, in which the role of countries, especially the major ones, is significantly declining in favour of international companies and periphery states (Aybet, 2020, p.305).

In general, it has become difficult, in light of the new and highly complex structure of the international system after the Cold War, to subjugate all new phenomena, not just the Corona crisis to the realist perspective. But that does not prevent the continuation of the dominance of realism after the Cold War. As such the other theories, in particular, liberalism and constructivism about their interpretation of the crisis touch this reality

somewhat. However, their interpretation generally can be considered incomplete and somewhat biased. As they overlook the several manifestations during the crisis that clearly assert the continued dominance of the realist mentality and behaviour in the international system. Such as, for instance, states' struggle with medical appliances based on "Us-First", the centrality of nation-states in addressing the crisis, the crippling of international cooperation...etc.

2. Key Principles and hypothesis of Realism theory

Realism theory is a school composed of many branches. However, these branches share some essential hypotheses that embody the core of realist thought. The most important of them is, "anarchy" an absence of a powerful international government able to control the states' behaviour and prevent wars. States' policies or behaviours are determined by human selfishness. Also, the main priority of states in an anarchic system is power and security (Donnelly, 2005, P.30).

Thus, states seek to realize power and security by any means, including cooperation to improve their relative power against the other in terms of securing their survival. In this way, realism assumes that conflict and the security dilemma are constant situations in the international system (Adhikari, 2020, p.117).

Also, the state's interest is a variable determined by power. So, realists hold that the small states' policies are very similar because they are determined by their limited power (Kheyrian, 2019).

Therefore, realist thought revolves around military power or cases as it is the key determinant in deciding the wars and peace or stability in international relations. Thus, realists consider the other cases like economic and social cases less important or low politics in international politics as they are determined by military power (Viotti and Kauppi, 1999, P.7).

Consequently, realism holds a very pessimistic view of international politics. Realism says cooperation is possible but not permanent. Because the states have concerns about the other's intentions. Thus, they think that their continued cooperation or alliance may reinforce their partners at their expense, or change the existing balance of power. In short, in an anarchic environment where each state does its best to secure its survival, states feel insecure when they are forced to cooperate (Alhammedi, 2021, p6).

Hence, realists argue that the balance of power is the best way to secure stability in international policies. Since the full hegemony of one power in the international system would lead to military counter alliances against the dominant (Serban, 2013, p.57).

In this vein, Waltz argues that the balance of power is a constant case in the international system for securing security. as a result of the constant change of the power distribution among the states, which threatens the states' security and survival. In this respect, Waltz considers two types of balance: the internal in which states reinforce their economic and military power. And external by military coalitions (Waltz, 1979, pp. 117-118).

Also, in the context of survival as it is the states' utmost aim. Realism does not recognize the moral principles in states' foreign policy. States, whatever their internal regime nature, do anything whether moral or immoral when necessary for the state's survival (Baylis and Smith, 2001, pp. 142-143).

Realists share a key hypothesis, which is the state is the most important actor in international relations. And the role of the rest of the other actors such as international organizations, Multinational corporations and terrorist groups is just secondary. In other words, they cannot work independently to influence international relations. The most prominent example of this is the U.N, which is dominated by the major powers (Viotti and Kauppi, 1999, P.6).

Under the survival of an anarchic system, realists assume that all the decision-makers are necessarily rational, or they must be that. Hence, they carefully consider every decision in foreign policy to secure survival and maximize the state's national interests. This implies they are sometimes forced to take hard decisions that contradict their political persuasion (Antunes and Camisao, 2017, P.15).

The realism theory underwent several developments since the founding of classic realism by Morgenthau. Where realists developed neorealism and neoclassical realism. these new models of realism differ in the ways or levels of analysis of the phenomenon. However, they agree on the core principles of realist thought. They all agree international politics is a persistent conflict for security and power, the centrality of the nation-state in the international system, the anarchic system, the rationality of states' leaders and the principle of self-help for securing the utmost aim, which is survival. In this regard, the study attempts to examine the Covid-19 crisis through realist thought.

3. Covid-19 and the dominant Role of state

No doubt that the role of the state in the international arena significantly retreated after the cold war or the neoliberal era in favour of the international organizations and the NSAs. Yet, as the realists argue, in times of dangerous threats or crises only the states, not the organizations, play the biggest part in confronting these crises. That has been greatly evident during the financial crisis in 2008. In which the states, including the U.S., intervened forcefully to rescue their financial systems. Consequently, to rescue the international economy when the liberal international institutions were indeed powerless to do that (Gardini, 2020, P.17).

In accordance with realists also in critical times or dangers, citizens ask their governments directly to take decisive action. In other words, they

view that the state is only capable of confronting the dangers. Despite the state's engagement in many regional multi-gatherings (Modaber, 2021, p.2).

The Covid-19 crisis has proved that the state is still the most important actor in world politics. In particular, in times of dangerous crises like Covid-19. That needs fast measures and huge resources to effectively face them, only the states can take fast measures and own the resources to face them. During the Covid-19 crisis, most of the states did not ask international organizations, particularly the weak World Health Organization for help. They immediately took protective measures or self-help measures to save their citizens and economies from the negative consequences of the crisis (Kliem, 2020).

Furthermore, realists argue that the power of international organizations, including the UN is very limited. Because they are just tools in the hands of the great powers. In other words, the interests of the great powers hinder them to work independently and effectively, especially if these interests are at odds (Akgun, 2020, p.81).

This was greatly evident from the ineffective efforts of WHO in confronting Covid-19. Because of the Trump administration's reluctance to provide the U.S share of the WHO budget, which is the largest share. Under the allegations that the organization is biased toward China, which engages in fierce competition with the U.S (Oteo, 2021, p.2). China, in return, has withheld important information about the virus from WHO. It also pressured the WHO to ignore Taiwan's successful experiment in containing Covid-19 (Hemchi, 2021, p.20).

Liberals and constructivists admit that the nation-state had a powerful role during the crisis. Therefore, the full centrality of it during the crisis is very exaggerated. International organizations, including WHO, and non-governmental organizations have played an active role to address the crisis.

World Trade Organization (WTO), for instance, has worked to strengthen and coordinate policies between its members to expand the production of the Corona vaccine and its delivery to all countries of the world. COVAX initiative or coalition that has a vital role in the Fair delivery of the vaccine is an initiative of WHO in partnership with countries, international organizations and international companies of vaccine production (Beqiraj and Ippolito, 2021, p.303). Also, World Bank had an extensive contribution during the crisis. It provided financial aid estimated at more than two billion dollars to poor countries to face the consequences of the crisis, especially the economic one (Penas et al., 2022, p.132).

In this respect, it's not possible to deny the great awareness and informational role led by WHO about covid prevention, updates on the vaccine, the number of injuries and deaths, etc. Which greatly guided the governments and citizens to the best policies and responses to face the crisis (Penas et al., 2022, p.136). On the other hand, non-governmental organizations had an important role during the crisis. At the request of many governments, they helped in relieving and facing the crisis. For instance, syndicates and civil societies in many countries have built temporary sanatoriums, and have carried out awareness campaigns. Additionally, the donations to the government to buy masks and medical equipment (Zondi, 2021, p.12). Certainly, the full centrality of the state during the crisis as the realists say is very exaggerated, given the important role, especially of the international organizations during the crisis. However, the crisis has revealed that the state is still the most important actor in world politics and still controls the organizations' behaviour. This is evident from, for example, the absence of the real sufficient efficiency of WHO to address the crisis.

4. Absolute Priority of survival in an anarchic and self-help world

Despite the existence of international organizations, particularly the U.N. However, realists contend that the international system is still anarchic. This is not only due to an absence of powerful superior authority, particularly the UN able to control the behaviour of states. But also, because security is still the main priority of states and conflicts and military wars still occur in the context of survival and power (Daoudi, 2020, P.3). Since the end of the cold war in the context of the alleged neoliberal era, almost more than a hundred military conflicts, including civil wars were breakout around the world. So, it would be very unrealistic to expect the terminations of these conflicts in an anarchic system have been intensified by Covid-19 (Kantarch, 2020, p.183).

The outbreak of a serious global crisis like Covid-19 greatly showed to what extent the global system is anarchic. There is no existence and no role for a supreme world government to face the crisis. The latter brought a huge global panic that led to chaos and irrational decisions by the states and citizens. The spirit of selfishness has highly risen (Pillay, 2020, p.59). The crisis reshaped the states' policies and behaviours toward only one priority, which is securing their survival and security (Alhammadi, 2021, p.151).

The Covid-19 crisis has proven that survival is the absolute aim of the states. This means in a time of sharp crises the states, whether big or small become extremely selfish to secure their survival 'Us first'. As we witnessed during the Covid-19 crisis, a superpower like the U.S. had isolated itself, as well as has abandoned its leading role in the world and its main allies to face the dire consequences of the crisis (Sheikh et al., 2021, p.1630). It seems that the U.S is well aware of the negative experience of Athens "the great power" with plague. That greatly weakened its power in favour of its competitor power Spartans (Modaber, 2021, P.2).

Once the crisis erupted, states sought to confront this crisis on their own. This not only undermined international cooperation but also ignited conflicts regarding medical supplies (Lika, 2020, p.13). The major powers confiscated and coveted each other's medical supplies. The U.S paid much higher to possess Chinese masks that were destined for France and Germany. France also confiscated mask shipments that were being gone to the U.K (Pillay, 2020, P. 59).

Even the EU has turned into a self-help region. As EU's countries quickly acted alone in terms of, for instance, border closure and exports ban without any collective coordination within the European Union. And in sense of self-help, a country like Italy was forced to resort to China for help after being betrayed by the EU (Basrur and Kliem, 2021, p.3).

The Covid-19 crisis has dealt a fatal blow to European solidarity. Hence, the crisis has proven that the European mentality is still influenced by realist logic, especially self-help in a zero-sum game when faced with a serious threat (Hemchi, 2021, p.20). The same Machiavellian mentality where "no permanent friends or permanent enemies, but only permanent interests". Also appeared when a solid alliance like the U.S-India alliance was about to collapse when Trump warned India to impose sanctions in the backdrop of India's ban to export the anti-malaria drug. It should note that Trump's warning has come less than two months after his visit to India to cement the strategic relationships and forge a strategic front to undermine China's power in Asia (Pillay, 2020, p.60).

Despite the above, constructivists contend that states' behaviour during the crisis has not been totally motivated by selfishness or narrow self-interests, but in terms of moral duty or their good identity. Indonesia, for instance, has provided medical assistance to India without any expected returns or based on ethical motives. Also, Canada donated the corona vaccine

to poor countries for the same motives (Kusumawardhana, 2021, p29). We can't deny a degree of cooperation and assistance during the crisis was based on moral and liberal foundations. However, it is evident that the realist mentality and behaviour have extensively prevailed in the anarchic world.

5. Covid-19 and Erosion of liberal international order

The international liberal order was founded on three main pillars "strong international institutions that can fundamentally change state behaviour"; "an open international economy that maximizes free trade"; and "spreading democracy around the world". These pillars experienced gradual erosion as a result of a set of events such as the international financial crisis in 2008, the trade war between the U.S and China, and the UK Brexit in 2016. Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis has extremely eroded these pillars to the point we can say that the international order has become a realist. In addition to the incompetence of WHO to handle the Covid-19 crisis, the latter has shown the great failure of the EU, as the largest political and economic gathering in the world, to underpin the solidarity among its members in the hard times. As the leading states particularly Germany and France have behaved selfishly towards the urgent demands of assistance from countries like Italy, Spain and Serbia (Lika, 2020, p.14).

In this regard, we should assert that realists still question international cooperation in the neoliberal era. Realists contend that the mentality of 'Us-first' still prevails the international politics and clearly stands out in a time of crises like Covid-19. In the latter, the mentality of 'Us-first' has completely dominated the behaviour of most of the states. This was evident from, for instance, the fierce competition for medical equipment, masks and respirators. Also, from the travel bans and blame games (Alhammadi, 2021, P.159).

On the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis has greatly affected the spread of democracy worldwide. According to IDEA, Covid-19 not only hindered

the spread of democracy but also led to enhancing authoritarianism and rising populism (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2020, P.3).

This is expected under realism, since when the state faces an emergent or serious crisis like Covid-19 its power magnifies while the activity of public freedoms and civil societies retreats. In this vein, realism asserts that the state is a unitary actor, i.e., all forces of the society unite behind the leadership when facing a dangerous threat like military aggression (Masoudi, 2021, p.245). It might be very surprising that these consequences have been embodied in Europe the stronghold of democracy since the outbreak of Covid-19. Due to the harsh measures of EU's governments to contain the crisis like the ban of demonstrations that restricted the fundamental right of the citizens as never before (Russack, 2021, p.1).

Not only that, but the most dangerous aspect of it is that the Covid-19 crisis has boosted the populism and populist movements in Europe. In fact, a lot of EU leaders' decisions to face the crisis like strict border controls are persistent demands in the populist movements' discourse. In this way, the populist leaders exploited the crisis to show the weakness and failure of the EU's ruling elites as well as the liberal democracy and EU. For instance, Alice Weidel, the leader of the party the alternative for Germany blamed the rampancy of the crisis in Germany for Merkel's open borders policy. The most dangerous implications of that are adopting the traditional parties some of the populist thoughts to gain more public support, especially since the covid-19 crisis will leave serious economic challenges that will greatly support the populist movements' position (Magri, 2020, pp. 122-123).

One of the implications that have to be mentioned based on the EU experience, is that the liberal model, especially the political values like democracy is limited in addressing a serious threat like Covid-19. In return,

China with a very authoritarian regime has been more proficient than the EU and the U.S in containing the crisis (Khojayan, 2021, p.4).

On the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis has greatly damaged the international economy and free trade due to borders closure, domestic lockdowns and the state's strong intervention in the domestic economy (Pickering, 2020). During the crisis, the governments, including the liberal directly intervened to save their economy, which also led to the increasing state's ownership of the assets. For instance, the Portuguese government has acquired the majority stake of TAP Air Portugal to save it from bankruptcy. Also, British Treasury has bought the debts of several private companies. The German government agreed to provide a 9-billion-euro rescue plan to Lufthansa (Wright et al., 2021).

Not only that, but border closure could have sparked military tension between China and Australia. because the latter's border closure harmed Chinese trade (Branicki et al., 2021, p.241). Also, this implies that economic power is very vital to maintain and developing China's military power in realist terms (Like, 2021, p.13). Generally, it is expected that Covid-19 will increase the influence of the state in the local economy, which, in return, will undermine the role of international foundations and the liberal system, as well as escalate international conflicts (Masoudi, 2021, p.264).

At the beginning of the crisis, states closed their borders quickly and imposed restrictions on trade with others fearing the spread of the virus. This implies the erosion of multilateralism and globalization in favour of the priority of national security and survival (Beteringhe et al., 2020, p.250). In this respect, Stephen Walt argues that Covid-19 proved that "tight interconnections among states have created many problems". That's why, states have imposed limits on their trade with others (Walt, 2020). However, on the contrary, some argue that it is true that border closure has reinforced

the role of the state and undermined international communications and cooperation, Yet, on one hand, it was temporary. On the other hand, we can't deny the key role of transnational relations in world politics, which their role is greatly highlighted in serious crises like Covid-19. For instance, Chinese students and entrepreneurs Associations in the U.K made great efforts to help the Chinese in U.K and China to face the crisis. In form of, for example, shipping medical supplies to China, especially to poor regions, donations to provide medical supplies and living need to the Chinese in U.K. Additionally cultural solidarity with China and the Chinese (Tran and Tseng, 2022, p.7).

The covid-19 crisis has debunked the prevailing perception that globalization led to creating very strong and complex interdependence among the states. So that the cost of disengagement is very painful or harmful for the state. Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis has proven the exact opposite, as states decided quickly to isolate themselves and limit their cooperation with others as a rational choice. In other words, they preferred to disengage themselves, if temporally, from the interdependence system (Hemchi, 2021, p.21).

Indeed, Covid-19 has proved that within the aggravated interdependence the threat moves and spreads very easily across the borders. Thus, that state's security is closely related to the security of other states. This will not enhance international cooperation as the liberals claim but will undermine it. Or will aggravate the states' fears of interdependence and excessive open borders. Accordingly, also the role of international institutions will be undermined as a result of a lack of international cooperation (Masoudi, 2021, p.247). However, liberals view that the international cooperation during the crisis was not completely absent, but was limited and selective, and was largely confined to regional organizations as a necessity to counter the crisis. for instance, the EU and ASEAN cooperated to secure the corona vaccine to the world and to strength WHO role (Kusumawardhana, 2021, p26).

Further, as for interdependence and multilateralism, liberals argue that the Covid-19 crisis has only highlighted the crisis of multilateralism and not the inauguration of her death. That existed before Covid-19 and was aggravated by Trump's anti-multilateralism approach. Thus, states' isolation and lack of interdependence are just temporary measures due to the impact of the crisis. since states cannot isolate themselves from multilateralism, and also cannot solve huge challenges individually including covid-19. This is evident from China's efforts to underpin multilateralism and its foundations such as WHO, and international and regional organizations. As well as, China's harsh criticism of Trump's approach. In this regard, China has provided financial aid estimated at more than one billion dollars to organizations and countries to support and protect multilateralism and the global economy (Banik and Bull, 2022, pp.214-216).

It is true that, during and after the peak of the crisis, there was a degree of international cooperation, and a role of international organizations, particularly WHO. However, it can be described as limited and ineffective. This implies that the crisis has come to assert the erosion of the liberal system since 2008 and the dominance of the realist mentality. Additionally, serious crises or threats like Covid-19, automatically force the states to behave very realistically even if temporarily. During the crisis, states stressed protectionist and isolationist measures, which have been on the rise since 2008, the mentality of "US-First" was very evident, and the power of populist movements has grown to a very large degree. Accordingly, it can be said, ostensibly, there is globalization and international pluralism, but they are nominal, and the realist behavior still controls them. This is also evident from the continuation of wars and arms races since the end of the cold war. Lastly, China's support of interdependence and multilateralism has a latent realist dimension that relates to its rise as a dominant global leader. This is also

evident from its new initiatives like the new silk road that aims at undermining the liberal system and its institutions.

6. Covid-19 as a trigger of increasing Sino-U.S strategic competition

Liberals argued that in the neoliberal era and globalized world after the cold war, the great, or world wars will disappear. This also means according to them the transformation of leadership in the international system will occur peacefully. Since the international financial crisis in 2008, there is a dramatic shift in the international system structure where the U.S, indeed, is no longer the only superpower in the international system. In return, China rose strongly to be a serious threat to the U.S hegemony. According to realism, a dramatic shift in the international system structure will inevitably lead to a sharp competition between the hegemonic and the rising power could evolve into a military confrontation to decide the world leadership. In fact, realism is very true in this question. The U.S since Obama, engaging in fierce competition with China in different domains. Trump launched a trade war against China to correct the international structure in the U.S favour (Schweller, 2021, P.3). Trump administration, according to the National Security Strategy of 2017, has labelled China a strategic rival of the U.S in the international system (Cavlak, 2020, P.263).

The Covid-19 crisis fueled the fierce competition between the U.S and China in an unprecedented way. Each party tried to gain power at the expense of the other in a pure realist manner (Nicholson, 2020). Both have engaged in a blame game to shake the international credibility and reputation of each other. Trump blamed China for originating and spreading the virus. While China blamed the U.S for introducing the virus deliberately by American soldiers who came to Wuhan (Adhikari, 2020, P.120).

The fierce competition between the two parties is also embodied in the race to find a vaccine for the virus. A very serious virus like Covid-19

threatens the future of humanity and requires intimate cooperation among the major powers to terminate it. Nevertheless, every major power, including Russia, the U.K and France worked alone and industriously to be the first to come up with a vaccine. To improve their relative power at the expense of the others in realist terms (Pickering, 2020).

In light of the Sino-U.S. competition, China sought to exploit the crisis to advance its global primacy as a responsible great power. While the U.S had no global leading role to confront the crisis, China relatively led the crisis globally through, for instance, "Mask diplomacy". China provided medical aid to the WHO and many countries, even European, estimated at millions of dollars (Basrur and Kliem, 2021, P.3). This is, of course, Led to the decline of the image of the U.S worldwide and vice versa the increase of China's image and soft power globally. This situation will not lead immediately to the primacy of China, or it will replace the U.S hegemonic position in the international system. However, it relatively changes the balance of power between the U.S and China which certainly leads to an increase in the geopolitical competition between them (Kantarch, 2020, pp. 183-184).

In regard to global primacy, constructivists admit that military and geopolitical influence play a significant role in US-Sino global competition. However, also the global image struggle plays the same role in the competition. Both parties have been working for a while to build a distorted perception of the other through the discourse. The Covid-19 crisis represented an ideal chance to reinforce this perception. While China's discourse extensively focused on that China is a victim of the U.S. the latter's discourse hugely focused on that China is the main responsible for the crisis and its victims of the dead (Lai, 2022). The U.S has reinforced these claims by blaming China's food culture style. In addition, a condensed discourse portrays China as the source of all epidemics. In this way, the U.S worked to

amplify the fear of China and shake its international status and soft power (Barreneche, 2020, pp. 27-28).

The U.S-Sino sharp rivalry during Covid-19, in particular, partly reflects the constructivist perception of the U.S-Sino competition. As Being a conflict partly stemming from each party's perception of its entitlement to global leadership, and the superiority of its values and civilization. Nevertheless, the entire competition is very realistic. This is evident from, for instance, the recent serious escalation over Taiwan for its strategic, geopolitical and military significance, which may evolve into a sharp military clash. Hence, constructivism provides a part of the reality of such conflict and not the complete realist reality. Accordingly, also Covid-19 has come to reflect the core realist of the competition.

Conclusions

In the post of the cold war, a heated debate among IR scholars erupted about the centrality of the realism theory in IR analysis. This debate has been mainly thanks to the failure of realism to predict the peaceful end of the cold war and the eruption of ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as the appearance of many successful economic integrations. Therefore, a number of theoretical approaches, especially Constructivism and Neoliberalism have occupied an advanced position in IR analysis. In other words, realism is no longer the central lens to understand the world after the cold war.

This is partly true. The world after the cold war brought many variables and new phenomena, like the rise influence of NSAs cannot be understood through the realism lenses. Nevertheless, three things we would like to emphasize: first, the vocabularies and concepts of the realist approach, especially the interests and power maximation, persistent conflicts, geopolitical competition, security dilemma and arms race have continued to prevail strongly after the Cold War. Second, the realist mentality has also

dominated the states and leaders despite their engagement in a wide economic gathering. Or their adoption of cooperative and soft power strategies. For instance, China through these strategies keen to achieve a soft hegemony, and a smooth geopolitical and military influence. In another example, Russia uses gas as a pressure tool to maintain its influence in Eastern Europe, and also to maintain the balance of power with Europe. Third, which is the most important, when the international system faces a very global serious threat, the realist concepts and principles emerge very strongly and quickly. And the realist mentality, especially "Us-first" become dominating the states' policies and behaviours.

The covid-19 crisis is one of the most serious global threats since the second world war. The world since then witnessed many crises such as Balkan and Gulf wars, the international financial crisis in 2008 and lastly the Ukrainian war, in which the realist approach emerged to address these crises. However, the Covid-19 crisis, in particular, has proven that the realist mentality still dominates international relations and states. Thus, the realism theory still maintains its centrality in the IR field.

Since the outbreak of the crisis, the international system had fallen into complete chaos reflecting the persistence of the anarchic system. States acted very selfishly in terms of "Us-first" and "self-help" even the European states. They have closed borders, isolated themselves and confiscated each other's medical supplies, which led to a sharp deterioration in international trade and cooperation. The crisis has also proven that the state is still the most important actor in the international system. The WHO was indeed powerless in addressing the crisis. On other hand, the crisis greatly led to the deterioration of the spread of democracy and the rising of populism even in Europe. And generally led to the erosion of the global liberal system. Lastly, the crisis intensified the strategic competition between China and the U.S in

terms of power maximisation. In nutshell, the crisis fully embodied the main concepts and principles of the realism theory.

Some argue, most of them are liberals, that the crisis really reflected the realism theory or mentality. However, this matter is temporary. Others add that, during the crisis the world witnessed a degree of cooperation, as well as WHO played an important role in addressing the crisis.

This may be true relatively. However, it can be said, the Covid-19 crisis has come to extensively reflect the persistence of the realist mentality that dominates the states, but it does not appear very clearly except in serious crises. Furthermore, the researcher asserts that the crisis contributed to emerging long-term implications, in which the realist mentality of thought in the international system will be more prominent. The most prominent of these implications:

- The erosion of trust in international organizations and the increased role of the nation-state.
- Retreating democracy and rising populism even in Europe.
- The further erosion of the global liberal system and globalization as a result of the increase of protectionism and the state's role.
- The intensification of Sino-U.S. competition
- The increase of mistrust among the states even between the western blocks. This would lead to an increase in conflicts and the arms race.

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