THE FAILURE OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY PROBLEMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the failure of the global leaders to unite against the COVID-19 pandemic and how this represents a lack of accountability on the global level. Using the desk research method, the authors draw upon secondary data (e.g., published reports, previous studies, social media, and websites) to gain a broad understanding of the dynamics of global leadership that shapes the global accountability processes during the pandemic time. The authors suggest that accountability at the global level (i.e., the accountability relationship between global health institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and different countries) can better be understood as a geopolitical phenomenon that contains many socio-political and demographic factors that relate accountability to leadership and cooperation. This study has implications for researchers, shareholders, and policymakers by enhancing their understanding of the global accountability process during crisis time.

Keywords: Global leadership, Accountability, COVID-19, Pandemic, Geopolitics.

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the outset of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has diffused globally with many implications, such as economic *"lockdown"*, that have resulted in a significant slowdown of global economic activity and an increase in social instability. This has disproportionately affected emerging countries, leading, for example, to their citizens' inability to pay for their housing, basic provisions, and public services. The pandemic's resultant broad economic and social implications invite us to address how it may impact accountability dynamics globally.

Most studies focus on the accountability of individual countries or governments to their people (i.e., a downward form of accountability to people at the micro-level) (Sharif et al., 2020 in the US; Broadbent, 2020 in England; Zahariadis et al., 2020 in Greek and Turkish; Ojiagu et al., 2020 Sub-Saharan Africa). However, very few studies addressed accountability at the global level –that is, the accountability of countries and international organizations to other countries and different people of different countries (Friedman et al., 2020; Zahariadis et al., 2020). The authors explore global accountability and leadership during the COIVD-19 pandemic from a geopolitical perspective to fill this gap. In this regard, Sharif et al. (2020) show that the COVID-19 pandemic and the related regulatory response to it contribute to geopolitical risk. They anticipated that COVID-19 would have a long-term negative impact on the geopolitical risk and economic uncertainty levels.

To do so, the authors conducted a review of the literature according to the systematic review process defined by Centobelli et al. (2021); Altarawneh et al. (2020) and Wadesango et al. (2020) that are well-known in the field of literature reviews concerning managerial topics. This study argues that, in today's critical time, a conventional or functional conception of accountability—that draws upon formal aspects such as regulations and procedures (Gray et al., 1997; Power, 1991; Watts & Zimmerman, 1990) is not adequate for a more realistic understanding of accountability at the global level during the period of COVID-19. In other words, the concept of functional accountability falls short of capturing the various insights in the complex context following the pandemic (Yu, 2020). This study discusses accountability from a geopolitical stance. This is important to understand accountability at the global level, where socio-political and demographic factors relate accountability to leadership and cooperation.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic is a global pandemic, where no country can manage or deal with it separately, it is observed that a full/inclusive coordination between different countries is crucial for this crisis to end. As Friedman et al. (2020) note, inclusive participation is critical for ensuring that health policies and programs are adjusted to communities' interests, decent human lives, and dignity and well-being.

However, for these contemplated global social relations to effectively achieve these objectives, a sound governance system should be in place (Scholte, 2011). Accountability is crucial to having an effective global governance system that the current world desperately requires. This is needed to provide for global society (Scholte, 2011). Here, there is a need to adopt a democratic form of accountability that restricts power and reacts to the people being impacted by the crisis, especially the marginalized and the voiceless (Scholte, 2011). This accountability makes political leaders answerable for their drawbacks in delivering worldwide health coverage (Friedman et al., 2020). This system helps political exercise pressure on world leaders to explain and account for failures related to the health system (Boin et al., 2017). Here, the authors adopt Keohane's (2006) view of external accountability where *"organizations are held accountable not to those who delegated power to them, but to those affected by their actions"*. According to this view, global and local health institutions and governments would be held accountable for their actions if their policies and actions affect different people in different parts of the world.

The Covid-19 Pandemic from a Geopolitical Perspective

Geopolitical theories are classified as a subdivision of human geography (Flint, 2006), as it is concerned with human activities and how these activities have a reciprocal relationship with the earth's surface. In other words, it is more concerned with describing and synthesizing the physical and social aspects of a specific place or place in the world. Agnew (2003) explained that these places are combinations of location, locale, and sense of place. Location is the role a place plays in the world, including critical industries, employment sources, immigration, and military power. Locale refers to governing and helping institutions, politics, and identity.

Some Foucauldian geographers see geopolitics' emergence as related to British imperial power around the sixteenth century. They see geopolitics as a governmentality tool that emerged alongside new knowledge to increase imperial control over colonies (Agnew, 2003; Tuathail & Toal, 2005). Imperial systems throughout history, from classical Greece and Rome to China and the Arab world, exercised their power through their ability to impose order and meaning on space (Slater, 2004; Walberg, 2011). In contrast, other scholars acknowledge that the geopolitics concept was first used by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen (1864–1922) in 1899 to

describe the role geographical factors play in determining national behaviour (Chapman, 2011; Dodds, 2007), but they claim that geopolitics is situated knowledge so has changed from Kjellen's original meaning (Flint, 2006). Meaning change relates to changes in the world's political system – for example, from imperialism to both world wars and colonies' independence movements, then to Cold War politics and on to the new world order after the USSR's collapse (Agnew, 2003; Tuathail & Toal, 2005).

Finally, we are now living in twenty-first-century geopolitics amidst new directions such as the geopolitics of globalization (ecological and economic) (Allen et al., 2020), environmental geopolitics (e.g., Global warming) (Nye, 2020a), and other issues like terrorism and collective means of handling the world's geography and economic resources. Recently, Joseph Nye has contributed much to new world order geopolitics. His latest studies focus on the use of soft, hard (Nye, 2004), cyber power (Nye, 2011), and morality effect on soft power and geopolitics, which relates too much to our conception of pandemic accountability conception (Nye, 2019). Nye criticizes America's extensive use of hard power (rather than spreading American values and merits through soft power) and initiating wars after 9/11, which gave America and the West problems in meaning and misunderstanding as a new imperial power in most of the world's countries (Nye, 2004).

The widespread COVID-19 in different parts of the world is much more than a biological phenomenon. It has quickly taken fundamental political, economic, societal, and geographical forms. This is evidenced by the ensuing lockdowns, mobility restrictions, stay-at-home orders, financial rescue packages, inter-state tensions, state border closings, digital surveillance, the concentration of infections in cities, and the politics of expert knowledge (Cheng & Shan, 2020; Chung et al., 2020). In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic discloses some of the central dimensions of state power in general and the re-production of state power in health care and economic policy (Moisio, 2020). This has many other implications on economic "lockdown" that have resulted, in the immediate term, in a significant slowdown of global economic activity and an increase in social instability, which disproportionately affects the poor people in different economic respects.

To avoid a global economic collapse and potential depression, UN Member States have taken dramatic and significant measures, including direct cash disbursements, short- and medium-term forgivable loans and deferment of payments, and unemployment insurance. The UN Member States have necessarily relaxed safeguards by trading compliance, oversight, and accountability for the speed of response and the achievement of a rapid impact, thus creating significant opportunities for corruption to thrive. While recognizing the need for urgent action to prevent economic and social collapse, the lack of sufficient accountability and oversight mechanisms in the allocation and distribution of economic stimulus packages increases the risk that corruption and fraud (UN, 2020). The concurrent occurrence of all these changes affected how the world's geopolitics is managed and understood. Our question is how to understand global accountability concerning this pandemic and this massive geopolitical change?

The Covid-19 and the Emergence of Geopolitical Risk

Geopolitical risk arises because of agents' power struggles (e.g., country leaders) in different territories that result in tensions between states (Caldara & Iacoviello, 2018). To justify their failure in managing the crisis, it seems that different countries' leaders are seeking 'blame avoidance' through accusing other (external) parties of not doing their part in the problem, intensifying tensions among the different world countries (Zahariadis et al., 2020). Many

tensions emerged in the global arena among the United States, the World Health Organization (WHO), China, European Union members, and many others (Akon & Rahman, 2020). These tensions started by criticizing the WHO management of the COVID-19 crisis. It was accused of slowly acting to stop the outbreak of Coronavirus globally and hiding information in a way that serves China and questions the organisation's independence (Peters et al., 2020). Following this claim, President Trump made a tough decision, which included a quick action to cut ties with WHO and stop funding the organization. Then, he sent a notice that the United States of America has its intentions to withdraw from the WHO. Contrary to the American action, the Chinese President announced new funding to the WHO with an additional US $2 billion over the next two years. He replied to the American accusation by declaring that China had informed the WHO and the rest of the world on time (Javed & Chattu, 2020).

Following this, Australia called for the formation of an independent international committee to investigate the pandemic's origins. This was followed by an intervention from the European Union to resolve this tension. The EU called for a 'scientific and collaborative field missions' to trace the Coronavirus way of transmission. China supported the calling for an independent review, and the resolution was passed by the 194 member states of the WHO. The interim report was due in November 2020, while the full report will be issued in May 2021 (Peters et al., 2020). However, despite having this great work, it was recently reported that China had blocked the WHO team's entry to its territory to study COVID-19's origins on the 5th of January 2021, making China's position appear as swinging in this crisis (Boseley, 2021). Having these tensions regarding the WHO, its funding, and role will affect the organization ability to do its part neutrally and independently (Peters et al., 2020).

COVID-19 raised some tensions between the western allies as the EU and America do not have the same cooperation in this critical time. This is clear in many instances. For example, when Italy asked for help in the first wave of COVID-19, the NATO countries and America had shown only silence. Contrary to the western silence, Russia sent quick medical assistance to Italy, and China also sent the necessary assistance, including a medical team, to serve the Italian crisis (Akon & Rahman, 2020). Further, Serbia faced almost the same Italian situation and has already declared European solidarity as *"a fairy tale"* (Campbell & Doshi, 2020) after the EU rejected giving them the necessary assistance. These issues and more envisage an expected shift of power in post-COVID-19 international relations.

The main problem with this situation is that the WHO has no authority to investigate epidemics within countries independently. There is no international law that gives enforcement power to the WHO to enter any country for investigation. So, the organisation's main power is related to member states' cooperation, which is diminishing currently due to the rising tensions between different states. To resolve this deficiency and to face any future global threat, international laws should be revised to allow the WHO to have the power to investigate any country. Without this, the WHO cannot be held accountable for the spread of any pandemic. Its role is to monitor and give recommendations based on the information and access provided by the member states (Javed & Chattu, 2020).

Global Leadership and Accountability

On a global scale, leadership and accountability need to be reassessed, where more actions should be taken for the international community to get out of the COVID-19 pandemic with minimum damage. These assessments and insights can be explained by the previously mentioned geopolitical changes and how they impact our understanding of global accountability.

Unlike most circuits that see the COVID-19 pandemic as a biological foundation, the authors argue that it has quickly taken a fundamental socio-political, economic, and geographical form. This new context allows us to understand accountability as a geopolitical phenomenon.

The Covid-19 represented a test of world leadership and accountability, which many world leaders failed (Allen et al., 2020; Nye, 2020a). This was apparent in how China and US leaders dealt with the pandemic. Being accountable towards global pandemic (common enemy) like COVID-19 should involve cooperation and transparency between the superpowers. Hence, in an ideal world, both sides (US and China) should have been united under the WHO label to look at the origins of this virus and what should be done for the interest of the whole world, including poor least-developed countries (LDCs) that lack the resources to do so. However, what happened is that we had *"blame avoidance"* and *"blame-shifting"* strategies from both sides. The Americans call the COVID-19 the Chinese virus, and China accuses the US army of bringing the virus. In contrast, there is an absence of proper leadership that contains accountable action, thinking cooperatively about this virus's coming waves. In this different time, leading countries should have *"power with others"*, not *"power over others"* (Nye, 2020a).

It is observed that COVID-19 has impacted all countries, and no government, on its own, was able to fight against the pandemic. There is a deficiency in adopting the necessary preventive measures to face their terrifying lethality, failing to establish the appropriate procedures and efficient instruments. However, as previously mentioned, the world superpowers are clashing together. Other leading countries (e.g., EU and Australia) compete to achieve more power and influence either regionally or internationally. The authors see a failure of leadership and accountability despite the numerous warnings from WHO. The entire system of international institutions and organizations and leading countries' leaders proved unprepared for, responding to, the coronavirus (Gardini, 2020; Fidler, 2020).

COVID-19 has produced a new normal that has some geopolitical influences. This emerging event has changed the concept of globalization and hence accountability at the global level. Globalization is not only affected by politics, economic decisions, and agreements, and borders or demographic factors do not limit it. As Nye (2020b) argues, the pandemic has created ecological globalisation. In contrast to the economic and political globalisation that can affect us for some time, ecological globalisation is spreading, representing a significant threat to the whole world. Again, the superpowers' cooperation means the only accountable action to save the mother earth and its species.

Unlike economic globalization, where developed countries are not affected by the harsh economic situations of LDCs, ecological globalization, and the related pandemic threat do not differentiate between developed and developing countries. However, LDCs, with their lack of power, facilities, or resources, are facing greater danger (Allen et al., 2020; Nye, 2020a & b). This indicates that, till today, global accountability and governance systems are not effective in responding to the pandemic. The world-leading countries, especially the US and China, have great responsibilities towards the world as their economy represents 40% of the world's GDP (Nye, 2020a). These responsibilities include strengthening the role of the WHO, UN, and other international organizations. If this is done, the WHO can be seriously held accountable for the pandemics' impacts worldwide. Further, there is a dire need for a COVID-19-related fund to help emerging countries face this pandemic. Finally, different countries must have a collective plan for this pandemic: what appears now is that different countries are politically working in isolation in solving their domestic cases.

In summary, having effective global accountability that forces world leaders to account for their responsibility towards the world community is crucial. This is because, currently, those who will survive are not the powerful, more robust, or even larger counties, but those that will adapt to this new normal. The contemplated adaptation needs collective teamwork from talented people all over the world to make proper planning. In other words, no country can face this pandemic in isolation from the world. Hence, significant superpowers need to work together instead of the presently followed blame-shifting behavior in global circuits. Failure to adopt international cooperation would prevent quick solutions to the crisis and jeopardize the entire health system globally (Javed & Chattu, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study contributes to knowledge by questioning the concept of accountability during the pandemic time (Alawattage & Azure, 2019; Awio et al., 2011). The authors sought to provide a theoretical insight to researchers interested in investigating the impact of the recent pandemic on accountability. Following Nye (2020a), the authors argued that it is helpful to understand the current global pandemic as a geopolitical phenomenon that has contributed to the presence of what the authors called global accountability. By appreciating the pandemic's ensuing vast economic and social implications, it is crucial to study the consequences brought about by these emerging circumstances for the accountability process at the international level. The authors clarify how global leadership and accountability had faced significant shifts during the pandemic time due to the worldwide system's geopolitical changes, contributing to significant gaps and drawbacks in international actions and relations. The present gaps, contestation, and isolation among the world-leading countries have ushered into their failure to bear their responsibility towards the crisis, contributing to a weak non-transparent global accountability system. For us, it is the superpowers' co-operation that represents the only accountable action to save the mother earth and the species living on it while the next wave of the Coronavirus is on its way. These countries should collaboratively work to boost global health systems by improving international health communication and health literacy and enabling robust surveillance and reporting (i.e., enhancing global transparency and transfer of information) (Metwally et al., 2020).

A limitation of this research is focusing on the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., the beginnings of 2020. We suggest that a future study can take a more extended period (i.e., by including data from the latter 2020 and 2021) to fully understand the recent implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to the global leadership and accountability issues. Further, as this study is focusing on the macro-level impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors suggest that future research can examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic at the micro-level of the individuals and the various institutions (Diab, 2021; Naseeb et al., 2021; Metwally et al., 2021).

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