

The background of the cover features a close-up, artistic photograph of several books and stacks of papers. The books have various colored spines, including blue and black, and their pages are visible, showing a range of colors from cream to yellow. The papers are stacked in a way that creates a sense of depth and texture. The overall lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, giving the scene a scholarly and professional feel.

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COVID AND THE DEATH OF AMERICA'S SUPERPOWER STATUS?

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The question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a shift in the power and position of the United States is the main question that this paper grapples with. COVID-19 is viewed to have tested the unchallenged superiority of the notable pillars of American hegemony, namely its economy, international image and the liberal democratic order established by the US. The healthcare system of the US which had always been championed has also suffered insurmountable criticism and been tarnished. The core argument of this study is that the pandemic has accelerated the decline of the superpower status associated with the US and inevitably led to other sovereign states losing their confidence in American leadership. The paper is divided into four subsections. First, it addresses why the US is considered as a hegemon in the international arena and criticizes its role as a hegemon from various scholarships. Second, it seeks to understand why the US has long been plagued with questions of decline, even before the pandemic. The third part delves into the challenge offered by China and how the power struggle between the US and China has reached new heights because of the pandemic. The last section outlines how the pandemic has completely tarnished the legitimacy of the US as the predominant actor in global affairs and its implications. The paper aims to contribute to the scholarly debate regarding the impact of the pandemic and its consequences on American hegemony.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for disrupting the lives of almost the entire world population and also causing massive disruption in the international order. While the pandemic has brought certain countries to the brink of ruin, it has also improved the social standing of a few others who have been successful in combating the virus. However, in the case of the United States, the pandemic has humbled the superpower.

COVID-19 has been responsible for immeasurable deaths in the United States, and some scholars believe that it contributed in the demise of America's superpower status. The death toll due to

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COVID-19 has already passed a threshold of 3,70,000, being the highest in the world and there seems to be no signs that it is abating anytime soon.¹ The pandemic has unleashed the weaknesses of the American system, particularly in its healthcare system as well as the liberal-democratic world order championed by the US and thus, sparked a massive debate about the decline of America's hegemony or superpower status.

In the past few decades, debates about the decline of the US's hegemonic status have become a central topic in international relations scholarship. The hallmarks of US power: its economy, the liberal democratic world order, its alliances and its image abroad have all been dealt significant challenges. Most of these challenges emanate from the emergence of China as a global power but some of them also have to do with the policies adopted by the US in the past. For instance, the Global War on Terror led by the US was sharply criticised by much of the global community and it led to a deterioration of America's image both domestically and internationally.² In more recent times, the systemic undermining of the valued strategic alliances of the US has created tensions between the US and its allies and had a particularly subversive impact on the Trans-Atlantic partnership.³

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered the toughest challenge to the supremacy of the US in the world order and it may have led to the loss of the USA's superpower status. The pandemic has devastated the US healthcare system, led to record unemployment and considerably weakened the economy, which is considered to be the base of the US's power. At a time when the US could have shown its resilience and excel as an effective leader in the international order, the US is unable to formulate a coherent strategy to deal with the pandemic in its domestic framework only. The withdrawal of funding from the World Health Organisation (WHO) has further eroded Washington's reputation and this exemplifies the reduced role undertaken by the US in international affairs.⁴

¹Peter Szekely, 'U.S. widens vaccination eligibility as COVID-19 deaths mount' *Reuters* (New York, 13 January 2021) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-usa/u-s-widens-vaccination-eligibility-as-covid-19-deaths-mount-idUSL1N2JN22O>> accessed 13th January 2021.

² Andrew T. H. Tan, *US strategy against global terrorism: How it evolved, why it failed, and where it is headed* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009).

³ Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs, 'Destroying the Foundations of U.S. Foreign Policy' (Center for American Progress 2018) <<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/06/28/452913/destroying-foundations-u-s-foreign-policy/>> accessed 6th January 2021.

⁴ Jeffrey D. Sachs, 'COVID-19 and Multilateralism' (2020) 16 *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573747?seq=1>> accessed on 10 July 2020.

The following sections will seek to understand the considerations behind US's conceptualisation as a superpower or hegemon. The study will also address in detail the reasons why questions regarding the decline of the US have long plagued international relations scholarship even before the emergence of the pandemic. This paper will also explore the role played by China as a challenger to the leadership of the US in global politics and examine how the pandemic has affected their bilateral relationship. The last section will delve into the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the superpower status of the US. Research has been conducted using secondary sources and a descriptive and analytical approach has been used as the methodology.

CONCEPTUALISING THE US HEGEMONY

The US is recognised as a hegemon in the Greek conceptualisation of the world. The term 'hegemon' is derived from the Greek word 'hegemonia', which literally translates to dominance over. During the Ancient Greece period, it was used to denote the political and military dominance of one city-state on the others and this definition can be aptly applied in the case of the US. Later on, this definition was broadened to include socio-cultural predominance of one state over the others and therefore, the US is rightly viewed to be a leader in a competitive international system.⁵

Scholars from various schools of thoughts such as TWAIL (Third World Approaches to International Law), Critical Race Theory, Cultural theories, post-colonial theories among others have offered substantive criticisms of the hegemony of the US.⁶ The TWAIL scholars have been critical of the prevalence of Western ideas and norms in international laws and institutions and how these Western norms are disguised as being 'universal' in nature because of their hold over most of the establishment of the same.⁷ These scholars are concerned about the formalisation and reinforcement of a hegemonic

⁵ Ashley J. Tellis, 'Covid-19 Knocks on American Hegemony' (The National Bureau of Asian Research 2020) <<https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/new-normal-tellis-050420.pdf>> accessed on 15 July 2020.

⁶ Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, 'American orientalism and American exceptionalism: A critical rethinking of US hegemony' (2009) 11(2) International Studies Review <https://academic.oup.com/isr/article-abstract/11/2/253/1781278?redirectedFrom=PDF&casa_token=8pXvRksyZzAAAAAA:uGxqfGg-0mp0V8LQKVSsbdasqfuJ-aLTZHnjqrXLQeTt6vphbI46HnCdtEUC-L6jgleRGtpj8fq8> accessed 5 January 2021

⁷ Richard Falk, 'Foreword: Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL)' (Third World Quarterly 2016) <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2016.1205443?journalCode=ctwq20>> accessed 4 January 2021

international law that essentially allows the US, in particular, to legitimately exercise raw power in global affairs.⁸

Apart from the criticisms offered by the TWAIL school of thought, the post-colonial scholars have also initiated discussions about how belief in American exceptionalism (an important plank of US foreign policy) has led to the conception of US as the provider of order in international affairs with devastating consequences and instituted a racial hierarchy that prioritises US lives or the lives of other Anglo-Saxons over the lives of anyone else⁹ Furthermore, the Critical Race theorists have also questioned the white supremacy that dominates the internal politics of the US, especially in the present times and cultural assumptions about the western rationality which often ignores the third world narrative and coloured social problems.¹⁰

The conception of the US as a hegemon is based on numerous factors but has four important pillars that have massively contributed to this idea. The four pillars of American hegemony are considered to be its economic might, military power, technological power as well as its 'soft power' that far surpasses the other countries in the international arena. The US economic power is exemplified by the hegemony of the dollar and also, the fact that some of the most prominent revenue-generating companies in the world have their headquarters in the US. The US still retains its title as the largest economy in the world.

In terms of its military strength, the US ranks number one in the world and its defence budget is almost three times that of China, the second largest military spender. As for its technological capabilities, it has been at the forefront of any new innovation and has dominated the tech market. However, its technological power is receding as a consequence of China's increasing focus on Research and Development as well as technological advancements. To this effect, China is now

⁸ Balakrishnan Rajagopal, 'Counter-hegemonic international law: rethinking human rights and development as a Third World strategy' (2006) 27(5) Third World Quarterly <<http://www.aalco.int/rajagopal2007.pdf>> accessed 6 January 2021

⁹ Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, 'American orientalism and American exceptionalism: A critical rethinking of US hegemony' (2009) 11(2) International Studies Review <https://academic.oup.com/isr/article-abstract/11/2/253/1781278?redirectedFrom=PDF&casa_token=8pXvRksyZzAAAAAA:uGxqfGg-0mp0V8LQKVSsbdasqfuJ-aLT'ZHnjqrXL0LQeTt6vphbI46HnCdEUUC-L6jgleRGtpj8fq8> accessed 5 January 2021

¹⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics' 1989(1) u. Chi. Legal f. <<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>> accessed 7 January 2021.

overtaking the US in the number of scientific publications and patents¹¹. While the gap in science and technology is diminishing between the US and the other sovereign states, the US is still home to the best universities in the world and is considered to provide the best research opportunities. With respect to its soft power, the US has been described as the most culturally influential society and the ‘American Dream’ is something people of all societies aspire for.

Furthermore, the US has successfully created the liberal democratic order in consonance with its allies in Western Europe, East Asia and Oceania who have the same vision for the international system¹². By creating the liberal democratic world order and providing a space for all other states to enter into the realm of international realms, the US has become more powerful.

The liberal world order has allowed the US to pursue its own diverse interests in a myriad of ways. For instance, as passionately argued by the dependency schools, the Bretton Woods institutions, under the leadership of the US, pursued the neo-liberal agenda and facilitated the opening of the markets of the developing countries for the economic interests of the US and other developed nations. However, the hegemony enjoyed by the US was viewed to be in danger for quite some time and the pandemic has accelerated the threats to the superpower status of the US.

DECLINE OF THE US

The decline of the superpower status of the US, as strange as it may seem, has been predicted by scholars from disciplines ranging from international politics to public administration. A nation always celebrated for its irreplaceable unipolar stakes in world politics now appears to be confined with questions of decline. However, the list of issues i.e. real wages, social movements, infrastructural collapse, unemployment, competitiveness in the global market, federal deficit, deteriorating health system, widening gap between the rich and poor, and failing educational institutions seem endless. Hence, it has given birth to its own school of thought by American Scholars called ‘declinism’.

Declinism stands for an idea in an identified time and space when something is fundamentally wrong with an institution, economy, or a society. Michael Prowse, an administrative officer of the United

¹¹ John Teaskinsoy, ‘Diminishing Dollar Hegemony: What Wars and Sanctions Failed to Accomplish, COVID-19 Has’ (2020) SSRN Electronic Journal < https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3570910 > accessed 30 June 2020.

¹² Ashley J. Tellis, ‘Covid-19 Knocks on American Hegemony’ (The National Bureau of Asian Research 2020) < <https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/new-normal-tellis-050420.pdf> > accessed 15 July 2020.

States has given a more precise definition of declinism. He has identified 'declinism' as a product of a rapid economic and social change. While Prowse acknowledges that change is always disturbing and often seen negatively, he further argues the changing order of world affairs has actually created a crisis-like situation for the American institutions such as the administration, companies, health, educational sector, and deteriorating governmental agencies.¹³

In contrast to the viewpoint offered by Prowse and Robert Kagan, in their book *The World America Made* talks about how negativity attracts our thoughts and states that this negative bias is responsible for the US having to dodge questions of its decline in spite of its vast influence.¹⁴ For instance, even though the US was subject to much criticism because of its action in the war on terror, the leadership role assumed by the US has also conversely cemented its position as the superpower.

From a more international relations perspective, scholars and academicians have prophesied the decline of the US at various points in time, beginning with the Korean War in 1950 to the trade war with China in the current scenario. While the US has prevailed each time, there have been several domestic and international causes behind these predictions or theories about the decline of the US. In recent years, the challenge provided by rising powers, especially China, along with its own domestic fiscal problems and intense partisan and polarised domestic political system has come to be recognised as the leading causes behind the relative decline of the US.¹⁵

The general effectiveness of US institutions has been declining over some time and the faith in American institutions has been slowly eroding. The increasingly partisan political landscape in the domestic sphere has also diminished the capacity for the US to act as an effective leader in international matters. The unravelling of the transatlantic alliance since the election of Donald Trump has also contributed to perceptions regarding the waning influence of the US. The inward approach adopted in the past few years has only consolidated such opinions.

However, there is a section of scholars who disagree with respect to the decline of the US. They believe that the US itself is not in a state of relative decline but rather the other powers are gaining

¹³ Michael Prowse, 'Is America in Decline?' (Harvard Business Review, 1992) < <https://hbr.org/1992/07/is-america-in-decline> > accessed 20 July 2020

¹⁴ Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (Vintage Books 2012)

¹⁵ Stephen M. Walt, 'How to ruin a superpower' (Foreign Policy, 23 July 2020) < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/23/how-to-ruin-a-superpower> > accessed 25 July 2020

more influence and gaining more autonomy in the international system. These scholars consider this to be a part of a larger shift of power from the transatlantic to the Indo-Pacific construct. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that the era of the US being the sole unchallenged superpower is inevitably going to see a shift.

The emergence of other great powers has also transformed the geopolitical landscape. Since the global financial crisis, the US influence in international organisations is receding and other great powers, particularly China and the other developing nations, are consolidating more power in the same.

CHINA AS A CHALLENGER FOR US'S POSITION

There has been a significant amount of literature dedicated towards the strategic competition between China and the US and how China can provide a major challenge to the hegemony of the US. The fact that China is now the world's second largest economy and expected to overtake the US in absolute terms, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has generated much insecurity in the American policy circle¹⁶. Americans have a very long history of exceptionalism, and hence there is a sense of anxiety on the question of superpower status.

This inadequacy felt by Americans when they compare their country to China has been dealt with eloquently in Michael Mandelbaum and Thomas Friedman's book *That used to be us*.¹⁷ The title of the book was inspired by a speech by President Obama in November 2010 wherein he said, "It makes no sense for China to have better rail systems than us and Singapore having better airports than us, and we just learned that China now has the fastest supercomputer on earth that used to be us".

This growing anxiety is not without cause. The causality of the rise in the economy will automatically lead to a significant increase in the military and R&D expenditure. Stergios Skaperdas, a renowned economist and an author of *Warlord Competition*, discusses the implications of COVID-19 pandemic on the superpower status of the US and expanding possibilities of conflict in international institutions.¹⁸ He emphasizes that the ability of the US to influence international politics has declined

¹⁶ Chris Giles, 'China poised to ask US as world's leading economic power this year' Financial Times (30 April 2014) < <https://www.ft.com/content/d79ffff8-cfb7-11e3-9b2b-00144feabdc0>> accessed 19 July 2020.

¹⁷ Michael Mandelbaum and Thomas Friedman, *That used to be us* (Picador 2011).

¹⁸ Stergios Skaperdas, 'The Decline of Us Power and the Future of Conflict Management After Covid' (2020) SSRN Electronic Journal < https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3644753> accessed 29 July 2020.

by citing the incident of Iran's attack on the US AL-Asad military base in Iraq after the assassination of General Suleimani. It signifies that the first time in history, the US base got hit by any other sovereign state without a military reprisal. He further examines the stress of 'expensive war load' on the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to him, the military expenditure of the US is set to decline at a time when China is continuously increasing its spending on defence.

Along with the military, technology, as one of the notable pillars of the United States, China is giving real competition to US firms. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the US was way ahead than any other nation-state in the world. For instance, in 2012, the scientific productivity of China was just 24% of the US, but by 2019 it marked 67% of the US level. Many scholars of computer science suggest that China is going far ahead than the US in technical discipline, mostly with reference to artificial intelligence.

The pandemic has also intensified the power struggle between China and the US. While President Trump has called COVID-19 the 'China disease' for political appeasement in the domestic arena, the geo-political consequences of such insults have been severe¹⁹. The racial discrimination that followed such remarks have been highly criticised in the domestic as well as the international society.

While the US has been gradually reducing its presence in international institutions, China has been taking advantage of the space of the same. China has been actively involved in providing aid to countries badly affected by the pandemic. On the other hand, the US has been criticised for restricting the US multinational corporations from exporting essential supplies abroad.

COVID-19 AND THE END OF US SUPREMACY

While the relative decline of the US has been theorised by various scholars from different schools of thoughts even before the emergence of the pandemic, the imagined dire state of the US never came to pass. However, even the pessimists recognised the US to be the most powerful nation in international relations scholarship and the country with the most influence in international politics. The pandemic has led to a definite shift in such ideas with countries calibrating their perceptions and reformulating their actions with respect to the US.

¹⁹ Katie Rogers and Others, 'Trump Defends Using 'Chinese Virus' Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism' *The New York Times* (Washington, 18 March 2020) < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html> > accessed 28 June 2020.

Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen school of security studies have talked about international events being the unpredictable variable in international relations and the pandemic can certainly be classified as an unpredictable international event that has sent ripples throughout the global arena. The position of primacy enjoyed by the US, as a result of its economic might, military strength and most notably, its undeniable soft power, is now fast receding.

In this context, Stephen M. Walt, an eminent professor of international relations at Harvard University, has talked about how in spite of most optimists believing that a US-dominated unipolar world order would exist for a long time, the COVID-19 pandemic has become the last nail in the coffin for the superpower status of the US²⁰. In the last decade only, William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks had offered a sophisticated argument detailing why US hegemony will last till the end of the century at the very least but the crisis brought on by coronavirus has completely shifted the narrative. Walt states that the mishandling of the coronavirus response by the Trump administration has accelerated the decline of the US in the global arena.

He puts forth the argument that the lack of a coordinated strategy to deal with the pandemic and the astronomical number of infected people has tarnished America's reputation and made a huge dent in the concept of 'American exceptionalism'. He highlights how the pandemic will lead to devastating long term economic consequences for the US with key sectors being gravely affected. He substantiates his argument by saying that since the pandemic's spread has not been controlled successfully, the US will have to go through prolonged periods of restrictive measures and lockdowns and thus, the damage to the economy will be greater and the subsequent recovery will also take more time. He acknowledges that the US still has a number of advantages over other countries, namely its natural resources, innovative economy and a strategically advantageous geo-political location, that will aid in its recovery but he also states that the challenges that the US has to contend with will only grow more stronger in the meantime.

In a similar vein, Ashley J. Tellis, a globally-renowned scholar who primarily focuses on issues of international security, also provides a succinct analysis of the various ways the COVID-19 pandemic will fracture the superpower status of the US along with the foundations of the international order

²⁰ Stephen M. Walt, 'How to ruin a superpower' (Foreign Policy, 23 July 2020) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/23/how-to-ruin-a-superpower>> accessed 25 July 2020.

created by the US.²¹ According to Tellis, while the full economic implications of the pandemic will be revealed in the future, the early economic indicators promise grave consequences for the US. This assertion made by Tellis has come to be validated because on 31st July, 2020, the Commerce Department reported that the US economy shrank at a record-breaking 32.9 percent in the April to June financial quarter.²²

This is the worst quarterly contraction in the history of the US economy and underlines the unprecedented economic damage caused by the pandemic. The economic recovery will take years and will also depend on the progress made to curtail the spread of the virus as otherwise, businesses will not be able to function effectively. This point has also been emphasised upon by most economists in the field who state that the defeat of the pandemic is a necessary prerequisite for economic recovery.

Tellis goes on further to state that the battering of the US economy will have two implications for the national power of the US. According to him, the phase of unrestrained globalisation will give way to a more restrained version of interdependence wherein states will seek to protect certain aspects of production from any future vulnerability. The dependence on other nations, especially China, for certain crucial commodities will also recede. The economic crisis will most probably lead to cuts in the defence expenditure and according to Tellis, this budget cut comes at the worst possible time, i.e. in the face of aggressive behaviour by Beijing. The primacy of Washington will be in serious threat if it cannot adequately deal with the growing capabilities of China. He also argues that the mismanagement of the US response to the pandemic has led to a reputational decline that will take years to recover from.

In addition, in spite of the US state providing massive economic relief packages to revive its economic status, the future direction for the economy is still not fully clarified. Also, the Data Science Foundation of America has come out with a study that shows the voting behavior of the United

²¹ Ashley J. Tellis, 'Covid-19 Knocks on American Hegemony' (The National Bureau of Asian Research 2020) <<https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/new-normal-tellis-050420.pdf>> accessed 15 July 2020.

²² The Economic Times, 'US economy shrank at record-breaking 33% rate last quarter' The Economic Times (31 July 2020) <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/us-economy-shrank-at-record-breaking-33-rate-last-quarter/articleshow/77264428.cms>> accessed 31 July 2020.

States.²³ According to this report, the voting population of the US can be divided into two sections. The elderly (sixty-five plus age group) are more concerned with the welfare institutions while the younger section are more concerned about economic issues.²⁴ At this juncture considering the current situation, it seems tough for the Trump administration to address the priorities of both the sections altogether.

The inability of the US government to address the aforementioned issue along with its other domestic crises such as its reckoning with the Black Lives Matter Movement, its vastly overwhelmed healthcare system, and its increasingly divisive political environment among others has crippled the power of the US internationally as well. One major example of the same can be stated to be the recent Capitol Building invasion, which did not just shock the entire international community but raised serious concerns about the ability of the US to dispel its domestic crisis. Allies of the US were left dismayed and horrified by the images of the long-standing icon of democracy under threat. On the other hand, adversaries were quick to point out the fallacies of the US political landscape, with some countries going further on to state that the US is now incapable of upholding its moral position in the world.²⁵ The various domestic disturbances have further propelled the international standing of the US to crumble.

The geopolitical shift with respect to the US becomes glaringly apparent when one looks at the actions of the other sovereign states in global politics. The relationship between the US and its European allies has been deteriorating since the election of President Trump who has repeatedly put down the European Union and called NATO 'obsolete'.²⁶ The repudiation of American leadership has become more obvious in the pandemic setting. The European countries, including some of the USA's strongest allies, are no longer looking at the US for leadership and instead charting their own paths.

²³ Ajit Singh, 'Big Data Analytics and Predicting Election Results' (Data Science Foundation 1 April 2019) <<https://datascience.foundation/sciencewhitepaper/big-data-analytics-and-predicting-election-results>> accessed 20 June 2020.

²⁴ *Supra* note 23.

²⁵ Tucker Reals, 'Foreign reaction to the "disgraceful scenes" at the U.S. Capitol' CBS News (7 January 2021) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-capitol-riot-donald-trump-protests-foreign-reaction/>> accessed 12 January 2021.

²⁶ Liam Kennedy, 'Covid-19 is ushering in a post-America world order – and Europe is taking note' *Scroll.in* (20 May 2020) <<https://scroll.in/article/962390/covid-19-is-usher-in-a-post-america-world-order-and-europe-is-taking-note>> accessed 30 June 2020.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is a concern shared by almost the entire world and in such a scenario, a collective action spearheaded by the US would have been a definite possibility. However, the strategy of coercion followed by the US with even its closest allies has tarnished any goodwill or feelings of solidarity harboured by the other nations. For instance, the US has been criticised for diverting deliveries of crucial medical equipment by not just its Canadian neighbour but also the European nations.

The Asian and Oceania partners of the US have also become frustrated with the inconsistent American policy with respect to them and are seeking to forge their own autonomous roles in world affairs.²⁷ While they were comfortable with the US as their security provider as a counterfoil to the rising power of China, they are increasingly seeking to build more multilateral arrangements within themselves. Seeing the US struggle as it is with the pandemic and recognising that the devastating economic consequences on the economy of the US could result in the US pulling more resources inwards has also led to a decrease in their confidence in America as a committed partner.

The international standing of the US has also been questioned by not just the international media but also faced scathing criticism from domestic platforms. The New York Times front page tribute to the victims of COVID-19 disease titled 'U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, an Incalculable Loss' did not just shed light on the devastating consequences of the pandemic but also highlighted the disastrous response of the US administration to the same.²⁸ Leading dailies in the US on both sides of the ideological spectrum have been aghast at the ineptness of the American institutions.

The first step in the Trump's administration response to the COVID-19 disease was to downplay the severity of the disease and this initial step says everything about the mismanagement that followed. The administration did not initiate a national response to the pandemic but rather, allowed the individual states to take necessary action, sometimes resulting in political infighting.²⁹ These actions

²⁷ Bidisha Biswas and Anish Goel, *What Comes After US Hegemony?* *The Diplomat* (19 December, 2018) <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/what-comes-after-us-hegemony/>> accessed 6 July 2020.

²⁸ The New York Times, 'U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, an Incalculable Loss', *The New York Times* (27 May 2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/24/us/us-coronavirus-deaths-100000.html>> accessed 20 June 2020.

²⁹ Yasmeeen Abutaleb and others, 'The inside story of how Trump's denial, mismanagement and magical thinking led to the pandemic's dark winter' *The Washington Post* (19 December 2020) <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/politics/trump-covid-pandemic-dark-winter/>> accessed 6 January 2021.

that downplayed the severity of the crisis were accompanied by the dismantling of the pandemic response team as well as budget cuts in the CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention), which was assumed to be the leading source of information and action during a health emergency.³⁰ President Trump and his supporters also engaged in large public gatherings that would end up becoming COVID-19 super spreader events and were also quite reluctant to wear masks, thereby not even following the basic guidelines provided by healthcare officials. The gross incompetence displayed by the federal government under President Trump was not just symbolic in the domestic domain but also signalled the weakening of America's institutions and leadership to the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

The coronavirus has brought to light the structural weaknesses of the American system and crystallised perceptions about American institutions being in a state of decline. Reports of the failure of the US healthcare system, considered to be the most supreme in the world, have brought to the fore the ill-preparedness of the US to deal with a crisis. The moral superiority and credibility attached with the US has been gravely damaged and it will take a long time for the US to regain its reputation in international relations. The absence of the US during this period of crisis and turmoil will most certainly strengthen perceptions about the US losing its superpower status.

Even in the post COVID-19 world order, the global distribution of power may not see a vast difference as other countries are also facing difficulties but the hegemony enjoyed by the US in the past will no longer be there. The usable power of the US and the ability of the US to influence matters in the international system will see a substantial decrease in the post COVID-19 world. The concept of 'American exceptionalism', one of the defining features of American foreign policy, and the idea behind America being a 'force of good in the world' has been punctured.

While the incoming Biden administration has already indicated its intention to revert the US back to its position at the centre of international politics, he may find that even his allies are a bit reluctant or rather, cautious about the role of the US post-Trump. During the presidency of Donald Trump, even the strongest partners of the US have had to reconfigure their approach towards the US. The loss of

³⁰ German Lopez, '*The Trump administration's botched coronavirus response, explained*' Vox (2 April 2020) <<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/3/14/21177509/coronavirus-trump-covid-19-pandemic-response>> accessed 7 January 2021.

confidence of European nations in the leadership of the US has resulted in them having to adjust to the new geopolitical realities and collaborate among themselves. Even some of the countries in the Asian region that depended on the security umbrella provided by the US are looking to form strategic relationships with each other to counter the growing influence of China.

Further, while Biden may want to explore a greater role of the US in international affairs, the fact is that the previous administration along with the pandemic has diluted the capabilities of the US to actually make a difference. For instance, in spite of repeated warnings by Joe Biden, the President-Elect of the US, the EU signed a massive investment deal with China, highlighting how countries have switched their equation vis-a-vis the US. More and more countries are taking a neutral stance towards the US and China, the new adversaries in global politics, and this does not bode well for the US.

In addition, the US economy, the material base for US hegemonic power, has been greatly affected by the pandemic. The economic impact of the pandemic has been historic with record unemployment and the worst quarterly contraction in the history of the US economy. The stimulus packages approved by the US Congress have not been sufficient to reinvigorate the economy and acclaimed economists have stated that the economic recovery will take decades. This economic recovery will also make it difficult for the US to play a prominent role overseas as it will be focusing inwards.

Even though earlier a case could be made for the decline of US hegemony, the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt the finishing blow to the superpower status of the US. The US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had provided the perfect answer for the superpower status associated with the US by stating that the US 'is an indispensable nation' but that statement no longer holds true, with countries having figured out ways to live without the US.