

Coronavirus will open doors for India

Recently President Trump ordered China based US concern, 3M, which manufactures masks and ventilators, to stop shipments to other countries and divert its stocks to the US. This was post Trump signing the Defence Production Act in end March. This statute compels American companies to produce material that are in short supply in an emergency. Consequently, the US highjacked a shipment of 200,000 masks in Bangkok, enroute to Germany, and diverted the same to the US. Similar action was undertaken for medical shipments earmarked for Canada and Brazil from China.

Earlier there were reports that stocks of masks meant for France were purchased on the tarmac of Shanghai airport by US companies paying double the price and diverted to the US. A report in the Guardian stated, 'American buyers managed to "wrest control" of a shipment of masks from China that was supposed to go to France by offering three times the selling price.'

Trump has banned move of medical stores across borders leading to anger in Canada. Trudeau, the Canadian PM stated that it was a mistake which could backfire as Canadian medical professionals go to work in Detroit daily. The Canadian government stated, 'two economies are interlinked in ways that mean that it would hurt both of our countries in our ability to protect our citizens were supply chains to be disrupted.'

The US defends its actions by stating that when demand increases, supplies are short, there would be a need to resort to such practices. A US official even stated that the country would continue with its buying spree 'until we have way too much.' He admitted that, 'We've gotten our hands on every bit of it that we can.'

Trump's belief, despite medical advice, that Hydroxychloroquine would be the cure for the Coronavirus led to him seemingly threaten India, despite the Indian government clearing US paid orders a day before.

Trump also stopped terming the Coronavirus as the China Virus because of a threat from Xi Jinping which was possibly that such an action could lead to China blocking supplies. Hence, even when questioned on fake Chinese figures of casualties, Trump stated that, 'he is not an accountant for China.' The spread of the virus to the US and

rising casualties has forced Trump to eat humble pie and back China rather than accuse it of misdeeds. The US is falling in global stature.

Evidently, the US strategy of 'Nation First' has failed. It has pushed US power and economy into the background as like all nations, the US devoted funds to building the economy and military, ignoring the health sector. Evidently, Trump is a leader in panic, unsure and uncertain where to go. He has forgotten that the US has always led the world in a pandemic or crisis. Allies and alliances led by the US have lost trust on its leadership, opening a void.

Fareed Zakaria, a leading foreign affairs expert stated, 'The US is abdicating its role as leader of the world. During previous pandemics such as Zika and Ebola, the US was at the forefront of organising international effort. President Obama stepped up as the president of the world.' He added, 'In this case, the US is absent. It has no interest in a global leadership role...it is acting childish.' True words as the US is now struggling to control the spread of the virus within the country.

Within the EU, nations have stopped the flow of medical supplies across borders as also movement of people, breaking the only common bond within the Union. The Italian government has accused the EU of being slow in coming to its aid when it faced the brunt of the epidemic. It blamed the organization for lack of solidarity.

Its anger was because Germany and France imposed restrictions on export of medical equipment. The Italian Ambassador to the EU stated, 'unfortunately not a single EU country responded to the commission's call (for medical equipment). Only China responded bilaterally. Certainly, this is not a good sign of European solidarity.'

Current actions of the EU led to Dr Glen Segell of the University of Haifa to comment, 'COVID 19 has led to political leaders in the EU and its member states to reimpose hard frontiers and prevent the free movement of people and goods.' He added, 'Europe's countries are not self-sufficient. No EU state manufactures or grows everything it needs. There will be shortages that could be catastrophic both in shops and medical supplies.'

Within the EU, Portugal, Spain and Italy have pushed for the issuance of 'Corona Bonds' to help their economies, which has been opposed by Germany, Netherlands and Austria. In response to a question on whether this was a lost opportunity for the bloc to show

solidarity, Alexander de Croo, Belgium's minister of finance, said 'I would think so.' On Thursday, after a marathon discussion, the EU agreed to a 500 Billion Euro rescue, but side lined the demand for a Corona Bond from Italy, Spain and France.

Allies and alliances appear to be falling apart as nations battle to contain their casualties. The EU is no longer an effective organization. Internally fissures are rising which would make it ineffective. It can no longer be a replacement to the US as a world leader. Nations would seek their own path, looking for their own alliances.

The WHO which was to have led and coordinated the fight is almost non-existent and ignored. It is evidently a lackey of China and soon there would be demands for its restructuring or it would find nations walking out of the organization. The UN too is losing relevance as it has no teeth to act against nations responsible for perpetuating the worst crisis which humanity faces since the second world war. It would be a dead body in the days ahead.

China has now become the mass provider to nations and has begun to exploit its position for its own advantage. A report from France stated that post a conversation between Xi Jinping and President Macron of France, China agreed to provide a billion masks to France provided it agreed to permit Huawei 5 G in the country. Similarly, Italy was sold back the same protective clothing that it had earlier gifted China. Its supplies to many other countries were faulty and below standards forcing nations to return the stocks.

China is moving fast to fill the leadership gap by providing much needed resources not only to the developed world but also to nations in Africa, backed by a vast public relations campaign. China aims at removing Chinese link to the Coronavirus and terming it as COVID 19. The Chinese public relations campaign includes advertisements in western press, articles and tweets by its ambassadors across the globe and write-ups by Chinese funded journalists. Some pro-Chinese journalists even questioned Trump when he termed the Corona virus as Chinese Virus.

However, China's leadership role is likely to be short lived as nations begin recovering from the impact of the virus and commence rebuilding their economy. While governments may continue to seek Chinese funding and economic collaboration, the national public, which

has paid a heavy price in the loss of family and friends, would react differently. There would be pressures on every government to cut down economic cooperation with China. Simultaneously, would be demands to boycott Chinese goods. Japan has earmarked a fund worth USD 2.2 Billion to support its industries to shift manufacturing from China. It is solely to counter this that China is currently on an advertising blitzkrieg.

India which acted in time, assisted neighbours and friends alike, maintained silence on accusations and displayed a pro-active approach to contain the spread of Coronavirus can fill the international leadership gap, provided it is able to contain the spread of the virus, limit its casualties and kickstart its economy. India is now the nation in demand to provide the medicines needed to combat the virus. Its goodwill and international standing are on the rise.

China is aware of the advantage India possesses and has hence begun wooing India in multiple ways. It discarded Pak's demand for discussion on Kashmir in the UNSC, cooled its activities along the Indo-China border and is promising every form of support, aware that India remains financially stable. China is hoping that with Indian support it could fill the void, which may be unlikely.

With US and European economies moving into recession, their power would wane. The future would belong to Asia and within it, India and China. If the world is to choose between the two, it would be India.

The Indian leadership needs to carefully consider its actions to contain the spread of the virus and plan revival of its economy. It may not have the economic power of China but possesses far more goodwill than China has, and China ever will. It must be prepared to exploit this goodwill.