# US imperialism in the wake of Covid-19

ALI AHMED ZIAUDDIN

LADIMIR Lenin once said, "there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen". Can anything be more relevant to explain the present?

Things fall apart. Time passes. And so will this pandemic. But what it leaves behind in its wake is a matter of worry. If history offers any lesson, pestilence like the plague, smallpox, cholera or the more recent Spanish flu caused severe socioeconomic hardship in different regions of the world. In turn they triggered political upheavals, power realignment and wars.

With over 350,000 dead, almost six million infected, and the world economy at a standstill, there is no reason to expect today's world to remain unaffected. What exact damage it may cause is a wild guess but one thing is certain: uncertainty. In view of earlier lessons, it's worthwhile to explore what the future holds; not to wade into fantasies but to prepare for the worstcase scenario. First, let's examine the broad parameters that define the present globalised world.

For the first time in history, the entire world is under a global empire, governed by the ancient doctrine: might is right. The facade of democracy, human rights, and rule of law are there but they do not impede the forcible imposition of the imperial will on weaker states. The imperial centre along with its allies, more accurately client states, operates on the premise that providence entrusted them the right to maintain world order; others must obey. Any defiance provokes reprisal. Imperial writ must prevail. It's imperial logic because it's the nature of power. Diplomatic pressure, sanctions, regime change, fermenting insurgencies, and when all else fails, military invasions are the handy tools to enforce order.

Yes, there is internal resistance from the more humane elements; yes, the allies/client states do grumble a lot; and yes, other power centres compete to make life difficult, but in the end the imperial centre holds sway. Its power stems from military might and financial control. And its driving force is imperial logic pressed by the insatiable greed to control the world's resources.

With nearly 800 military bases in 70 countries of varying sizes, the military

control is obvious. What is trickier is the financial control. In the post Second World War period, the US dollar replaced the British pound sterling as the world's reserve currency. The war left USA relatively unscathed and the biggest creditor; its economy vast and sturdy to back it up. The dollar was as good as gold. This vast wealth creation was largely due to the munitions production of the Second World War, followed by the Cold War. After the war, manufacturing diversified into all kinds of items. Its economy became the global supplier and buyer of various goods and services from the rest of the world. A broad industrial base within a market economy created conditions for American multinational corporations to provide full employment and a feeling of exceptionalism, which in turn enabled its ruling elite to grow an imperial instinct. It's an affliction suffered by all powerful nations throughout history.

With the excuse of containing communism, this drive created a broad socioeconomic structure in the US that came to be known as the militaryindustrial complex. It grew exponentially ever since. What no one noticed, except a few perceptive academics, was that the so-called American dream got fundamentally embroiled in a permanent war industry. The complex is a collective of defence, energy, banking, tech giants and media industries that control every nook and corner of the American economy and politics. It meant and still means that continuing wars are an economic necessity. All other policies, foreign or domestic, are subject

But in the last three or four decades, besides the defence industries, most profits have come from manipulating finance, speculation and outright fraud; not from manufacturing sectors (the Smithian model). Profits without production became the new mantra of the ultra-rich. While one percent of Americans amassed incredible wealth, millions of workers lost jobs to cheaper workers in foreign lands. Globalisation accelerated this process. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the imperial drive went berserk using whatever convenient excuse at the given moment. It's apt to note that three decades since, USA has invaded and/or

destroyed nearly a dozen countries.

While the elites focus on their empire, nearly a third of America lives pay-check to pay-check. But the endless wars go on because it's the most lucrative racket. Permanent war comes at a huge cost, both human and economic. So long as most of the labour intensive industries were on US soil, the middle-class taxpayers paid the bill and the working class boys were sent to war. Once the assembly lines shifted abroad, America started running on deficit. Still the war racket didn't stop, costing trillions while the middle class dwindled and the number of working class falling under

funds started buying these bonds to beef up their foreign reserves. America's swelling debt over the past three decades to 194 countries, by the end of the year, will accrue to more than 25 trillion US dollars, three of which is owed to China. None of this includes all the alarming private debts either.

The bankers and the clients are stuck in a gridlock. It's complicated. It means that every US dollar transacted pays a fee, whatever little, to the Fed. Second, all transactions are under the Fed's watch. It means transactions not to the liking of the US can be withheld or worse, confiscated, meaning any



PHOTO: COLLECTED

the poverty line increased.

How was the deficit met? As the world's reserve currency, most countries kept their foreign exchange in dollars with the US Federal Reserve System (Fed). Even after the Fed de-linked the dollar from gold in 1971, trust in the world's banker didn't suffer. So the Fed covered its deficit budget by borrowing from other countries' savings, hoping the American economy and foreign earnings would slowly reimburse the creditors. But as the war racket ratcheted up, so did borrowing. The debt pit got deeper. Then the Fed started issuing treasury bonds. Countries with surplus

client i.e. any country unwilling to toe Washington's line runs the risk of losing its money. Only last year, the US and UK seized Venezuela's dollar and gold reserves. Third, the banker pays paltry interest but clients can't easily withdraw large deposits due to the fear of being sanctioned, although they too need dollar reserves to meet their balance of payments. All this provides the US enormous control over global finance. Despite so much control, America's fiscal balance still falters because the imperial instinct is insatiable.

While the defence budget rises, infrastructure keeps breaking down.

Nearly a third of America can't afford healthcare and worse—they go hungry regularly, can't pay rent and are trapped in student debt. The US prepared for a global war, not a pandemic. The world watched baffled, the emperor naked behind the façade of invincibility. A mighty presence across the world is all bluster; unable to fend for itself. China did fumble initially but its stringent containment measures from mid January was there for everyone to see. The US and Europe imagined they were somehow immune; they wasted precious time but now blame China. There should be an independent scientific inquiry led by the WHO to find the origin and the nature of the disease so that this doesn't happen again. But if the US and its clients are bent on a witch hunt, there should also be a UN commission to assess the damages done by the colonial project, especially by the US, in the last hundred years or more.

John Perkins, author of Confessions of an Economic Hitman, commented "The Covid-19 death toll is just one of many examples of how the same people who bend weaker governments to their wills with conditional loans, corrupt deals and occasionally orchestrated coups hurt the American public." Can the US extricate itself from the debt trap? Not if it doesn't mend its ways and quickly. As the saying goes—"all debts catch up" But that is anathema to imperial logic.

In such conditions, power seeks quick fixes, which often leads to desperate measures. America's ruling one percent may threaten to seize China's financial assets if it doesn't fall in line, which may well lead to confrontation. They may look to start the Second Cold War with China, or accidentally start a hot one. The first one had enriched USA and defeated its enemy; it would be a strong temptation. It seems such thinking is gaining bipartisan support in Washington. China is no pushover, neither militarily nor economically. America's recklessness may endanger the entire world. A few years ago Joschka Fischer, the ex-German foreign minister, wrote "One of the key challenges of the 21st century will be to manage the decline of US power". He may well prove

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## A pandemic revelation: women rule (better)

## Give women their due, and everyone benefits



health crisis

the coronavirus

pandemic better

than others

"Germany, led by Angela Merkel, has

had a far lower death rate than Britain,

Times recently reported. "Finland, where

Prime Minister Sanna Marin, 34, governs

France, Italy or Spain," The New York

with a coalition of four female-led

as many deaths as nearby Sweden.

"And Tsai Ing-wen, the president of

Taiwan, has presided over one of the

most successful efforts in the world

lockdown.

newspaper reports.

at containing the virus, using testing,

contact tracing and isolation measures to

control infections without a full national

We mustn't forget the redoubtable

"Ardern, 39, New Zealand's premier,

Kiwi Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern.

lockdown, delivering empathetic "stay

from her couch and communicating

conferences," London's The Guardian

"Her insistence on... urging New

Zealanders to look after their neighbours,

daily through non-combative press

has held Kiwis' hands through the

home, save lives" video messages

parties, has had fewer than 10 percent

**A**SHFAQUE SWAPAN

take care of the vulnerable, and make sacrifices for the greater good—has world won her many fans." It also produced from the biggest results. The nation of 4.8 million people has recorded an astonishing 22 deaths, we have seen according to the government. New cases in our lifetime, are down to zero. Notice a trend here? All the leaders some countries have dealt with

mentioned above are women.

Now let's consider which countries have done worst. According to statistics compiled by Johns Hopkins University in the US, the countries with the highest number of Covid-19 cases are the US, Brazil and Russia, in that order. The number of US cases, a mind-boggling 1.76 million, is over four times that of its nearest country. Brazil, at second place, has 438,812 cases, with Russia close

Consider their leaders. President Donald Trump. President Jair Bolsonaro. President Vladimir Putin. One would be hard-pressed to find more emphatic, almost caricature-like examples of machismo amongst national leaders. Trump is on record suggesting injecting disinfectant to treat Covid-19 (He was being sarcastic, silly!), and Bolsonaro proudly takes the discredited treatment hydroxychloroquine, while suggesting naysayers can go have a fizzy drink instead.

"Macho isn't mucho," the former Hollywood star Zsa Zsa Gabor once wryly observed.

It is remarkable how many female leaders have made a real mark in handling the pandemic.

"How about Iceland's Katrín Jakobsdóttir, who has offered free coronavirus testing to all the country's citizens? Or Norway's Erna Solberg, who held a press conference just for children, telling them it was okay to feel scared?" Helen Lewis pointed out in an article in The Atlantic magazine.

However, the false binary of macho male versus nurturing female leadership is too simplistic. Sociopolitical dynamics

We need to look beyond male and female leaders and consider the broader sociopolitical perspective. It's not about whether women leaders are necessarily better. It's about whether nations which are congenial to women leaders are better.

are complicated. Nor is it so cut-anddried. New Zealand's Ardern has a lot in common in temperament with Canada's Justin Trudeau. In the US, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has more in common with male Democrats

Governor Gavin Newsom of California and Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York than female Republicans Governor Gay Ivey of Alabama and Kristi Noem of South Dakota. And Xi Jinping, China's iron-fisted male leader, has led his nation to a stunning recovery after catastrophic

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Kathleen Gerson, a professor of sociology at New York University, told The Guardian that women leaders are more likely to be elected in "a political culture in which there's a relative support and trust in the government—and that doesn't make stark distinctions between women and men. So you've already got a head start.

"A country that elects a strongman or where a strongman can hold on to power, once elections become a sham is an already troubled country," Lewis writes in The Atlantic.

"So let's not flip the old sexist script. After centuries of dogma that men are naturally better suited to leadership, the opposite is not suddenly true. Women leaders aren't the cause of better government. They are a symptom of it."

This is broadly true for societies as well. How a society treats women is a telling guide to a society's health.

What's remarkable is how far we still

have to go. Even some countries that consider themselves advanced have their work cut out. The US is still waiting for its first woman president. Just one out of four US senators is a woman. Angela Merkel is the only woman leader of G20 nations, a group of the world's 20 largest

In South Asia, the situation is worse. We carry the heavy burden of the misogyny and patriarchal instincts of religious orthodoxy—this, unfortunately, cuts across all faiths. Our roster of women leaders is illusory, and many bask in the reflected glory of family connections.

Bangladesh's considerable strides in gender parity, sometimes outshining its South Asian neighbours, is encouraging. But what must never be forgotten is how much is left to be done. Our mindset is still deeply invested in patriarchy. We need to learn that providing half of the nation to realise its full potential benefits us all—materially and morally.

The full emancipation of women may take time, but it will surely happen one day. And all of us-men and womenwill be the better for it.

(This article is dedicated to the women who have filled my life with love, joy and support. From you I learned first-hand to love, admire and respect women and support their inalienable right to equality and dignity. Thanks to you all, I learned how to be a real man.)

Ashfaque Swapan is a contributing editor for Siliconeer, a digital daily for South Asians in the United States.

### QUOTABLE Quote



(1469-1527)Italian statesman and writer

The more sand has escaped from the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should

#### **CROSSWORD** BY THOMAS JOSEPH

items 16 Luau

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI

see through it.

**ACROSS** 1 Treat, as a turkey 6 Bank fixtures 11 Clarifying words 12 Singer Black 13 Fruit basket

14 Bisect 15 Building wing instrument 18 Tall tale 19 Game cube 20 Fishing pole

21 Sushi choice 45 Fuses 22 Make blue 24 Says further **DOWN** 25 "First ..." 27 Tennis great Arthur 29 Was restless

32 Casual top 33 Mamie's husband 34 Genesis name 35 Furious 36 Attack command 37 Track act 38 "Love Story" actor

40 Lorelei's river 42 Map ratio 43 Crude tanker 44 Informs

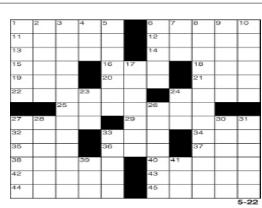
1 Humans, e.g. 2 Activist Bloomer 3 Shook, perhaps 4 Pitch's kin

5 Guarantees 6 Timetable: Abbr. 7 Copying 8 Was just what was needed 9 Coveted 10 Hardens 17 Famed raft 23 Female rabbit 24 Pendulum path 26 Admitted an error 27 Tops

gathering 30 Made flat 31 Hinders 33 Resort spots 39 Maximum amount 41 Hasten

28 Spooky

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VECTEDDAV'C ANCWEDO

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BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT 50 YOU HAD A ROUGH DAY TOO? YEAH, DOES IT SHOW? THAT PAUSE WAS DANGEROUSLY LONG