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TRANSFORMATION OF THE SYSTEM OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN POST COVID-19 PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses possible scenarios of global world order followed by the outbreak of COVID-19. It assesses to what extent the pandemic will impact the process of transformation of the system of international relations and discusses possible scenario of the global politics for post-COVID period. The article suggests that the expected outcome of the pandemic will be bi-polar world order, which will much differ from the system of the International Relations of Cold War period. The impact of COVID-19 on ongoing processes will be tangible. In the meanwhile, bearing in mind emerging neorealistic tendencies, enhancing role of states as pivotal actors of international system and current level of global inter-dependence, the international relations cannot return to the epoch where political realism had dominant position in global affairs. The article concludes that the pandemic will not drastically change the international order, but it will decently accelerate international processes, started years ago.

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Introduction. The outbreak of COVID-19 and its spread worldwide is one of the most sweeping global diseases happened after World War II. It captures practically all countries and continents, making the United Nations declare first about a public health emergency of international concern (World Health Organization, 2020) and later on about a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020).

The global pandemic has unpredictable and considerable impact on global economy, policy, almost on every aspect of life of societies and states. The forecasts from the Bretton Wood institutions are not promising - the International Monetary Fund warns about the worst recession the global economy will experience since the Great Depression of 1930-s (World Economic Outlook, April 2020). The World Bank also prognosticates global recession, which is going to be the largest fraction of economics experiencing declines in per capital output even since 1870 (Global Economic Prospects, June 2020).

Though the ongoing, past and frozen processes in international politics, such as nationalistic movements, local and regional conflicts and wars, terroristic attacks and fight against them comprise the substantial part of global population, many of these processes are taking place at local or regional levels, therefore the scale and spread of mentioned processes are incomparable with the pandemic the world faces today.

Not to mention that capacities and technical preparedness of states in fight against military operations, overcoming political and economic challenges differ from each other, and the states with high GDP and military arsenal are in more favorable situation in terms of level of security and protection of own population. Meanwhile, the swift spread of novel coronavirus does not consider the wealth and political ambitions of states and comes to prove once again the fragility of current system of international relations as a whole. The pandemic treats practically each and every state, and first and

foremost, countries with the highest GDP-s, from the USA to China, from Italy and the other EU member states to countries in Latin and North Americas, Far and Middle East, African continent, etc. Hence, one of the main disputes of political and international agenda becomes the perspectives of transformation of global order. In this context the discussion on the role of nation-states in global affairs, having tendency to decline during the last decades, especially under the light of the spread of liberal and neo-liberal ideology in international relations, becomes acute again.

The study aims to analyze to what extend the global pandemic will impact the process of transformation of the system of international relations and discusses the possible scenario of the global politics for post-COVID period.

Possible scenario of new global order.

The process of transformation of the international system, happening in the light of ongoing processes and interrelations between main actors of international affairs is not a new phenomenon. This process has started long before the outbreak of COVID-19. At the same time the global pandemic comes to accelerate this process of transformation, making it more visible and conspicuous, the prove of which is increasing confrontation between the USA and China and their allies, weakening of neoliberal ideology on international affairs, ebbing of globalization and strengthening the processes of regionalization in the light of emerging regional players, clustering of the biggest global economies, etc.

The COVID-19 has become one of the central topics of political debates and dissensions between the USA and China just after its outbreak. It has been converted to one of the other issues between the two major global economies along with further political aspiration, which puts another watershed between the states. The concerns raised by the US political establishment and accusation of People's Republic of China, followed by US legal claim for concealing the outbreak and for providing false information on virus, was shared also by France, the UK, Germany and Australia. The statements from western allies of Washington followed each other. In the meantime, China's main allies, such as Islamic Republic of Iran, where the spread of COVID-19 was much bigger at early months of the pandemic, blamed the United States for its spread. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed that the "*coronavirus could be man-made by the US government*" (Aljazeera, 2020). China's another ally – Russia qualified accusations against Beijing by the US administration as counterproductive.

Thus, dividing the world into two poles with pivotal roles of the USA and China and having their allies gathered around these axes, the pandemic coerces the USA-China ongoing trade war, started years ago, to move to other platforms and gives an additional impetus to ongoing confrontation between two major actors of international affairs.

Expanding controversy in different sectors amid the world biggest economies, the differences between the USA and China, transposition and strengthening of the US foreign policy in Southeastern Asian region, especially enhancing militarization in South China Sea, as well as transformation of China – USA relations from growing comparison to open confrontation, brings to the idea that the international system is gradually transforming. Currently it is in process of reversion from unipolar world, established after the end of Cold War period with acute Pax-Americana approach, through more diverse and unstable structure, when several other actors emerged in political arena, again to bi-polar world order, where the countries and regions are in process of clustering around these two pivotal poles or at least trying to be in different types of alliances or unions with them.

Indeed, the concept of the bi-polar world nowadays may sound a bit ambiguous. In the meantime, it is obvious that the term cannot be univocally interpreted. J. Nye in "*The paradox of the American power. Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*" digests three main levels of power – military and political level, where the USA prevails, economic sphere – where the dominant powers are the USA, countries of the Western Europe (Germany and France) and Japan, and transnational relationships, where it's very difficult to identify the leader. The mistake is that many focus only on the first sphere, without considering the last two" (Nye Jr., 2002).

The transformation of the system of International relations and recurrence to bi-polar world despite certain essential and structural similarities does not and in principle cannot replicate bi-polar system in same extend as it was during the Cold War period. Emergence of China as a new global power with its geo-economical ambitions, strutted by initiations and implementation of set of megaprojects – as an instrument of soft power with strong political and military components, vividly demonstrates that the era of unipolar or, later on, multi-polar world order with strong influence on one of its poles – the USA, has being come to its end. The statement of the US 10th National Security

Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, made in *“The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives”*: *“Once American leadership begins to fade, America's current global predominance is unlikely to be replicated by any single state”* (Brzezinski, 1997) is gradually losing its relevance in the light of geopolitical and economical processes, happening during the last decade. China's bid as a new global power comes to prove the opposite.

Set against the world order during Cold War era, the main ascent of the delineating system is anchored on economic rather than ideological rivalry between the poles. Emergence of China as a new player in global market has already been looming since the late 2000-s, when new centers of power have started to be outlined in international relations. During relatively short period of time People's Republic of China (PRC) managed to strengthen its position in global market. Today with USD 14,343 trillion GDP PRC is the second largest economy giving way to the USA (USD 21,374 trillion GDP), meanwhile with purchasing power parity (PPP) the US GDP is the second largest one (USD 21,427 trillion) after China (USD 23,460 trillion) (The World Bank, 2019). China is the largest export destination for 33 countries and the largest source of imports for 65 countries (McKinsey, July 2019). Even today, in line with the expected impact of COVID-19 to global economy, the IMF forecasts the decrease of annual real GDP for 2020 for the USA -5.9%, and +1.2% for China (World Economic Outlook, April 2020).

It's worth mentioning that despite the rivalry of Cold War era, today the two leading economies are closely interconnected. China is the largest trade partner of the USA. China is USA's third largest export market (2018) with total amount of USD 120.3 billion. China is also the USA's largest supplier of goods with total import of USD 539.5 billion (2018) (The Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2018).

The dependence of global economy on China became more then obvious in terms of pandemic outbreak. Recognizing the growing dependence of EU economy on exports of the items of the first need from China, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy openly raised his concerns by mentioning that *“the extent of our dependence on China for the import of a number of products is enormous, particularly for masks and protective suits (50%). 40% of the antibiotics imported by Germany, France or Italy are from China, which produces 90% of the penicillin consumed worldwide. Today, not a gram of paracetamol is produced in Europe. The creation of an inventory, or a strategic reserve of essential products would make it possible to protect Europe from shortages, and to ensure their availability throughout the whole European territory”* (Borrell, 2020). Thus, in new post-COVID era the countries will probably revise level of their dependence on one source of import market and will diversify their economy through engaging or creation of other markets. Such transformation will leave its direct impact on process of globalization as a whole, which is expected to be elevated not as intensive as it does during the last two decades.

Another peculiarity of post-COVID situation and emerging bi-polar order is its multidimensionality. The USA-PRC vying goes beyond geo-economic issues and captures practically all aspects of politics as well. The failure of the UN Security Council during the first days of pandemic to agree on a resolution on COVID-19 because of lack of agreement between the USA and China and the attempts of politization of the topic by both sides, clearly demonstrates the growing disagreements in various spheres. In fact, this is unprecedented situation, as UN Security Council could agree their positions and adopt resolutions on joint actions during medical crisis the world face before (US SC resolutions on HIV epidemic, Ebola crisis). Even in full swing of the Cold War era the USA and USSR were able to cooperate together for getting a polio vaccine and fight against the epidemic, outbreaken in mid-1950s.

The megaproject “Belt and Road”, initiated by President Xi Jinping, as well as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS New Development Bank, launched on China's initiative, apart from their economic aspects have solid political implications as well. China's engagement in global and regional political processes during the recent years in the Middle, Western and Eastern Asia comes to prove China's political ambitions. Thus, in post-pandemic world China's factor on not only global economy, but also a on policy is expected to be more tangible, which will definitely accelerate China's bid to become global power.

Today China continues to strengthen its position also in Southeastern Asian region as an regional power. Though the continuous controversy with the United States and increased armed race in the region, China is gradually moving towards the signing of free trade agreements with different states and alliances. Along with the Agreement concluded between the Eurasian Economic Union and People's Republic of China, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership – a free trade plus

agreement, where ASEAN 10 member-states together with 6 countries with whom ASEAN is in free trade agreement (Australia, India, China, New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Japan), has an exceptional importance for China, as this cooperation format captures almost half of the world's population and one fourth of the global export. After the withdraw of the USA from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam and the USA (the later signed but not ratified)), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement factually has become the main platform and key player for China in the region, where the United States is no longer represented.

The pandemic comes to prove that the security challenges, prevailing both during Cold war and post-Cold war era and especially in the beginning of the XXI century, have also been transformed. Nuclear powers, strengthening of military arsenal stopped to be the main containment tools and measures for protection of international peace and security. In a new global order international security cannot be limited by its military component (though it will continue to be dominant), but also economic, political, societal, environmental, cybersecurity and other types of security will have dominant position.

The emergency has contributed also to the revision of the prevailing international relations theories. With the era of neoliberal institutionalism, the role and impact of international and intergovernmental organizations, transnational corporations become as important and tangible as the states' position. Different formats of international cooperation and growing number of various types of integration with free movement of goods, capital, labour and services form a solid ground for further development of international economic relations. There are every reasons to believe that nothing can stop the globalization process, permanently accelerated by rapid development and spread of IT technologies and high-tech industry.

In the meantime the situation followed by the spread of novel coronavirus and closure of state borders, number of restrictions, implemented by states, suspension of free movement of goods, labour and capital led to the situation, where the status of states as main actors of international relations become again dominant. Within the severe restrictions and border closures, when national economies have to be reoriented to domestic markets and first and foremost have to satisfy the food needs of own population, certain elements of nationalism, and first of all economic nationalism are elevated. This tendency became more then obvious in Europe – in the continent with the most succeed form of integration, after the actual disregards of Italy's call for help from the EU member states in early March. This let the political scientists think about the undermining position of globalization and revitalization of the concept of political realism in international system with strong role of states, advancing national interests.

In the meantime, the pandemic and subsequent situation reveals that Western model of peace and development through establishment of democracies and liberal markets are not the only way towards economic growth and prosperity. According to the majority of global ratings and rankings the PRC – the first largest economy by PPP, is not a country with democratic form of governance and freedoms. The Democracy Index 2019 – an annual report, published by the Economist Intelligence Union considers China a country with authoritarian regime of governance with 2.26 scores, which is the worst indicator China has since 2006 (Democracy Index 2019, 2020). Freedom in the World Report 2020 counts China “not free” country (Freedom in the World, 2020) and Human Rights Watch mentions that “China remains a one-party authoritarian state that systematically curbs fundamental rights” (World Report, 2020).

Similar ratings have Singapore, Hong Kong and other developed countries. This comes to state, that the existing liberal and neoliberal traditions and liberalistic approaches on security provision and economic growth today already question their viability. China, gradually becoming one of the main poles, and pulling other regions and countries with emerging economy and political ambitions (such as Russia, Iran, countries of BRICS, SOC), issues a challenge to the existing models of effective governance and economic prosperity. The successful response to COVID-19 and protective measures, undertaken in the countries of Southeastern and Eastern Asia attest the readiness of the region to address to emerging global challenges.

Conclusions. Today we can clearly state that during post-COVID-19 era the situation worldwide will be definitely changed. The started and ongoing transformations will reveal a set of new challenges. There are all preconditions to believe that the probability the global world can face with modified bi-polar international system with acute roles of China and the USA and their allies is more than actual.

One of major changes is the role of nation-states, which will indubitably be strengthened. Meanwhile this does not mean that the global world will return to the era of Westphalian system with the

marked roles of the states as main actors of global affairs. Today it's practically impossible to omit the role of international institutions, as the challenges and issues, that the world faces nowadays have global coverage, which means that none of the states has enough capacity fight against them separately.

At the same time the expectations of the pandemic on global affairs are overestimated. The COVID-19 cannot dramatically change the global order for a number of reasons.

First, the global order has historically been changed as a result of wars, military operations, annexations, etc., the consequence of which are changes of geographical boundaries of the world. The pandemic does not cause restructuring of geography of states. Both small states and great powers will have the same borderlines, they had before the outbreak of the pandemic, as the pandemic will not have a direct and tangible impact on prevailing strategic interests, as well as on military balance of the states. Moreover, it's expected that as lessons learnt from the pandemic, the states will reduce the share of their military expenditure in the GDP and re-allocate them to other sectors – healthcare, agriculture development and food processing, IT development, etc. (the share of military expenditures for China was 1,9% of its GDP in 2019, for the USA – 3,8% of the GDP, for Russia – 3,9%, France – 1,9%, UK – 1,7%, etc.) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 to geopolitics will not be as tangible as it's articulated. The composition of alliances, unions, different formats of international cooperation do not experience tangible changes. In line with enhancing process of regionalization and polarization, the cooperation between the existing alliances and unions is expected to be intensified. The global pandemic came to prove that the world has already become more than globalized. The existing and emerging treaties and challenges have global scale and significance, which means that all actors of international affairs should demonstrate more deliberate approach, consolidate efforts and synergies to overcome global challenges and ensure global peace and more secure world order.

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