

POLITICAL REFLECTION



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*by Hrvoje
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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

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World News

By Ebru Birinci

The COVID-19 Update



As of December 26, 2020, 80,3 million Covid-19 cases and 1,7 million death were recorded based on given official numbers by the governments. The Covid-19 influence has expanded throughout every aspect of our lives irreversibly. The pandemic has shown the vulnerabilities and inefficiencies of the world community and state apparatus. On the other hand, despite the neo-liberal expectations of a globalized world, people, liberals included, have laid hopes on the enlarged responsibility and control of the state in overcoming the pandemic. While stretching and loosening the restrictions, in turn, governments around the world hover between the economy and public health.

While the second wave of Covid-19 grabbed many countries and a highly-infectious coronavirus has been seen in many countries, the latest vaccine developments have stimulated recent vaccine purchasing race mostly among the rich countries; by December, worldwide confirmed purchases reached 7.2 billion doses. In November, Pfizer and its partner BioNTech announced the development of a vaccine that is 95 percent effective, being the third of the officially approved vaccines after Russian and Chinese's Covid-19 vaccines. Reportedly, the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccines varies considerably: Pfizer/BioNTech - 95%, Moderna - 94.1%,

Oxford/AstraZeneca - 70%, Sinovac - 50%, which can be worrisome for those who live in the countries that preferred purchasing Sinovac.

The picture of vaccine purchase per country, no wonder, indicate the disturbing global inequality. For example, total vaccination coverage of some countries like Canada, Australia, the United States, Britain, and the EU exceeds their population, however, vaccine purchase of other countries with weak economies cannot even cover half of their population, such as Mexico, Turkey, Indonesia, not to mention other underdeveloped countries. The rich countries reserved most of the available doses, especially those of Pfizer-BioNtech, for the near future. Such a trend of egoism among the countries is well-understood within the concept of rising nationalism in international relations, yet it is likely to bear more tension and conflict in the future especially with regarding to national health security.

Climate Change



The five years old commitments, made within the framework of the Paris Agreement, did not prevent the world from experiencing the hottest five years recorded since then. Besides, the reduction of carbon emissions due to the Covid-19 lockdown across the planet falls short of expectations for the future. According to the latest UN Emission Gap Report, published on 9 December 2020, “CO₂ emissions could decrease by about 7 percent in 2020 (range: 2–12 percent) compared with 2019 emission levels due to COVID-19, with a smaller drop expected in GHG emissions as non-CO₂ is likely to be less affected. However, atmospheric concentrations of GHGs continue to rise”. The report also draws attention to the levels of contribution to total GHG emissions among the world countries. China, the USA, the EU, and the United Kingdom and India, the top emitters, have contributed to 55 percent of the total GHG emissions without LUC (Land-use change). The increasing number of countries committed to net-zero emission goals has

become one of the most important developments of 2020. The election of Joe Biden, whose election pledge was bringing the US to the Paris Agreement again, has built up some hope, too. Biden also had a climate plan that suggests adapting a net-zero GHG target by 2050.

2020 US Election: Joe Biden- the 46th US President



The 2020 US Presidential election has been an event, to which great importance has been attached. It could bring an end to the Trump period, which has challenged the western liberal values promoted by the US for years. Or in the case of the re-election of Donald Trump as president, his arbitrary decisions, protectionist and populist policies would continue damaging these values, attracting other world leaders. Trump took many unilateral steps, undermining the US leading role in the global governance; favored anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies; developed personal relations with political leaders, ignoring institutional and diplomatic traditions of the US; failed to address the Covid-19 pandemic, which assured his defeat in the 2020 elections.

Before the elections were held, some were concerned about the scenario in which Trump refuses to leave the White House if he lost the elections. Indeed, Trump has claimed electoral fraud to overturn the election results. It is unlikely, nevertheless, to witness a serious obstruction in the transition of the presidency since Trump is losing support after the Electoral College ratified Joe Biden's victory.

Joe Biden comes from the American establishment, against whom Trump waged a war and did harm its core values, which are directly linked to the

neoliberal world order. Biden has promised both “to build back together”, addressing the domestic problems such as economic inequalities, racism, corruption, etc. He also assured bringing the US back to the international arena, rejoining in the international organizations and agreements, and strengthening historical alliances. Biden and his team are well aware of decreasing US popularity across the world and committed to reassume its status as a global leader. Offering reasonable proposals and management to contain the global problems, such as global warming and the pandemic, seems to be central issues that Biden would address in his efforts to restore the US global leadership status. On the other hand, regarding China, Biden does not seem to follow an accommodationist policy; he would likely to adopt a more assertive policy vis-à-vis the main challengers of the US; China, and also Russia; the latter benefited considerably from the Trump administration’s foreign policy in its own efforts to secure its place among great powers.

Crisis in Ethiopia Deepens



In November 2020, the long-standing tension, increased since the suspension of the polls in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic, between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front turned into an armed conflict, which also triggered an international problem with the involvement of Eritrea in the conflict. Tigrayan leaders have alleged that Eritrea is involved in the conflict to support the Ethiopian government and attacked several Eritrean targets. Given the historical rivalry between the Tigray and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, such diffusion of the internal conflict of Ethiopia towards Eritrea came as no surprise. Eritrea obtained de facto independence from Ethiopia in 1991. The common history of Ethiopia and Eritrea deepens and ramifies due to the Tigray region of

Ethiopia. Ethiopian EPRDF, dominated by the Tigrayan people, and Eritrea had fought over the border-lines (Eritrea borders the Tigray region) between 1998 and 2000, yet the peace agreement could only be signed in 2018. The Tigrayan people lost their power and privileged positions after Abiy Ahmed has become the prime minister of Ethiopia in 2018. Abiy Ahmed promised democratic reforms and initiated a centralized system for Ethiopia instead of ethnic-based parties, and reached a deal with Eritrea, which brought him the Nobel peace prize. The Tigray People's Liberation Front refused to join Abiy Ahmed's non-ethnic prosperity party, claiming that the system would lead to authoritarianism. The final election conflict between the Ethiopian government and Tigray has escalated when Tigray regional authorities decided to hold their own election. Although there is not much clarity about the situation on the ground, it is known that the armed conflict already resulted in the killings of civilians and an Ethiopian refugee problem in Sudan.

Ceasefire Agreement is Reached in Nagorno-Karabakh



In September 2020, the armed conflict, one of the frozen conflicts of the post-Cold War world, escalated in the Nagorno-Karabakh region between Azerbaijan and the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh and Armenia. The Ceasefire Agreement was signed on November 10, by the Azerbaijanian President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War has many characteristics in common with those signed regarding Syria and Libya, with regards to Russian and Turkish active involvement, and the use of the drones as game-changers. Since the beginning of the armed conflict, Russia positioned itself by the international law, under which Karabakh is accepted as Azerbaijanian

territory, occupied by Armenia, and suggested that Azerbaijan was fighting within its own territories, which does not require any Russian intervention. However, Turkey has shown its direct support to Azerbaijan. The changing rules and balances of international relations have delivered Azerbaijan the chance to act to alter the status quo, and it proved to be successful, to a certain extent, making significant territorial gains. Turkey, on the other hand, secured a stronger position in the South Caucasus, proved its strong dialogue with Russia, avoiding any serious confrontation. The war, in the meantime, has become another scene of an extended Turkey-France confrontation. France, being a co-chair of the Minsk Group and having a strong Armenian diaspora, has criticized the Azerbaijanian military operation and Turkish policies towards it, although its efforts could not reverse the situation in favor of Armenia. Russia, for its part, could increase its military presence in the region and promote its role as a must-be peace-broker, which has strengthened in Syria and Libya. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, who is under strong public pressure to resign, has been the one who has lost the most from the war.

Quad Cooperation against China Strengthens



On October 6, 2020, the foreign ministers of Japan, Australia, India, and the US hold the second ministerial meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which has taken shape since the cooperation of the four countries to deal with the consequences of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004. Nevertheless, the cooperation has not been developed until late 2017, when the Trump administration embraced "a free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept of Japan. Increasing concerns of the US and its allies over the Chinese assertiveness in the region have expedited the process.

The Quad seeks to prevent Chinese domination in the region and balance against any aggression from China. The representatives of countries reaffirm the Quad's strong support for ASEAN and ASEAN-led regional

architecture. 2020 has been the most active year of the Quad with a handful of multilateral and bilateral meetings of the Quad countries. On November 3, the Quad countries navies began to conduct annual Malabar drills in the Bay of Bengal. Beyond the great power competition with the US, China has uneasy relations with the other Quad countries for different reasons, too: A military stand-off between China and India on a disputed land border for several months worsened diplomatic relations with Australia (DEAR PROF RAHMAN, check if the author means Australia or India?) which ended up with Chinese trade sanctions, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan, around which the parties are constantly increasing their military presence.

UK and the EU Reach a Trade Deal



Only a week before the deadline, the UK and the EU signed a 1240-page long trade deal, hoping to bring more certainty to the European economy and prevent economic turmoil. According to the agreement, signed after four and a half years, when the UK voted to leave the EU, the parties can continue to trade in goods without tariffs or quotas starting on January 1, 2021. Both sides, trying to secure their vital economic interests, seem to be satisfied with the terms. The agreement limits the fishing right of EU nations in British waters by 25 percent, brings visa requirements for those EU citizens who want to live or work in the UK; the UK citizens, too, lose some working rights in the EU, furthermore, export and import will be subject to customs and other regulations.

It took three years for the UK to leave the political structure of the EU. Britain wanted to take back control and consolidate its sovereignty; the EU, on the other hand, tried to ensure European standards. The trade deal was seen unlikely for the most, and many predicted a no-deal Brexit scenario that would have been chaotic and economically detrimental for Britain. The UK ports have already been suffering from transport suspensions due to the coronavirus mutation in the UK. Such pandemic-

related economic problems seem to compel it to reach a trade deal with the EU.

Macron Wants to Reform Islam



Islam and Muslims have long been a central topic of public debates in France more than any other European country. Distinct occasions, from anti-Islamic implications or rhetoric to violent attacks of terrorists or individual radical Islamists, end up with heated public debates regularly. The latest chain of events followed the murder of Samuel Paty, a 47-years-old teacher who showed the Islam Prophet Mohammed's caricature during a class about freedom of thought. In the aftermath, French President Emmanuel Macron, who called Islam a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, announced his anti-radicalism plan, offering reforms and restrictions of Islamic practices in France. In fact, Macron has been working on such a reform plan for Islam for some time. Although he has said that he seeks to counter not Islam, but political Islam in France, he could not avoid the criticism. Both his determination to use governmental apparatus for his anti-radicalization policies and his language fueled a public backlash in Muslim societies; some criticism has also been raised in non-Muslim press with regard to increasing tension among Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Muslim leaders have criticized Macron for giving ground to radical Islamic ideas and feeding Islamophobia across Europe. However, the members of the group that support Macron's policies argue that they feel the radical Islam threatens their lives and freedom. However, despite the plenitude of addresses made, so far, no political leader from no country, ideology, or religion could handle addressing the deep-rooted problem of religious polarization without provoking *the Other* or instigating more extremism within their audience.

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