

Africa in Limbo: The Geopolitics over Covid-19 Pandemic

Dr Sarvsureshth Dhammi

Assistant Professor, Department of National Security Studies,
Manipur University

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the socio-political and economic structure of the whole world. While countries like the US, UK, France, and other European countries are running against the time to produce the vaccine, China is pretending to come out of the crisis without any antidote. The competition between the West and China leads to a new type of geopolitical dynamics. Their tug of war has left Africa alone with health emergency, poverty, insurgency, terrorism, and political instability. However, where West later, came up with loan waiver policies for African countries, China chose to remain silent of the global call for helping Africa and engaging through bilateral diplomacy. This paper analyses the response of contemporary powers of the world to overcome the challenge of COVID-19 in the African continent.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Geopolitics, Diplomacy, Health Emergency, and Africa.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the geopolitical dynamics of the world. While contemporary powers are running against the time to develop the vaccine to save their people, Africa has been left alone with its challenges of poverty, human security, insurgency, terrorism, extremism, political instability, especially the crony-capitalism of the continent pretending to have won over the pandemic. Africa stands tallest if historians and political scientists assess how the world's richest continent with natural resources, cheap labour force, and the most arable land of the world has given all of its wealth to contribute to the world's progress and development, yet has remained neglected.

From colonialism to World War I, WW II, Cold War, to COVID-19 pandemic, Africans have paid hug price for their independence to stay on the path of development. There is no doubt that regional and international organisations like African Union and the United Nations have helped the continent to get out of its primary challenges. However, all these efforts have failed due to internal, regional, and international geopolitics in the continent.

The COVID-19 has also brought out the issue of economic crisis and racisms against Africans, especially in China, the US, and other European countries, which completely limbo the primary challenges of the continent. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has witnessed the barbaric treatment of African students and businesspersons in China.¹ Several students posted videos on social networking sites on how Africans were illtreated in

¹ Danny Vincent (2020), "Africans in China: We Face Coronavirus Discrimination," *BBC, Hong Kong*, April 17, 2020, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52309414>, Accessed on May 1, 2020.

China. It created a wave of huge anger in the African continent, and many African Ambassadors summoned and protested to Chinese counterparts across Africa.² Nevertheless, racism against Africans turned into a global issue among all European countries and the US after the killing of 46 years old George Floyd.³ The power-politics to pressurise China for its negligence with coronavirus turned back towards western nations. China successfully turned racism table towards Western countries with the help of their social networking propaganda war, and African cry for justice, equality, and development disappeared in the geopolitics of the contemporary powers of the world.

Challenges in Africa During COVID-19 in Pandemic

The Global outbreak of COVID-19 is not only revealed how African countries are dependent on economically developed countries, but it also unfolds how weak African leadership is to hold accountable those countries that are directly or indirectly manipulating the internal and regional politics of Africa. The issues of racism, low testing capacity, lack of medicines, medical experts, and testing kits in African nations have been ignored widely.

According to John Nkengasong, the director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia:

“Ethiopia has run about 11,000 tests — only 10 for every 100,000 people. Much-richer South Africa has run about 280 per 100,000. For Australia, the number is about 2,000; for the United States, 1,560.”⁴

The lack of COVID-19 diagnostic facilities in Africa is pushing the continent to remain dependent on developed countries to overcome the challenge of a health emergency. The continent with a population of 1.3 billion people is already facing various other health-related issues like HIV, Malaria, Ebola, and Swine Flu etc. The race of philanthropists by donor countries is leading continent to become the testing ground for the west and dumping zone of China's faulty COVID-19 testing kits. The President of Tanzania blamed faulty kits are the reason for the sharp rise in cases in their country.⁵

The global race for protectionism posed a further challenge to the African continent. Many African countries have money to pay for medicines. However, more than 70 countries in the world have banned the export of medical equipment, which left Africa remained in the hands of countries that came back in the continent with the mindset of neo-colonialism to scramble their resources and further lead them into the “Debt Trap”.

The West's Response to COVID-19 in Africa

While assessing the vulnerability of the healthcare system and devastating effects of COVID-19, the European Union (EU) passed a resolution on April 17, 2020, to coordinate an action

² Geoffrey York (2020), “African diplomats protest alleged racism and inhumane treatment of migrants in China,” *The Globe And Mail*, April 12, 2020, URL: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-african-diplomats-protest-alleged-racism-and-inhumane-treatment-of/>, Accessed on May 1, 2020.

³ Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis and Robin Stein (2020), “How George Floyd was Killed in Police Custody,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2020, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>, Accessed on June 1, 2020.

⁴ John Nkengasong (2020), “Let Africa into the Market for COVID-19 Diagnostic,” *Nature*, April 28, 2020, URL: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01265-0>, Accessed on May 1, 2020.

⁵ Rabson Kondowe (2020), “Tanzania's President is Blaming the Sharp Rise of Coronavirus Cases on Faulty testing Kits,” *Quartz Africa*, May 4, 2020, URL: <https://qz.com/africa/1844277/racism-to-africans-in-china-and-surveillance-to-slow-migration/>, Accessed on June 1, 2020.

plan to combat the COVID-19.⁶ The EU sanctioned 20 billion Euros to help the most vulnerable countries, especially in Africa. The EU parliament support-efforts have joined calls from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to suspend debt payments from the developing countries. The EU pandemic response is beyond its borders.

According to the World Bank report, the COVID-19 set off the first recession in Sub-Sahara Africa. Several countries in the region are facing massive financial shortage as most of these countries' income comes from raw material and tourism, nevertheless, due to lockdown and cancellation of all international flights, most of the African countries are going through the financial crisis. Moreover, the foreign capital withdrawn from these countries will be double than the level of the financial crisis in 2008-2009. To address the financial crisis, the EU financial support is assisting most affected countries in the continent. For example, 50 million Euros were given to Nigeria to contain the spread of the virus, and 10 million euros were given to Ethiopia to increase the number of diagnostic laboratories, test kits, and treatment centres.⁷

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and European Investment Bank (EIB) are also strengthening efforts to combat pandemic and making a resilient healthcare system in the African countries to combat any health emergency in the future. The WHO and the EIB are strengthening their cooperation for the immediate COVID-19 support and jointly specifying financial help to build resilient healthcare systems to enhance health investment and primary healthcare to overcome the ongoing challenge as well as to work towards Universal Health Coverage for African people.⁸

The US response and fight against COVID-19 remained limited after the drastic rise of cases in the country. The ignorant attitude in the beginning, followed by power politics with China and the World Health Organisation (WHO), interlays derailed US efforts to overcome the challenges of the pandemic. The geopolitics further reached a new low level when the US completely stopped funding the WHO after repeated warning against its Director general Tedros Adhanom⁹ for his biased and doubtful role is reporting pandemic to the world under China's pressure. The US President Trump said,

*"We will be today terminating our relationship with the World Health Organization and redirecting those funds to other worldwide and deserving urgent global public health needs," Trump said. "The world needs answers from China on the virus."*¹⁰

The US government directed its funds to the USAID program in Sub-Sahara Africa and donated 1000 lifesaving ventilators to South Africa, reaching 30 million people in Ethiopia

⁶ "European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (2020/2616(RSP))" April 17, 2020, URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0054_EN.pdf, Accessed on May 1, 2020.

⁷ European Union, "Team Europe" - Global EU Response to Covid-19 supporting partner countries and fragile populations," April 11, 2020, URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77470/team-europe-global-eu-response-covid-19-supporting-partner-countries-and-fragile-populations_en, Accessed on May 1, 2020.

⁸ World Health Organisation, "WHO and European Investment Bank strengthen efforts to combat COVID-19 and build resilient health systems to face future pandemics," May 1, 2020, URL: <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/01-05-2020-who-and-european-investment-bank-strengthen-efforts-to-combat-covid-19-and-build-resilient-health-systems-to-face-future-pandemics>, Accessed on May 03, 2020.

⁹ The BBC (2020), "Coronavirus: US to halt funding to WHO, says Trump," BBC, April 15, 2020, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52289056>, Accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Andrew Joseph and Helen Branswell (2020), "Trump: U.S. will terminate relationship with the World Health Organization in wake of Covid-19 pandemic," State, May 29, 2020, URL: <https://www.statnews.com/2020/05/29/trump-us-terminate-who-relationship/>, Accessed on May 30, 2020.

with critical information to fight with the pandemic, and providing electronic and print instruction to 9 million students affected by school shutdown in Ghana.¹¹

Philanthropist Dragon in Africa

Since 1990 to Belt and Road Initiative, China has become a significant bilateral creditor of the African continent. Its total loan to African countries crossed the value of 146 billion US dollars.¹² China's massive investment in the mining sector, highway to hydroelectric dams, and other infrastructure projects has brought African countries under heavy debt. It raised more concerns about China's crony-capitalism and its idea of expansionism, followed by the debt-trap. The ongoing pandemic has destroyed economies and wiped out almost 20 million jobs in African countries. To overcome the ongoing economic challenge where an international organisation like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have announced immediate relief and freeing up billions of debt payment, China opted to remain silent to the global call for Africa's debt relief and chooses to cooperate bilaterally with African countries.¹³ Uganda's finance minister Matia Kasaija expressed his concerned on China's silence and said:

*"We have strong bilateral relations with China, but they haven't come to us saying anything."*¹⁴

The famous Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma donated medical equipment to 54 African Countries, but the aid received Africa's mixed reception. Many expressed concerns about the quality of Chinese products. Chinese doctors were also provoked a significant backlash in Nigeria.¹⁵ Many see Chinese aids as a damage control of its reputation in the context of how Africans were treated in China during the pandemic outbreak. A number of African students and Businessmen were treated very savagely by Chinese authorities during the pandemic outbreak in China.¹⁶ A number of videos emerged from various Chinese cities showing mistreatment of Africans in China. African Social media and news channels were flooded with the condition of Africans living in China. Number of Africans become homeless, evicted from their homes and apartments when Chinese authorities announced that five Nigerians tested positive for COVID-19 in Guangzhou.¹⁷ Africans were specifically targeted for their

¹¹ The USAID (2020), "The US Government's COVID-19 Response in Sub-Saharan Africa," June 04, 2020, URL: <https://www.usaid.gov/africa/documents/us-governments-covid-19-response-sub-saharan-africa>, Accessed on June 05, 2020.

¹² The Economist (2020), "Africa's Debt crisis Hampers it fight Against Covid-19," *The Economist*, April 11, 2020, URL: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/11/africas-debt-crisis-hampers-its-fight-against-covid-19>, Accessed on April 12, 2020.

¹³ "China Silent amid Global Calls to Give Africa Debt Relief," *The Economic Times*, April 29, 2020, URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/china-silent-amid-global-calls-to-give-africa-debt-relief/articleshow/75443169.cms>, Accessed on April 30, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hangwei Li and Jacqueline Musiitwa (2020), "Coronavirus Diplomacy: China's Opportune Time to Aid Africa," *The Africa Report*, April 24, 2020, URL: <https://www.theafricareport.com/26750/coronavirus-diplomacy-chinas-opportune-time-to-aid-africa/>, Accessed on April 30, 2020.

¹⁶ Hangwei Li (2020), "Mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou Threatens China's Coronavirus Diplomacy," *The Conversation*, April 17, 2020, URL: <https://www.theafricareport.com/26750/coronavirus-diplomacy-chinas-opportune-time-to-aid-africa/>, Accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁷ Alice SU (2020), "No Blacks: Evicted, Harassed and Targeted in China for Their Race Amid Coronavirus," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2020, URL: <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-16/china-coronavirus-black-african-evictions>, Accessed on 20 April, 2020.

race and colour in Africa. As a result, African Diplomats protested to Chinese authorities in Beijing for “discrimination and stigmatisation of Africans in Guangzhou.”¹⁸

However, Africans’ condition and protests were very short-lived on news channels and political spheres in Africa. China controls most of the African digital TV networks. It successfully removed all the anti-Chinese sentiment from the African digital network. In 2015 China started Digital Satellite TV Network Project in Africa intending to take the digital network to 10,000 African villages. However, the real objective of the Chinese president to start this project was to telecast pro-China propaganda in African countries. It helped China to cover-up Chinese wrongdoing with Africans in China and within the African continent, especially in the mining sector. At present, the Chinese digital tv network covered 30 African countries with more than one crore subscribers. However, pro-Chinese propaganda worked really well on the digital and political sphere of African countries; it started creating huge resentment in Africans towards Chinese activities in their country.

People of many African countries started feeling that Chinese people get away from any type of crime in their country as Beijing gave considerable loans to their country and corrupted their leadership. As a result, on May 24, 2020, three Chinese citizens were brutally killed by Zambians.¹⁹ Chinese were forcing Zambians to stay in the factory for work and not to go home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were several incidences when Chinese workers got away after committing a crime. There is no such voice against China for the accountability of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, China successfully turned African sentiments towards the west in ‘Black Life Matters’ movement in African countries. Very interestingly, incidents in the US turned into anti-west sentiments and spread all over the western countries by social networking fake accounts and electronic media controlled by China in Africa.

The world and Africans got more concerned about the anti-colonial legacy which was over approximately fifty years ago, but were not concerned with the worst situation due to pandemic and how China is using its funding to Africa to take over their resources and leading them to “debt trap colonialism” of 21st century. China strangled African countries with their existing political, economic, and social system and corrupted them accordingly.

Conclusion

China’s philanthropic and humanitarian practices in African countries are aiming to exploit rather than being humanitarian. However, the criticism of China has managed to engage with the continent actively. China’s aid-diplomacy helped it take over a number of crucial resources all over the continent. China’s hunger for resources through immoral practices is a warning for the continent to raise its voice unitedly for mutual and equal benefits. African countries are still most abundant in natural and human resources; they must focus on the development of the education system and use their resources independently without any

¹⁸ Geoffrey York (2020), “African diplomats protest alleged racism and inhumane treatment of migrants in China,” *The Globe And Mail*, April 12, 2020, URL: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-african-diplomats-protest-alleged-racism-and-inhumane-treatment-of/>, Accessed on May 1, 2020.

¹⁹ Jenni Marsh (2020), “Three Chinese Nationals were Murdered and Burned in Zambia, in a Week When Radical Tensions were Running High,” *CNN World*, June 6, 2020, URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/05/china/china-zambia-murder-intl-hnk/index.html>, Accessed on June 7, 2020.

political and economic pressure; they have to maintain a balance of geopolitics between the western countries and China's policy of expansionism.

At present, African countries need to be more focused on efforts to prevent the spread of the virus in the countries rather than focussing on anti-China and the west sentiments. There is a need to invest in early detection, emergency services to overcome the healthcare crises in the continent, including the COVID-19 pandemic. African countries need short-term fiscal and monetary measures not in the form of debt from China and any other country but in the form of debt suspension sometimes. African countries need to focus on small and medium industries at the local and regional levels to generate employment at the rural and local levels rather than constructing rail, road, and other infrastructural projects for the time being with economic aid received from various international organisations. African governments must unite against discrimination in any form (economic, racism) and from any part of the world. Partnership with the international communities and governments should be based on mutual benefits and strengthening healthcare systems in the continent.