

Associate Paper

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COVID-19 Adds a New Dimension to an Undeclared Third World War

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Key Points

- The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the devastating potential of viruses as a weapon of mass destruction.
- The strategic competition among major powers has already pushed the world into an undeclared “Third World War” with changed dimensions and instruments of warfare.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the intensity, dimension and trajectory of an undeclared Third World War and, in its aftermath, could possibly bring about a change in the global order.

Summary

In a global tug of war, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a new dimension to the global strategic balance and triggered a chain of events in the struggle for global strategic dominance, besides causing tremendous human suffering. Previously, in order for a conflict to be called a war, the use of military force and a declaration of war were considered basic necessities. War was defined as a condition under which a state prosecuted its perceived right by force. Similarly, a world war is one that involves countries all over the world. The meaning of “force” in the modern era has been extended beyond hard power alone, along with its various dimensions of application. Whereas the goals of earlier world wars were the capture of key territories or the surrender of political leadership and the attendant political will of adversaries, in the current era, the strategic aim revolves around the economic collapse of an adversary; in other words, an adversary’s economy and population centres become the targets. Given that construct, this paper argues that the world was already in an undeclared Third World War, one predicated upon different dimensions and instruments.

It further argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has further changed that war's trajectory and dimension.

Analysis

Were We Already in an Undeclared Third World War Prior to COVID-19?

The proliferation of nuclear arsenals among existing and potential great powers gave rise to the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), thereby making the idea of a full-scale, declared world war, like the First and Second, unthinkable, as any nuclear war would be devastating for all countries. Conventional and nuclear arsenals will continue to grow, nevertheless, as they become instruments of deterrence. Today, however, force is measured in terms of a country's Comprehensive National Power (CNP), which includes the country's economy (including its energy security), military strength (including its nuclear capability), strategic positioning and posturing, foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives, governance, Human Development Index (HDI), technological capability, knowledge and information, geography, natural resources, national will and leadership. Of those elements, economic power is the overriding component that has the greatest bearing on the rest.

So great is the influence of economic power that its application resulted in an already [intense trade/tariff war between the world's two largest economies](#) (the US and China), spiralling upwards at a rapid rate last year. The imposition by the US of economic sanctions on Russia, Iran, North Korea and a number of other countries, affected many others and created heightened turbulence in the global economy, thereby defining the global nature of economic war. China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to increase Beijing's infrastructure, reach and strategic footprint across several continents and the counter-initiatives that were enacted by the US, Japan and other countries are also part of that economic war. The conflicts in the Middle East over the last two decades, for example, also have an economic dimension, being associated with the control of energy products and the sale of military hardware to regional adversaries.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the conventional- and nuclear-armed combat forces of the US and China continue their strategic posturing, deterrence and messaging to all stakeholders there. China used combat forces to develop and occupy features in South China Sea in an attempt to convert international waters (albeit contested) that include shipping lanes that carry [US\\$5 trillion worth of global trade per year](#) into Chinese territory. The combat exercises being conducted in the Indo-Pacific are mainly shows of force and alliances. The expansion of regional military bases adds to the logistics component of the undeclared war. North Korea's missile and nuclear tests that serve to demonstrate its capacity to strike the US mainland, and the US military exercises with South Korea that moderate it are further displays of the posturing of combat forces.

Elsewhere, military force has been employed in Syria, where the US and Russia fought on opposite sides, although they took precautions not to attack each so as not to up the ante to a declared war. The military intervention of Saudi Arabia and its multinational allied force in Yemen also qualifies as war, to which Yemeni Houthis responded by bringing non-state actors into the conflict. The recent US-Iran confrontation, after the killing by the US of

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps General Soleimani, brought both countries close to outright war. The outcome of these conflicts appears to be the rise of two opposing alliances, the first being the US-Israel-Saudi Arabia-South Korea-Japan alliance (with support from NATO, Australia and New Zealand), and the other being China-Russia-North Korea-Iran-Syria.

While the likelihood of nuclear war may be low, nuclear arsenals are used as coercive instruments, such as by North Korea and Pakistan, to avoid conventional war. Other countries increase their nuclear and missile capability using national defence as an excuse. The abrogation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the increase in the number of tactical nuclear weapons and the possibility of a “dirty bomb” falling into the hands of terrorists are added dimensions. The allegations of nerve agents being used in Syria indicates that, despite a ban on those weapons by the United Nations, arsenals of those weapons continue to be built and used. Technological competition is an added dimension to warfare. Space warfare has, for instance, taken a dangerous turn with countries enacting preparatory measures to destroy each other’s satellites and other space infrastructure. Terrorism and cyber-warfare pose a threat to all countries. Proxy wars conducted by countries that use terrorism as a tool of statecraft is common. The theory of “good and bad terrorists”, the individual interests of countries and global power plays have overtaken the unified global war on terrorism, with major powers fighting some terrorist groups and closing their eyes to the depredations of others. The Middle East-North Africa and Afghanistan-Pakistan regions are examples of that situation. The use of all elements of information warfare, including misinformation campaigns, election meddling, cyber-warfare and the hacking of economic and crucial military networks are now almost commonplace.

Some strategists use the term “Cold War” to describe the situation described above. A Cold War is defined as a state of extreme unfriendliness existing between countries with opposing political systems that expresses itself not through fighting, but through political pressure and threats, such as existed between the US and the Soviet Union after the Second World War. The number of casualties suffered in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and other countries, and the number of refugees displaced due to those conflicts, surpasses the total casualties, as well as refugees, of both the earlier World Wars combined. In the Syrian war alone, 3.5 million people have been killed so far. The global situation described above surpasses the definition and boundaries of a cold war. It has graduated to armed conflicts, the capture of territory (as in the case of the South China Sea), innumerable deaths and economic destruction. To call it a cold war would be an understatement. The global situation even before the COVID-19 pandemic had virtually all the elements of a World War, even if its dimension, instruments and modalities had changed and the war had not been formally declared. It would not be wrong to call that situation an “[Undeclared Third World War](#)”.

COVID-19 Gives New Dimension and Trajectory to a Third World War

The outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), is one of the biggest risks that humanity has faced so far in this century. It exposed the vulnerability of the militarily- and economically-strongest nations to unprecedented human tragedy, while the global powers were busy strengthening other elements of their CNP. It exposed the world to the danger of

a possible biological weapon, thereby adding a new dimension to the ongoing third world war. It has also raised the suspicion that, despite the [Biological Warfare Convention](#), research on these weapons continues to be pursued. Wuhan being the initial epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, the trends in early 2020 suggested a rapid drop in China's CNP caused by the combined negative effects of the US-China trade war, stalling progress on the BRI and COVID-19. The last week of March 2020 and onwards saw the epicentres of COVID-19 shifting westwards with the US, Western Europe and the UK emerging as the worst affected, and China showing signs of recovery. Galvanised by the shock of infection, the rest of the world continues to be engaged in protecting its citizens as a first priority using every possible means. The global anger against China for delaying a considered and universal response to the pandemic is far from over, but is kept at a low key so as not to disrupt the medical supplies emanating from there. The Chinese narrative changed from accidental originator to victim, then good fighter and, later, to the good Samaritan volunteering to help the world in combating the pandemic. The delay by the World Health Organisation in declaring a pandemic exposed the vulnerability of global organisations like the United Nations to manipulation by influential members like China.

China, on the other hand, having declared victory over the pandemic, was quick to put its manufacturing back in place, trying to boost a "COVID-19 Economy" by creating a "Health Silk Road" and activating a badly-needed supply chain of medical equipment and medicines as an attempt to earn maximum profit out of the pandemic, while also attempting to repair its global image. In the context of economic war, it brought out the global vulnerability of supply chains being concentrated on China. Many countries, like Japan, have consequently decided to incentivise pulling some of their manufacturing facilities out of China, and vowing to be self-reliant for critical supplies. The economic competition has also pushed the US and some other Western countries to prematurely lift certain social precautions against the pandemic, so that they do not suffer an unacceptable economic disadvantage while competing with China, but thereby creating additional risk to human lives.

Strategically, China followed the teachings of its military strategist, Sun Tzu, who advocated 'strike when the enemy is weak and preserve when it is strong'. With the US and other countries deeply involved in combating COVID-19, China and North Korea pursued some offensive overtures. North Korea tested missiles in quick succession and China launched aggressive initiatives by sailing its aircraft carrier near Taiwan and sinking or chasing away Vietnamese and Malaysian fishing boats to reinforce its claims in the South China Sea. The US responded to reports of a possible nuclear test by China at Lop Nor by conducting an aircraft "[Elephant Walk](#)" in a show of strength. China also decided to use the opportunity to tighten its grip on the South China Sea by unilaterally setting up an administrative district in the Paracel and Spratly Islands and other features in those waters that claimed by other countries. Its unilateral move to approve the establishment of the Xisha and Nansha districts under the administration of Sansha city in southern island of Hainan did not sit well with the global community but, in accordance with Chinese strategic calculations, that appeared to be the best time for it to do so, even if it amounted to a blatant violation of UNCLOS while the attention of other countries was diverted towards combating the pandemic. It also exposed as a sham China's negotiated [Code of Conduct](#), which it offered as a guarantee of good will to ASEAN claimants of various parts of the South China Sea. The US and Australian

navies responded to that move by sailing an aircraft carrier and combat ships as a show of force to counter the aggressive Chinese stance in the South China Sea. They also flew fighter and bomber aircraft near the Taiwan Strait, responding to China's offensive initiative of sailing its new aircraft carrier towards Taiwan.

China's economic offensive and its military posturing in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea, and the US responses to those have increased the pace of this undeclared Third World War. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many vulnerabilities of the US and created a huge trust deficit for China globally; consequentially, the idea of a universal acceptance of one or two countries as superpowers or global leaders may soon be outdated. It may appear that China has an edge over the rest of the world as it allegedly controlled the COVID-19 pandemic earlier, but that remains too early to predict because the global anger and trust deficit is against China, making the strategic situation fluid. A new global order could emerge, which may not be US- or China-centric. All countries, big or small, will work to protect their national interests, maximise their self-reliance and protect their strategic choices. It could also be argued that, unlike earlier world wars, the Third World War could last for decades, and that the current events are the preparatory phase of that war. The world is yet to mentally accept the transition of World War into new dimensions that encompass economic warfare, trade, technology, space, information and cyberwarfare. Political initiatives that include the formulation of alliances like the proposed US-Japan-Australia-India "Quad", closer [Russia-China relations](#) that incorporate their shared ideas for Eurasia, the expulsion of diplomats and associated counter-offensive measures, together with joint military exercises, are the new instruments of the expression of collective power.

Conventional warfare has now taken a back seat, but the space exists for such wars at the regional level within the overall ambit of a Third World War. The new paradigm, unlike earlier World Wars, will not witness all countries simultaneously at war, because not all of them may agree to the narratives of the key players. Some countries could engage in actual conflict, such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, some countries may restrict themselves to military posturing, and others will engage in economic, trade, diplomatic, technological and information warfare, including cyber warfare. The space dimension is not yet fully explored; hence with recent advancements in this field, the world may see former US President Ronald Reagan's dream of "Star Wars" become more prominent. COVID-19 has been a wild card entry in this nascent Third World War. The eastern hemisphere appears, so far, to be better succeeding in the fight against COVID-19. The next few decades could see the strategic advantage shift further towards the East, as that hemisphere has some of the fastest-growing economies and population centres. It could be argued, therefore, that the primary battleground of the Third World War will be the Indo-Pacific region, and that the world has already entered in its preparatory phase, albeit without recognising or declaring it as such.

About the Author: Major-General Asthana is a strategic and security analyst, a veteran infantry general with 40 years' experience in national and international fields and the United Nations. He is a globally acknowledged strategic and military writer/analyst who has authored over 350 publications. Maj-Gen Asthana has been interviewed by various national and international news channels, newspapers and organisations, including the *Economic Times*, *Washington Post*, *Modern Diplomacy*, *South China Morning Post*, *Voice of France*, *Hindustan Times* and *Gulf Today*.

He is currently Chief Instructor of all courses for military officers at the United Service Institute of India, the oldest established think-tank in India. Maj-Gen Asthana is a doctoral researcher at Jawaharlal Nehru University, holds two MPhil degrees, a Post-Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management and various management degrees.

Maj-Gen Asthana has served as Director-General of Infantry of the Indian Army and has been twice awarded by the President of India, twice by the UN, and by the Governor of Haryana state. He serves on the Board of Advisors/Security Councils of the Confederation of Educational Excellence (CEE), International Organisation for Educational Development (IOED), International Police Commission (IPC India), Security Council of Internet TV Media News Network (ITVMNN) and other UN organisations. He is also on the Advisory Board of the Swedish Armed Forces International Centre (SWEDINT) and is a member of the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON).

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