

# Coronavirus: A Double-edged Sword for China

China's response to the coronavirus pandemic, including its effort to shape the narrative, is likely to have major geopolitical implications. For China, the pandemic is a double-edged sword. The government's shortcomings in responding to the virus have damaged its image around the world. Yet, Chinese leaders may believe that their country will emerge from the crisis more powerful than before.

By Brian G. Carlson

The pandemic resulting from the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, could become a pivotal event in world history. Long before the outbreak, the rise of China was gathering force, raising the specter of major structural changes in international politics. The pandemic is likely to accelerate some trends that were already underway while introducing new issues. China's response to the coronavirus – from the standpoints of public health, domestic politics, the economy, and foreign policy – promises to have important geopolitical ramifications. China's prestige has taken a hit, but its leaders may nevertheless view the crisis as an opportunity to pursue their foreign policy ambitions.

In Europe, China's image suffered as the Chinese government attempted to divert blame and claim credit for its handling of the crisis. The pandemic has also contributed to growing tensions in US-China relations, raising questions about the appropriate European response.

## Public Health Response

China's public health response to the coronavirus is the source of intense controversy. Critics charge that the Chinese government's initial failures prevented the virus from being contained in Wuhan, thus al-



Chinese President Xi Jinping arrives for the opening session of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Beijing on 21 May 2020. *Carlos Garcia Rawlins / Reuters*

lowing it to spread around the world and become a devastating pandemic. The Chinese leadership's preferred narrative is that China contained the virus more successfully than most other countries, including Western democracies, demonstrating the superiority of its authoritarian political system. The contest between these narratives

is likely to have important implications for the Chinese Communist Party's domestic legitimacy, relations between China and other major powers, and the future of world politics.

The publicly available evidence suggests that Chinese officials at both the local and

national levels made crucial mistakes in their response to the viral outbreak, due in no small measure to the lack of transparency in China's political system. Officials in Wuhan failed to provide timely, accurate information about the outbreak to residents of their city or to the central govern-

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ment and silenced those who tried to raise alarms. The central government reportedly waited several days after learning the true extent of the outbreak before informing the public and locking down Wuhan. According to epidemiological studies, these failures significantly increased the number of cases and deaths around the world.

By early December, patients later diagnosed with the coronavirus were showing symptoms. On 30 December, Li Wenliang, a doctor in Wuhan, attempted to spread the word on social media about a respiratory illness. Censors shut down online discussion of the outbreak and reprimanded Li and other doctors for disseminating "rumors." Li himself later contracted the coronavirus and died in early February. Meanwhile, local authorities in Wuhan suppressed news about the outbreak. The city health authority reported unrealistically low numbers of infections despite a surge of patients admitted to the city's hospitals. Officials also denied that the virus was transmissible from human to human, even though Li and several other health care workers had become infected. Local authorities were reluctant to cause disruptions in advance of municipal and provincial political meetings that were scheduled for the first half of January. Moreover, the incentive structure in China's political system discourages local and provincial officials from relaying bad news to the central government. On 18 January, officials in Wuhan allowed a Lunar New Year banquet featuring dishes prepared by 40,000 families to proceed. By this time, city officials had been aware of the virus's spread in their city for three weeks.

The central government was also slow to respond. Chinese officials informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about the outbreak on 31 December, but they claimed that the virus was not transmissible person to person. Only the announcement of an infection in Thailand on

13 January, until then the first reported case outside of China, spurred China's leadership to recognize the possibility of a pandemic and begin a nationwide effort to identify cases. However, the government failed to publicize its concerns until 20 January, when President Xi Jinping first spoke publicly about the virus, and the government acknowledged for the first time that person-to-person transmission was possible. This delay of several days was costly. By the time China locked down Wuhan on 23 January, approximately five million people had left the city, enabling the virus to spread worldwide.

Chinese leaders claim that the measures they implemented were successful in containing the virus domestically. These measures included the lockdown in Wuhan, later extended to all of Hubei province, as well as lockdowns in other parts of the country and the use of digital technologies (see [CSS Analyses No.264](#)). According to Chinese statistics, China limited the number of infections to around 83,000 and deaths to roughly 4,600. If these statistics are reasonably accurate, then the toll was far lower in China than in many Western democracies. Yet, many international experts doubt the accuracy of these statistics. Absent an international investigation, it is difficult to evaluate China's claims. The Chinese leadership initially resisted an international investigation, eventually agreeing to one that can begin only after the pandemic is over. China acted swiftly in response to later domestic outbreaks.

### Domestic Politics and Economy

The coronavirus outbreak was a potential domestic crisis for the Chinese Communist Party, for reasons of both public health and the economy. The treatment and death of Li Wenliang sparked public outrage. Eventually, the government bowed to public pressure, acknowledging that Li's treatment had been improper. Some of the party's efforts to claim credit for success in handling the virus created a domestic backlash. In a few cases, prominent figures offered pointed public criticism of Xi and the party's leadership, for which they were arrested. The viral outbreak exposed, once again, the problems inherent in a rigid, hierarchical political system that lacks transparency and discourages efforts to tell unpleasant truths. Since sustained economic growth is a pillar of the party's legitimacy, the economic slowdown also posed a challenge.

Months after the outbreak, the party appears to have regained its footing. Several factors explain this outcome. Perhaps most important are the difficulties other countries are experiencing with the virus. High infection and death rates in other countries are helping to convince Chinese citizens that their government's claims of success are justified. Another factor is a surge in Chinese nationalism in response to international criticism of the way China handled the virus. Although much domestic dissatisfaction undoubtedly remains, recent advances in China's digital surveillance capabilities have improved the party's capacity to monitor political discourse and suppress dissent.

Economic recovery will be an important test for the party. During the first quarter of 2020, China's GDP contracted by 6.8 per cent compared to the same period one year earlier, according to official statistics. This was officially the first quarter of negative economic growth since 1976, the year of Mao Zedong's death and the last year of the Cultural Revolution. For the first time in decades, the government refrained from announcing an annual GDP growth target, citing the unpredictable situation. The International Monetary Fund predicts that China's GDP growth could fall to 1.2 per cent this year, well below the double-digit growth that China enjoyed for much of the past four decades and even the 2019 figure of 6.1 per cent. Even if the Chinese economy stabilizes quickly, its export sector will suffer from the coronavirus-induced global recession. Efforts by the US and other countries to shift supply chains out of China could also hurt the domestic economy.

At a time when the Chinese government already faces severe challenges, including a protracted trade war with the US and a sustained protest movement in Hong Kong, the pandemic has placed additional strain on Xi's leadership. Some observers suggest that the coronavirus could become "China's Chernobyl" – a catastrophe that would harm the party's domestic legitimacy and international prestige. Even though the party's domestic image could suffer long-term damage, party leaders seem confident that they have weathered the storm at home.

### Pandemic Diplomacy and Backlash

In the international arena, Chinese leaders saw opportunities as well as daunting challenges resulting from the pandemic. The most pressing challenge was to respond to international criticism of China's handling

of the outbreak and to reverse the consequent damage to China's image. In this endeavor, China employed diplomacy with both soft and hard edges.

On the soft side, China launched a campaign of "mask diplomacy". China sent masks, testing kits, ventilators, and more than 170 medical experts to countries around the world, including hard-hit Italy. Chinese state media publicized these efforts extensively. The goal was to shift attention away from unpleasant issues, including the origin of the virus in Wuhan and the problems with China's initial response, and towards China's efforts to help other countries fight the pandemic. However, these efforts fell flat when medical supplies that China delivered to several countries, including some in Europe, turned out to be of poor quality.

China's pandemic diplomacy also featured a harder edge. Chinese diplomats, including a new generation known for their boldness, dubbed "Wolf Warriors" after patriotic Chinese films, responded aggressively to criticism. In recent months, China pressured countries to offer public thanks for Chinese donations of medical equipment, made good on threats to punish Australia economically for urging an investigation of the origins of the virus, and criticized other countries' public health responses. In some cases, Chinese officials spread disinformation. For example, a Foreign Ministry spokesman claimed that the US military had introduced the virus to Wuhan, and the Chinese ambassador in Paris claimed that France had left infected people to die in nursing homes. These actions generated considerable backlash around the world, frustrating China's attempts to turn the international narrative in its favor.

### Assertive on the Periphery

Chinese actions on issues not directly related to the pandemic have compounded the international backlash against China's pandemic diplomacy. These include assertive behavior along its periphery on issues related to Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the border with India.

Amid the pandemic, China strengthened its grip on Hong Kong. In late May, the National People's Congress approved a new national security law for the city that increases the government's power to suppress pro-democracy activism, arguably ending

Hong Kong's semiautonomous status and the "one country, two systems" formula. Chinese leaders appeared to calculate that they could withstand the ensuing international condemnation, especially with many countries now distracted by the pandemic.

China intensified diplomatic and military pressure against Taiwan, the self-governing island that the mainland regards as a renegade province. In the run-up to Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration as president for a second term, Taiwan mounted a successful response to the coronavirus, preventing a local outbreak and limiting the death count to single digits. This success strengthened calls for Taiwan's membership in the WHO, which China opposes as a violation of the "one China policy." With these factors raising tension in cross-strait relations, China increased military pressure against Taiwan, dispatching both air and naval forces close to Taiwan's shores.

In addition, China continued its efforts to assert dominance over the South China Sea. In recent months, a Chinese naval vessel pointed a gun radar at a Philippine ship, a Chinese coast guard ship sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel, a Chinese maritime research vessel conducted research in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone, and China

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included disputed land features in new Chinese administrative districts. These actions are a continuation of China's policies in recent years, but Chinese officials may perceive the current moment, when South-east Asian countries are distracted by the pandemic, as an opportune time to press their claims.

Finally, China's border dispute with India flared up recently, featuring deadly skirmishes between the two sides' military forces in a disputed region in the Himalayas. Some analysts believe that China chose the current moment, when India is struggling to contain the coronavirus, to discourage India from fortifying its position along the border and especially from drawing closer to the US.

In each of these instances of increased friction along China's periphery, the govern-

### Unknown Origins of the Virus

The origins of the novel coronavirus remain shrouded in mystery. Chinese officials have suggested that the first human infection may have occurred at a market selling wild animals in Wuhan. Scientists agree that the virus was not human-made or manipulated. US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have alleged that a naturally occurring virus may have escaped accidentally from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a laboratory with the highest biosafety level (BSL-4), where scientists conduct research on coronaviruses in bats. Trump and Pompeo have not provided public evidence to support their claim, which China denies. See Michèle Gemünden, "[Trust and Transparency: Antidotes against Corona Conspiracies](#)," CSS Corona Blog, 25.05.2020.

ment's assertive actions have appealed to Chinese nationalism, an important pillar of the party's legitimacy. At the same time, they have intensified regional tensions and further complicated China's relations with Western countries, especially the US.

### Geopolitical Implications

For China, the pandemic is a double-edged sword. It imposes significant costs on China's economy, the domestic prestige of the Chinese Communist Party, and the country's image around the world. Chinese leaders sense the growing international resistance that they face. In April, a think tank close to China's Ministry of State Security presented Chinese leaders with a report arguing that the level of international hostility toward China had reached a level unseen since the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. At the same time, Chinese leaders may have reason to believe that they will emerge from the crisis with an improved position of relative power. This conviction could embolden China.

Some analysts compare the rise in US-China tension to the beginning of a new cold war. Whether or not this characterization is accurate, the coming period is likely to feature intensifying strategic competition in the military, technological, economic, and ideological domains. US-China relations were growing increasingly tense well before the pandemic, but the coronavirus accelerated this trend. US President Donald Trump, who initially praised China's handling of the outbreak, progressively blamed China as infection and death tolls mounted in the US. Trump also ceased US funding for the WHO, which he accused

of covering up China's mishandling of the outbreak. Friction has also grown on other

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issues, including Hong Kong, Huawei, and efforts to reduce reliance on supply chains in China, especially for pharmaceuticals and medical supplies. A recent Pew Research poll found that two-thirds of US citizens view China unfavorably.

The pandemic also caused tension in China's relations with several European countries, potentially creating a closer alignment of interests between the US and Europe. Although transatlantic tensions are likely to endure, especially as long as

Trump remains president, this alignment of interests nevertheless could stimulate greater transatlantic cooperation in response to China's rise. As one example, US efforts to contain Huawei's growth may now gain increased support on this side of the Atlantic. The German and British governments are now reportedly revisiting their earlier decision to allow Huawei to build their countries' 5G infrastructure.

In the wake of the pandemic, Xi appears determined to sustain the foreign policy assertiveness that has characterized his tenure. Yet, China's image around the world, which was already less than sterling, has suffered further. China's limited soft power could prove a significant obstacle to its foreign policy ambitions. Ultimately, in order to exercise international leadership, China has to win friends around the world.

The pandemic has complicated this task, as Chinese leaders appear to recognize. If international resistance to China's ambitions becomes sufficiently strong, Chinese leaders may have to scale back their aspirations, at least temporarily. Such a step would be difficult, however, in the face of growing nationalism in China, a trend that the pandemic has reinforced. For the foreseeable future, policymakers in Europe should anticipate that China will maintain and possibly intensify its foreign policy assertiveness.

For more on the "The Security Policy Implications of the Coronavirus Crisis", see [CSS core theme page](#).

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