

COVID-19: A Cause of Global Geopolitical Shift?

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At the end of World War II, the United States led the establishment of a new international order centered on the principles of free markets and liberal democracy, anchored by a set of multilateral institutions. This order was not without resistance, as the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China raised the Iron Curtain in an attempt to block the spread of such a system. Due to their autarky and absence of incentives, the centrally planned economies behind the Iron Curtain slowly crumbled and eventually collapsed, paving the way for American preeminence and an American led neo-liberal order. While Russia—the core remnant of the Soviet empire—received doses of advice and aid from the West, China enthusiastically embraced a capitalist economic system. American hegemony was so influential that its neo-liberal order is simply known as the “Washington Consensus”. The preeminence of the neo-liberal order created such a tectonic shift that it prompted Francis Fukuyama to proclaim “the end of history”¹. Fukuyama’s euphoria over the triumph of neo-liberalism did not withstand the test of time as China, in short order, began to rise. Capitalizing on its sustainable economic growth and large financial reserves, China has expanded

its influence through aid and investment across the globe with an eye toward reconfiguring a post-Washington Consensus world. During the course of this attempted reconfiguration of the global order, China offers an alternative model called the “Beijing Consensus”. When faced with a rising power—China—an existing hegemon—the United States—has felt anxious and uncertain about its power and role in a changing world².

Hence, ideological competition between the United States and China has spread in earnest. The United States presents its model as being effective in promoting not just human rights and democracy, but also economic growth. After decades of exposure to the Washington Consensus, many countries in the developing world have made limited dents in poverty and little headway in developing efficient and stable governments³. Conversely, China, through its Beijing Consensus model, stresses economic growth and political order. It has, in recent years, aided economic growth in many developing countries⁴. However, the utility of the Beijing Consensus has not passed the stress-test. The public and leaders around the world continue to observe the applicability of the

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. (Simon and Schuster, 2006).

² Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

³ Dambisa Moyo, *Dead aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. (Macmillan, 2009).

⁴ Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011).

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China model. The recent unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and the responses from the governments of China and the United States served as a yardstick testing the efficiency and effectiveness of the Beijing Consensus and Washington Consensus.

The COVID-19 pandemic that originated in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei, China late last year has sent shock waves across the globe. After an initial stumble in its response to the pandemic, China instituted swift, coordinated measures that succeeded in containing the spread, allowing the Chinese government to reopen the country to some semblance of normalcy by March. China's successes showed that an authoritarian government can have strong capacity not only in promoting economic growth but also in responding to crises.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the United States—the existing global hegemon—appears to be confused, unorganized and incompetent in its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dismal responses by the government of the United States highlight the fragility of democratic systems in times of crisis. With a focus of winning the next election at the expense of long-term well-being of the society, the Trump administration appears to be succumbing to its parochial, ill-informed and xenophobic voting bloc. Rather than cultivating national unity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump scapegoats the crisis. Initially, President Trump characterized the warning of a potential COVID-19 pandemic as a hoax—a Democratic Party plot to influence the 2020 electoral cycle in the United States. President Trump and his supporters view any proposed lockdown of society as an infringement on personal liberty. In fact, they view such lockdowns as violations of people's constitutional rights. As belated actions failed to contain the pandemic,

President Trump escalated his scapegoating tactics. First, he blamed China for concealing the gravity of COVID-19. He then labelled COVID-19 the “China virus” with the implicit association of the origin of the virus with China, exacerbating conspiracy theory that the virus was manufactured in a lab in China. The tone of the Trump administration is that the United States is not only under attack by the virus but by the Chinese. The Trump administration's scapegoating rhetoric pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic is viewed both as part of his reelection bid, and part of continuing geopolitical struggles with a rising China. There exist precedents within the Trump administration of painting China as a rogue state. Beginning with his 2016 election campaign, then presidential candidate Trump pledged to beat the so-called enemy China, that had costed the U.S. jobs, spied on U.S. businesses and stolen U.S. technology⁵. Once again, as the election cycle approaches, President Trump has politicized the COVID-19, accusing China of not only stealing American jobs and technology but of killing Americans. The conspiracy theory has rallied key portions of his base.

Historically, pandemics have fostered international cooperation. The United States and the former Soviet Union collaborated to fight polio worldwide. It should also be noted that the United States and China coordinated closely during the SARS outbreak in 2003⁶. Non-traditional security threats, like the COVID-19, require broad collaboration that includes not only governments but also multilateral and non-governmental organizations. The United States has avoided these multilateral mechanisms. Surprisingly, under the weight of COVID-19, the United States has not only attacked China, but it has also scapegoated the World Health Organization (WHO)

⁵ David Jackson and Kim Hjelmgaard, “Trump Says US Investigating Whether Coronavirus Spread After China Lab Mishap but Cites No Evidence,” *USA Today*, April 20, 2020. Available at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/04/18/trump-us-investigating-whether-coronavirus-spread-china-lab/5158551002/>.

⁶ Yanzhong Huang, “The US and China Could Cooperate to Defeat the Pandemic: Instead, their Antagonism Makes Matters Worse,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-24/us-and-china-could-cooperate-defeat-pandemic>.

alleging that the organization misinformed the world of the scale of the destruction COVID-19 was causing in order to conceal China's blame. The United States, thus, abruptly withdrew its funding to the WHO. Furthermore, the United States did not only fail to coordinate with European allies in an effort to combat the pandemic, but has also competed with the allies for crucial medical supplies.

While the United States has adopted an isolationist foreign policy, China has pursued a multilateral approach to address the pandemic. In response to the US announcement that it would postpone its contributions to the World Health Organization, China increased its funding to the organization. China's gesture signals its attempt to assert influence in international institutions.

To the surprise of many observers, the United States was reported to have diverted shipments of face masks and other medical kits from even its allies like Canada and France. Such an "America First" attitude has casted doubt on the reliability of the United States as an ally, not to mention as a global leader, in times of crisis. In contrast, elsewhere around the world, China aggressively pursued "face mask" diplomacy, sending medical experts and supplies to needy countries. The dividends of China's "face mask" diplomacy can already be seen. For instance, in Southeast Asia, China's collaborative approach has changed attitudes among regional leaders and the public toward China. China's outward expansion through its One Belt One Road Initiative has created, in recent years, negative perceptions in the Asia Pacific region. Chinese investment in countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar drew public criticisms of China for being self-serving. The negative image among the public in some Southeast Asian countries toward China evaporated rapidly, when news of China's shipments of medical supplies and presence of Chinese medical staffs in these countries emerged. The positive impression of China's good faith in many parts of the world is natural in such critical situation, in which the public

are scared and the government have limited capacity to battle the pandemic. In sum, China's "mask diplomacy" shows leaders and the public in many parts of the globe that a rising China could be a benign power.

It is also interesting to note that the public and leaders across the world have noticed the merits of the China model which stresses on the necessity of autocracy for its efficiency and efficacy. Not only has the China model proven successful in promoting economic growth, it is also effective in battling crises such as the COVID-19. At the same time, the public and leaders have questioned the US model's suitability in addressing crises. Instead, they view the American model as fragmented, indecisive, ineffective and undisciplined.

Since becoming a global economic power, China has positioned itself to be a global leader. At a five-year Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping projected China would achieve global power status by 2050. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly pushes China one step closer to realizing that goal. Its "mask diplomacy" and its success in containing COVID-19 have made China's model increasingly appealing to the developing world more than ever. These developments provide China with additional soft power which is an important ingredient for China to project its global influence. Given the positive appeal of the China model in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded by the West's mistrust of China, it is imperative that China attempt to further strengthen its position in the global system. Such an attempt by China will certainly face push back by the United States and the European Union. As the dust settles, the speed and scope of China's power projection will depend on the relative success of economic recovery in China, the United States, and other key Western countries. What is certain is that the Beijing Consensus will coexist in a competitive manner with the Washington Consensus for the foreseeable future, where forces and counter-force for change will one day shift the existing geo-political configuration.

**The Author chooses to use footnote as referencing style.*

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