

# A MODERN TRAGEDY? COVID-19 AND U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

THOMAS J. CHRISTENSEN

MAY 2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief invokes the standards of ancient Greek drama to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic as a potential tragedy in U.S.-China relations and a potential tragedy for the world. The nature of the two countries' political realities in 2020 have led to initial mismanagement of the crisis on both sides of the Pacific. And the interactions between the two sides, and with other actors, such as the World Health Organization, have so far squandered historic opportunities for cooperation to tackle a common threat. The finger pointing and politically driven accusations between the worlds' two leading powers — and between the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States — might have catastrophic results, particularly when the virus spreads to the world's most impoverished nations.

The brief calls for a ceasefire between Beijing and Washington on criticism of the two countries' initial responses to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, accompanied by a commitment to an eventual international investigation of what went wrong in all countries during the early phases of the pandemic. The brief concludes with six areas in which the United States and China should seek cooperation: to share best practices to stem the further spread of the coronavirus; to develop effective vaccines at the earliest possible date; to prepare in advance for mass manufacturing and global distribution of vaccines that are developed; to assist the neediest countries in fighting the disease; to manage debt crises and combat famines in the developing world that might result from the pandemic; and to preserve global trade by privileging diversification of supply chains and national strategic reserves over economic nationalism and less efficient forms of production.

## INTRODUCTION

The term “tragedy” is not generally used in contemporary discourse the way that it was originally intended in literature and theater. Nowadays anything awful is labeled a tragedy: from the criminal — such as a mass shooting — to the accidental — such as a train wreck or bus accident. In ancient Greek theater, the outcomes of tragedies were usually very bad as well, but it was not just the negative outcome that made them tragedies

as opposed to comedies. A tragedy requires that the personal characteristics of the key players — often summed up as “tragic flaws” — and how those players interact with one another in a certain context lead them unwittingly, but not simply accidentally, to a crescendo of pain and suffering. In some instinctive sense, the tragic outcome seems avoidable. But puzzlingly, it also seems inevitable once one drills into the personalities and flaws of the key players and the context within which they interact.

It is in this sense of the word that I see COVID-19 as a potential tragedy in U.S.-China relations and a potential tragedy for the world. The nature of the two countries' political realities in 2020 have led to mismanagement of the crisis on both sides of the Pacific. The interactions between the two sides, and with other actors, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), have so far squandered historic opportunities for cooperation to tackle a common threat. If great powers, including strategic competitors like the United States and China, cannot cooperate on countering this threat to humanity, then how can we expect to cooperate on other issues?

## THE MAKING OF A TRAGEDY

Relations between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were already very tense before the COVID-19 crisis. China's assertiveness on the international stage since the 2008 financial crisis and especially since President Xi Jinping rose to power in 2012-2013 has helped cement a bipartisan consensus in the United States that a tougher and more competitive approach toward the PRC is required. In the past few years, the U.S.-China trade war, pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, massive repression against Uighurs in Xinjiang, and increased U.S. and Chinese naval activities in disputed waters off China's coast have all served to heighten bilateral tensions. But the common threat posed by the virus could have provided an occasion for de-escalation of those tensions if both capitals had decided to cooperate to tackle it together and alongside others. Instead, COVID-19 so far has proven only to be a source of greater friction, rather than greater cooperation, between the PRC and the United States.

Here is where the tragic flaws of the two political systems collide. In China, where the pandemic began, it seems that the authorities handled the original outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in December 2019 very poorly. The local governments in the city of Wuhan and Hubei province apparently suppressed the bad news that a virus was spreading

in the city, silencing through coercion the voices of doctors who were blowing whistles and pointing to the dangers of an epidemic. Until January 20 of this year, the Chinese government did not even recognize publicly that the virus was clearly being passed among humans.<sup>1</sup> But the virus has proven itself so contagious in multiple countries, it seems impossible to believe that health care workers in Wuhan were not among the early patients, which would be a very clear sign of human-to-human transmission. After all, with full knowledge of the contagion and very careful practices in place today to fight the spread in hospitals in the United States, many health care workers and hospital staff have still come down with the disease while treating COVID-19 patients.

At a minimum, then, it seems that there was a local cover-up of the dangers of the disease. Chinese nationals I spoke with in America were fully aware and not surprised that concerned doctors in Wuhan were stifled by strict regulations against "spreading rumors" or "revealing secrets" without prior permission from higher authorities. The lack of a free press in China also hampered the prompt dissemination of knowledge about the disease to the general public in Wuhan and beyond. Local officials' reluctance to draw attention to problems is predictable in a system that blames and often punishes such officials for bad outcomes, even if forces that were generally outside of their control were the cause. Added to the mix is the massive anti-corruption drive launched by Xi. Most officials in a broadly corrupt political system fear being selected for a "disciplinary investigation" that has only one predictable end. If there is no independent justice system and most officials have at least some black marks in their dossiers, then local officials try to avoid publicly taking maverick positions on negative occurrences such as the spread of a disease. For these reasons, local officials sweeping bad news under the carpet and the early and quite consequential paralysis in responding to COVID-19 should not come as a surprise to scholars of contemporary Chinese politics.

Most likely there were also further cover-ups at higher levels in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Central government elites do not want to see the PRC's reputation tarnished on the international stage, and more importantly, want to insure that the CCP's legitimacy at home is not harmed by coverage of the origins of the pandemic and the weak and even destructive early responses to it. And there is real reason for the CCP leadership to worry. The local problems that I describe above are not really local, but rather the natural outcome of a single-party authoritarian state without institutions, like a free media and an independent court system, that could protect the individual rights of citizens, including whistleblowers, against state repression. Chinese nationals in America with whom I discussed these issues in late January and February did not know what to think as the crisis escalated, but some expressed fears for their families back home based on one shared perception: the CCP government could not be trusted to tell the public the truth about what was actually happening.

---

**Chinese doctors and health care officials almost certainly have learned valuable lessons to share with the outside world, including the United States.**

---

Once the central government recognized the threat from the contagiousness and seriousness of the virus and locked down Wuhan on January 23,<sup>2</sup> the Chinese government appears to have been quite effective at limiting the spread, expanding hospital capacity in a hurry, distributing protective gear to health care workers, expanding testing protocols, and isolating, often forcibly, those proven to have contracted the disease and even those suspected of having been exposed to it. Chinese doctors and health care officials almost certainly have learned valuable lessons to share with the outside world, including the United States. This is true even if it is the case that the same system in which they work caused tremendous damage early on by allowing a large, international city like Wuhan to become a giant

incubator for a highly contagious and dangerous virus that would spread through the country and around the world.

The reluctance of the World Health Organization to label COVID-19 a global health emergency until the end of January,<sup>3</sup> a full week after the lockdown of a large, international Chinese city, may also have caused significant damage. While later investigations will likely reveal more fully why this delay occurred, it does seem probable that what was at work was some combination of Chinese political pressure on WHO member states or the WHO's top leadership to preserve the PRC's reputation on the international stage and the WHO's overreliance on official reports from member states like China.

While the WHO's slowness in making that declaration may have delayed reactions to the coming catastrophe in various part of the world in consequential ways, oddly the one place that this does not seem to have been the case is the United States. And ironically, it has been Washington that has become the loudest critic of the organization. Here is where the American tragic flaws come into play. Under the Trump administration, the U.S. government has downgraded the importance of science and expertise in its decision-making processes and has generally avoided using multilateral organizations and agreements to protect and assert U.S. interests. Fewer government health experts were on the ground in the U.S. mission in China than in past administrations. Deep expertise combined with long government experience is associated in top administration political circles with the so-called "deep state" that President Donald Trump has accused of trying to undermine his presidency. The president himself clearly prefers making decisions based on his gut instincts and on his hopes rather than on the results of careful research. So he claimed early on that the virus posed limited risk to the American people and the American economy; that it would disappear soon "like a miracle," perhaps when there was warm weather; and, more recently, even that injecting disinfectants could be explored as a potential cure for the disease.

---

**The much touted U.S. ban on travel from China at the end of January, however sensible, apparently did little to stem the tide of the disease in the United States, since it had already arrived earlier and had begun spreading.**

---

Even after the threat COVID-19 posed to the world became clearer, the Trump administration largely dismissed the danger as overblown or, worse, inflated intentionally by the administration's political opponents. It is very difficult to see how an earlier recognition by the WHO that the novel coronavirus constituted a global health emergency would have changed that flawed American reality. Critically important weeks were lost in implementing serious policies to combat the virus. And the much touted U.S. ban on travel from China at the end of January, however sensible, apparently did little to stem the tide of the disease in the United States, since it had already arrived earlier and had begun spreading. In the case of New York, the virus apparently arrived indirectly from China via Europe, before the bans on foreign travelers from both regions were established. Subsequent repeated claims that tests were universally available and were being provided in sufficient numbers to meet the challenge were patently untrue, and, early on in the crisis, governors were often left to fend for themselves and compete with one another in acquiring protective gear and medical equipment for physicians, in some important cases from China.

When the history of the COVID-19 pandemic is written, South Korea, New Zealand, and Taiwan will likely be seen as the best examples of free societies that wrestled effectively with the virus in its early phases. Unfortunately, the United States almost certainly will not.

China's international reputation, meanwhile, has apparently taken a big hit not just in the United States but in Europe and the Indo-Pacific because of the issues raised above. The CCP has also named all new cases of the virus in China as

foreign, leading to discrimination against foreigners around the country, especially African migrants in and around Guangzhou. This poor treatment of Africans who have lived in China for years has done severe harm to China's reputation in Africa, which had been fostered over many years through economic interaction and infrastructure investment.<sup>4</sup> Despite some impressive reactions in China after the epidemic was publicly recognized and despite efforts to assist other countries with medical equipment and expertise — and thereby boost China's international image — it appears that COVID-19 will prove much more of a liability than an asset in the PRC's diplomatic portfolio.

Here is where the systemic insecurities of the Chinese Communist Party and the political and psychological insecurities of the Trump administration seem to be playing off each other in a classically tragic manner. The tragedy is evident in Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian promoting conspiracy theories about the U.S. Army planting the virus in Wuhan (he has not been fired and there is no evidence that he was even disciplined for this outrageous accusation).<sup>5</sup>

The tragedy is also present in Trump's race-baiting description of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus," once he began taking it seriously, and his rather celebratory response on Twitter of a corrected increase in the Chinese official death totals.<sup>6</sup> One can only surmise that he saw the reports of increased Chinese suffering as good because it might somehow make his own government look somewhat more effective in comparison. The president has subsequently stopped using the "Chinese virus" label, but leaked guidance from the Republican National Senatorial Committee on how to respond to questions about COVID-19 in a presidential election year instructs them to blame China and the WHO and to praise Trump for limiting travel from China.<sup>7</sup> Such deflection and scapegoating might impress the Republican political base at home but will almost certainly further harm America's reputation on the international stage and make future cooperation with China harder to establish.

Potentially compounding and catalyzing the tragedy, presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden's campaign has decided to attack Trump for being too soft on China during the early weeks of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> While China was clearly to blame for the crisis in this partisan narrative, so was Trump for "roll[ing] over for the Chinese."<sup>9</sup> One criticism that Biden supporters have raised is that Trump permitted the sending of "our [protective] masks" to China.<sup>10</sup> This puts down a marker for the president that any future Sino-American cooperation on the virus in this election year might be called out by the Democrats as somehow traitorous.

So now we have the makings of a tragedy full of characters with tragic faults: one domestically insecure government (the CCP) with a legitimacy crisis that plays out in the form of domestic repression under a single authoritarian leader who can never be questioned or criticized; one insecure executive branch in the United States (the Trump administration) under a vainglorious president who is running for reelection and demanding that his partisan troops never criticize his response to the COVID-19 crisis, but instead blame China and the WHO for allowing the virus to spread in the first place; and one traumatized opposition party (the Democrats), which still can't believe Trump won in 2016 and has decided this time around that "when they go low, we should go low as well."

I believe that all of the characters in this tragedy would like the virus to go away, but they have all chosen to protect their own reputations by placing blame squarely on others in ways that make much needed international cooperation to combat the virus more difficult. A good dose of self-criticism on all sides will be needed to improve future responses to similar challenges (which will almost certainly arise). More urgently, a good dose of humility and self-reflection might allow for greater international cooperation in this ongoing crisis. Failures of international cooperation will likely cost hundreds of thousands, or more likely millions, of additional lives through disease, hunger, and economic deprivation. Angela Merkel, chancellor of a wealthy

and well-equipped Germany, and a responsible and internationally oriented leader of the first order, recognized recently that we are only in the early stages of this crisis.<sup>11</sup> When one thinks of a much less well-equipped and much poorer sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia, one can only shudder about the number of people who could die later because of fighting now among great power rivals and among the two major political parties in the richest nation on earth.

---

**There will be time later to assess the early mistakes of China and others in greater detail, but the virus is out there now and we should be tackling it together.**

---

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Whatever mistakes and cover-ups occurred in Wuhan early on, China is now a repository of useful knowledge about the virus and how best to control its spread. It also has a very strong scientific community studying the origins of viruses and their medical treatment, who can cooperate with our own experts both to find a vaccine and to develop effective treatments short of a vaccine. This is true even if it turns out that the virus actually leaked from a scientific facility in Wuhan with insufficient safeguards. There will be time later to assess the early mistakes of China and others in greater detail, but the virus is out there now and we should be tackling it together. And the WHO and other multilateral institutions like the G-20 should be bolstered to help address the medical and economic challenges that are likely to spread around the globe, particularly in countries with weak medical infrastructures and poor economies that will almost certainly suffer massive debt defaults. Again, this remains true even if international politics and institutional weakness delayed the WHO's initial response to COVID-19. It simply does not follow any logic (except a tortuous political one) that the proper response to any earlier failures by the WHO should be to cripple the major vehicle of international public health during a global pandemic.

Here are six areas of cooperation that the United States and China can pursue in both bilateral and multilateral settings that would serve their national interests and the interests of humanity, even if they do not necessarily fit the domestic political logics of leaders in Washington and Beijing. The list is suggestive and not intended to be exhaustive and can include cooperation among governments and non-governmental actors.

**1. Share best practices.** The two sides should share and learn best practices for how to slow the spread of the virus, including mistakes to be avoided. While it might be too soon to expect Beijing and Washington to agree to a probe of their early mistakes, it would be very helpful if each side would commit in principle to conduct such a probe after the virus has been brought under control and eliminated. This is unlikely to be our last pandemic. We all need to learn lessons for the long run and it would reduce political tensions between the two nations in the near term to recognize the eventual need for such a probe.

**2. Cooperate on vaccine creation.** The United States and China should work on vaccines together and should pledge to share any breakthroughs with each other and the rest of the world promptly when they are made. This can be done on a government-to-government basis or in cooperation between universities and companies. One sign of hope on that score is that Chinese and U.S. scientists, including at Columbia University, have managed to perform collaborative research on the virus despite the conflicts between the two governments.<sup>12</sup>

**3. Prepare in advance for massive vaccine production and global vaccine distribution.** Vaccinating everyone everywhere will be a massive logistical undertaking that will require great forethought before a vaccine is invented. Delays in distribution of even several months could easily cost astounding numbers of lives. If political fighting over who

gets vaccines and when were to occur, it would be devastatingly destructive to international cooperation on any matter for years to come.

**4. Assist the poorest nations in battling the virus.** Cooperate to remediate suffering in the developing world by boosting the medical response capacity in highly vulnerable areas like sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, etc. In 2014, the United States and China cooperated effectively alongside many other countries to address the Ebola crisis in Africa. The WHO should be a major actor in this cooperation regardless of any problems related to the organization's public response in January 2020. And to the degree that the pandemic is accompanied by famines in some places, as seems likely, the United States and China should support the efforts of the World Food Programme to distribute provisions and eliminate distributional bottlenecks slowing the delivery of needed aid.

**5. Cooperate to manage debt defaults in the developing world.** The possibility of systematic debt defaults in the developing world seems quite real and this could have ripple effects in the entire global financial system. More multilateral cooperation will clearly be needed. The G-20 responded rather well to the 2008 financial crisis and should be called upon again to address this global recession. The COVID-19 crisis should also provide an opportunity for global bankers to push China to join international development financing groupings like the Paris Club, which reduce conflicts among lenders when debt crises occur around the globe. Without cooperation on debt restructuring, the international economy could be severely harmed by beggar-thy-neighbor strategies among lending institutions. In this context, the many non-transparent, bilateral infrastructure development loans made by China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative could loom particularly large.

**6. Prioritize development of strategic reserves over economic nationalism.** Nations are now more acutely aware of their dependence on foreign supplies of needed products in a world of globalization and transnational supply chains. But we should also recognize that global trade has generally been a very positive factor for the world economy and that significant reductions in global trade will likely lead to more, not less, poverty and more, not less, vulnerability to disease and hunger. Two potential solutions to protect global trade would be the diversification of global supply chains so that a single country, like China, is not so essential to supply final manufactured goods. This would mean even more complex economic interactions around the world than we have today, but it would provide a much more efficient solution than each nation trying to produce many products entirely at home to reduce vulnerability. To supplement such a globalist strategy, individual countries should be encouraged to create larger strategic reserves of needed medical and other supplies as an alternative to simply moving all production of such products back to their own countries. Economic nationalism as an alternative to strategic reserves would carry huge opportunity costs for global efficiency and wealth and could also infect international security politics in destabilizing ways. Similar approaches to stockpiling of internationally purchased products for security purposes have long been used effectively in the energy sector.

In order to pursue such a constructive agenda, all countries should call a ceasefire on blaming others over the early outbreak and global spread of the virus. To help facilitate this diplomatic ceasefire, all countries should commit to eventual international investigations into how they responded to the crisis, including mistakes and misdeeds done along the way. The WHO should be involved in such an investigation, and the United States should be actively involved with the WHO to participate and help guide its involvement. For the reasons discussed above, it appears that neither the PRC nor the United States will likely be pleased to hear the eventual results of such an inquiry. But if they fail to cooperate now and continue to fight, and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of additional deaths occur as a result, each country will suffer even greater losses to its reputation and diplomatic standing than it would by accepting in advance that it will receive some criticism. China and the United States should be behaving like confident great powers, not like insecure and tragically flawed players in an ancient Greek drama.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Emily Feng and Amy Cheng, "Critics Say China Has Suppressed and Censored Information in Coronavirus Outbreak," National Public Radio, February 8, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/08/803766743/critics-say-china-has-suppressed-and-censored-information-in-coronavirus-outbre>.
- 2 "China Coronavirus Lockdown Measures Rise Across Hubei Province," BBC News, January 23, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51217455>.
- 3 "Coronavirus Declared Global Health Emergency by WHO," BBC News, January 31, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51318246>.
- 4 Yun Sun, "COVID-19, Africans' Hardship in China, and the Future of Africa-China Relations," The Brookings Institution, April 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/04/17/covid-19-africans-hardships-in-china-and-the-future-of-africa-china-relations/>.
- 5 Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, "Chinese Diplomat Promotes Conspiracy Theory that U.S. Military Brought Coronavirus to Wuhan," CNN, March 13, 2020 <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>.
- 6 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, April 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1251186179548033025>.
- 7 Alex Isenstadt, "GOP Memo Urges Anti-China Assault Over Coronavirus," *Politico*, April 24, 2020 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/gop-memo-anti-china-coronavirus-207244>.
- 8 Warren O. Stroebel and Sabrina Siddiqui, "Biden Aims to Out-Tough Trump On China While Invoking His Obama Experience," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2020 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-aims-to-out-tough-trump-on-china-while-invoking-his-obama-experience-11588420801>.
- 9 See this Biden campaign advertisement: Joe Biden, Facebook, April 18, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/joebiden/videos/unprepared-joe-biden-for-president/153477366105420/>.
- 10 For a video of the original Democratic Party super PAC advertisement and an analysis of it, see D'Angelo Gore, "FactChecking Ad About Donating 'Our Masks and Supplies to China,'" FactCheck.org, April 23, 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/04/factchecking-ad-about-donating-our-masks-and-supplies-to-china/>.
- 11 Adela Suliman and Andy Eckardt, "Germany's Merkel Cautions This is 'Beginning' of Coronavirus Pandemic," NBC News, April 23, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/germany-s-merkel-cautions-beginning-coronavirus-pandemic-n1190241>.
- 12 See, for example, Katrina Manon and Su Yu, "U.S. and Chinese Researchers Team Up or Hunt into Covid Origins," *Financial Times*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/f08181a9-526c-4e4b-ac5f-0614bf1cffb3>.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Thomas J. Christensen** is nonresident senior fellow in the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution and professor of public and international affairs and director of the China and the World program in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. From 2006 to 2008, he served as U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, with responsibility for relations with China, Taiwan, and Mongolia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Barabara Edwards, Nancy Hall, Jonathan Kirshner, Alastair Iain Johnston, Margaret Pearson, and Jennifer Camille Smith for helpful comments on earlier drafts. Ted Reinert edited this paper, and Rachel Slattery provided layout.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.