

COVID-19: China's Chernobyl, China's Berlin Airlift, or Neither?

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Contemporary history shows a pattern of crises such as wars or pandemics leading to a shift in global power politics and realignment of power centers. Crises result in opportunities for countries to climb or fall on the global power scale.

The current Coronavirus 19 (COVID-19) pandemic has presented just such an opportunity for China. As the source of the outbreak, China initially faced a situation similar to the Soviet Union's 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion: an authoritarian state's lies, cover-ups, and utter lack of openness and transparency leading to unnecessary loss of life domestically and internationally. Chernobyl—by some accounts—was the first step of the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ Could the COVID-19 pandemic be China's Chernobyl?²

Yet, this is not the only potential outcome. China's comprehensive lockdown of Wuhan, in Hubei Province, (the source of the outbreak) allowed Beijing to control the scope and scale of the outbreak to the point where China currently has a lower infection rate and lower lethality rate than does the United States (US). China followed up its lockdown by delivering vast numbers of personal protective equipment (PPE) to suffering countries. China could frame itself as performing a Berlin Airlift of sorts; using its knowledge, abilities, and largesse to provide much-needed relief to grateful populations. The Berlin Airlift provided immeasurable global esteem to the United States, and Washington's soft power has been high ever since.³ Is this China's path?

Reality is rarely that binary or simple, however. China committed sins of censorship and control that turned a problem into a crisis. Yet, there is no denying that Beijing's draconian controls afforded China the luxury of providing aid to suffering countries due to its success in domestic contagion control. However, for China to turn the COVID-19 pandemic into a Berlin Airlift victory, Beijing needed to deliver reliable products with a positive and humble narrative, and reports are that China generally failed in that regard. It often delivered faulty or defective PPE wrapped in an arrogant and defensive tone, which defeats the purpose of aid.

More broadly, this crisis could reveal that China's rise is independent of the United States and whether Washington's power is declining; China cannot effortlessly fill a

void that the United States might leave. If the Washington suffers a loss to its soft power due to mishandling of this crisis, that does not directly help China. The end result could be a world looking at a post-World War I (WWI) void with no obvious benign hegemon leading a liberal international order, unlike the post-World War II (WWII) era. As such, perhaps no post-WWII/Cold War metaphor is appropriate for this crisis.

Background

An excellent chronology of China's actions at the beginning of the outbreak was published by the Congressional Research Service.⁴ This is a truncated account:

Late December 2019: Hospitals in Wuhan, China, identify cases of pneumonia of unknown origin.

30 December 2019: The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issues "urgent notices" to city hospitals about cases of atypical pneumonia linked to the city's Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market. The notices leak online. Wuhan medical workers, including ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, trade messages about the cases in online chat groups.

31 December 2019: A machine translation of a Chinese media report about the outbreak is posted to ProMED, a US-based open-access platform for early intelligence about infectious disease outbreaks. World Health Organization (WHO) headquarters in Geneva sees the ProMED post and instructs the WHO China Country Office to request verification of the outbreak from China's government. The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issues its first public statement on the outbreak, saying it has identified 27 cases.

1 January 2020: Wuhan authorities shut down the city's Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

3 January 2020: Local Wuhan police reprimand Dr. Li Wenliang for spreading allegedly false statements about the outbreak online. Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) Director-General Gao Fu tells US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC) Director Robert Redfield about a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan.

4 January 2020: In its first public statement on the outbreak, the WHO tweets, "China has reported to WHO a cluster of pneumonia cases—with no deaths—in Wuhan, Hubei Province."

6 January 2020: US Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Alex M. Azar II and US CDC Director Redfield offer to send US CDC experts to China. US CDC issues a "Watch Level 1 Alert" for Wuhan and advises travelers to Wuhan to avoid animals, animal markets, and animal products.

11 January 2020: A team led by Prof. Yong-zhen Zhang of Fudan University in Shanghai posts the genetic sequence of the virus on an open-access platform, sharing it with the world. China CDC and two other Chinese teams subsequently also post genetic sequences of the virus on an open-access platform. China shares the virus' genomic sequence with WHO.

12 January 2020: Dr. Li Wenliang is hospitalized with symptoms of the novel coronavirus.

14 January 2020: In an internal meeting, China's national health officials warn that China faces a "severe and complex public health event," adding that "the risk of transmission and spread is high" but not disclosing this publicly.

20 January 2020: China officially confirms person-to-person transmission of the novel coronavirus and infections among medical workers.

21 January 2020: The US CDC announces the first novel coronavirus case in the United States, in a patient who returned from Wuhan on 15 January 2020.

23 January 2020: Wuhan suspends public transportation and bars residents from leaving the city.

28 January 2020: Chinese leader Xi Jinping and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus meet in Beijing.

30 January 2020: WHO Director-General Tedros declares the epidemic a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

Chernobyl?

The Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster of 26 April 1986 was marked by several distinguishing characteristics: a flaw in the design of a system that can go undetected but is not unforeseeable; a heroic localized response to a disaster that is much worse than initially realized; a cover-up via draconian information control; a reassigning of blame and ducking of responsibility; impressive efforts to contain the disaster and mitigate its effects; and revelations about the flaws of governance and disaster preparedness.⁵ China's COVID-19 outbreak possesses each of these qualities but to varying degrees.

The timeline in the prior section tracks crucial events in the first two months of the outbreak, but the story does not end there. Dr. Li Wenliang—the hero who first brought attention to the virus and was silenced for it—died of COVID-19 on 7 February 2020. This sparked a massive outpouring of grief and rage on Chinese social media. The proliferation of online tributes after his death overwhelmed censors. The public expression of anxiety and dissatisfaction with government responses was a nightmare for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, yet Beijing denied there was a problem. The responses of the Hubei authorities to the first cases of COVID-19 was not an anomaly but instead part and parcel of the

Chinese system of regionally decentralized authoritarianism. The provincial authorities reacted with hesitation—and even denial—because they did not want to create an impression of lack of control or of poor management. They relayed as little information as possible to the center about the mysterious infections, even as the seeds of the pandemic were sown. Meanwhile, the Hubei local government took pains to silence any whistleblowers. “Internet police” were mobilized to threaten people criticizing the CCP and its handling of the virus online. Essentially, local Chinese officials tried their best to cover up the coronavirus outbreak from the outset of the epidemic, which delayed effective responses and allowed the virus to spread unabated.



(US Department of State illustration, D. Thompson)

Figure 1. Chinese censorship. “China has one of the most social media-savvy and active online populations in the world, with more than 800 million internet users. However, because of the Chinese government’s oppressive internet censorship, everything Chinese citizens see is restricted and controlled.” (Leigh Hartman, “In China, You Can’t Say These Words,” *ShareAmerica*, 3 June 2020, <https://share.america.gov/>.)

Beijing’s statements in late December and early January denied that human-to-human transmission was possible. Crucially, Beijing waited six days—14 to 20 January—to issue a public warning that China was facing a pandemic from a new coronavirus.⁶ Beijing even allowed the residents of Wuhan to circulate inside the country and abroad to celebrate the Chinese New Year. In February, the primary newspapers and the most widespread Western media were talking about a Chinese Chernobyl, as if the coronavirus was the death knell of the Chinese system, prompting China watchers to speculate on President Xi’s political vulnerability.⁷

Only when the problem was too obvious to conceal was the truth allowed to climb uphill. At that point, China's central government responded with an efficiency and professionalism that made up for some lost ground. China's centralized power structure, resource management, and surveillance state capabilities proved to be very useful in containing the domestic spread of COVID-19. China was able to direct resources in an authoritarian manner and shift assets—including human assets—to where they were most needed. The construction of ~1,000 bed hospitals in Wuhan in a week was an impressive example of this. The end result was containment: Shanghai, a city of 24 million persons, experienced coronavirus deaths only in double-digits, just three months after its quarantine was imposed. China essentially approached the COVID-19 outbreak as a domestic security threat, not just as a public health emergency. It mobilized every unit of state and societal control. Once they received Beijing's signal to clamp down at all cost, local governments organized quickly. Citizens were told to monitor their neighbors. Chinese tech companies supplied the police with data from health apps that determined whether citizens should be quarantined. Like the Chernobyl explosion, this was an unmitigated disaster that actually could have been much worse for all involved.

However, there is deep suspicion that Chinese authorities throughout the provinces were systematically underreporting coronavirus cases. For example, it is now widely known that the Chinese government did not include asymptomatic cases in its statistics before 31 March 2020. On 17 April, China revised its domestic fatality rate upward by 30 percent; thus, tacitly admitting errors, if not outright deception. Perhaps most damning to China is the US intelligence analysis that alleges China covered up the extent of the COVID-19 outbreak—and how contagious the disease is—to stock up on medical supplies needed to respond to it.⁸

China's global standing suffered a major blow as a result. Beijing's relations with Sweden and the Czech Republic were already deteriorating, but this exacerbated it.⁹ Even Russia and Iran have criticized China's hiding the extent of the outbreak.¹⁰ This is reflected in certain polls: a large majority of Germans thinks China bears some blame for the COVID-19 pandemic and believes Beijing has been dishonest about its infection numbers. The online poll of 1,500 adults, carried out by London-based Redfield & Wilton Strategies on 7 May, showed that 77 percent of respondents said China was at least somewhat to blame for the virus. Some 34 percent of respondents said China was significantly to blame.¹¹ Meanwhile, 74 percent said China has dishonestly reported its infection figures. More generally, the pandemic has fed arguments that countries should not rely on China for crucial goods and services, from ventilators to 5G networks. However,

China can potentially improve its image if and when it allows the WHO to conduct a review of the COVID-19 outbreak.¹²

Like the Chernobyl disaster, the political effects of COVID-19—both domestic and international—will take more than a year to fully realize. Still, there is no denying that China's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak makes referring to it as “China's Chernobyl” not unfair.¹³ However, that does not mean that is all it is.

Berlin Airlift?

The Berlin blockade and airlift was an international crisis that arose from an attempt by the Soviet Union in 1948 to force the Western Allied powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) to abandon their post-WWII jurisdictions in West Berlin. The Soviet Union sealed all road, rail, and river links into Berlin. Millions of German citizens under the protection of American, British, and French forces faced starvation. The Western Allies organized the Berlin Airlift (26 June 1948–30 September 1949) to fly supplies to the people of West Berlin. At its height, there was an American or British airplane landing or taking off every 90 seconds, 24 hours a day. This act of Allied heroism and coordinated resolve yielded immeasurable amounts of credibility and “soft power” for the West, particularly for the United States. China hopes that providing medical PPE and financial aid (combined with proper messaging) to needy countries will engender similar soft power and goodwill to that the United States enjoyed from the Berlin Airlift. Has it been successful thus far?

After the outbreak was becoming a full-fledged pandemic, President Xi made a flurry of phone calls with world leaders to promise aid. By 31 March, China had provided 120 countries and four international organizations with surgical masks, N95 respirators, protective suits, nucleic acid test kits, ventilators, and other assistance, including loans. More than 170 Chinese medical experts were dispatched to Europe, Southeast Asia, and Africa. At the subnational level, Chinese local governments sent medical items to their sister cities in more than 50 countries, and Chinese provinces dispatched medical teams to neighbors in need, including Guangxi to Cambodia, Yunnan to Laos and Myanmar, Xinjiang to Pakistan, and Fujian to the Philippines. China used video conferencing to share experiences and provide expertise on testing methods, contact tracing, prevention and control measures, clinical treatment, and asymptomatic cases in partnership with the ASEAN Secretariat, the Arab League, and individual countries including India, Malaysia, and Russia. Even the Chinese private sector such as the Jack Ma Foundation was part of this aid effort.¹⁴ Overall, China delivered 30 tons of equipment to Italy and 500,000 surgical masks to Spain, two EU countries that were hardest

hit by COVID-19.¹⁵ The aid to Italy was especially notable because Rome had expressed feelings of abandonment from its EU neighbors in its time of need.¹⁶

To capitalize on this aid, Beijing crafted a narrative through official and unofficial channels so that China received the soft power it felt was due.¹⁷ President Xi engaged with foreign leaders on a daily basis to express support as outbreaks appeared there.¹⁸ Among the recipients were the leaders of Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, and the Philippines. Chinese state media outlets flooded the Internet with photos of Chinese PPE arriving in more than 100 countries.¹⁹ Ambassadors inundated international newspapers with op-eds hailing the sacrifices Beijing made to buy time for other countries, while ignoring the source of the pandemic.

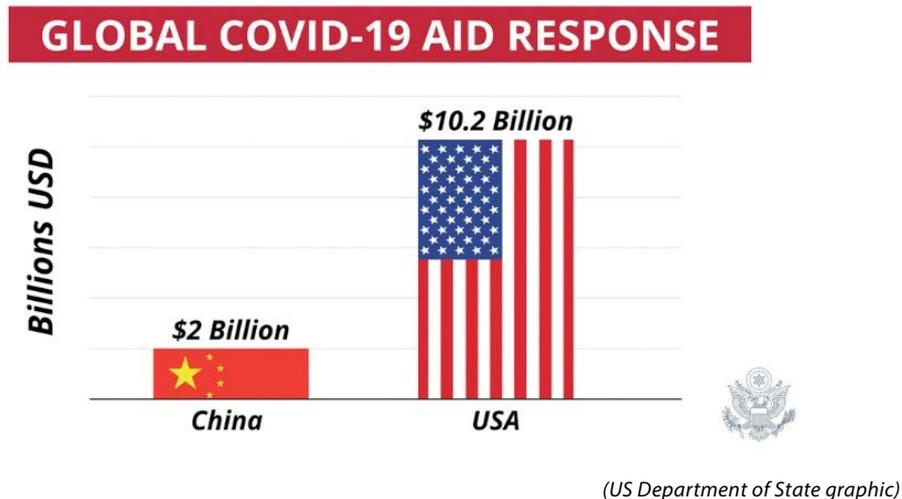


Figure 2. Comparison of US and China COVID-19 aid response. Despite providing far more aid to countries struggling with the virus, America has lagged behind China in driving the narrative of that fact, with Beijing aggressively promoting China's largesse.

China's medical aid has borne soft-power fruit, at least in Italy. The SWG research institute conducted a poll on 7 April that asked, "Who should Italy look more to develop their international alliances outside of Europe?"; 36 percent of Italians indicated China, while only 30 percent chose the United States.²⁰ Italian international relations scholar Francesca Ghiretti captured this sentiment:

In these uncertain times, prompt and decisive responses are needed and expected. One can argue on the circumstances, the hidden motivations and the numbers, but nobody can deny that China has provided prompt and direct support to Italy in its time of need. In return, Italians' have been grateful, perhaps not as much as some Chinese media would like their home audience to believe, but China's effort has indeed been appreciated. Following Italy's request, China sent medical

supplies and staff, receiving much media and political attention in Italy. Two elements have contributed to the success of the Chinese aid campaign: the lack of alternative support in the early stages of the crisis and a savvy media promotion strategy.²¹

The Chinese embassy in Rome embraced the hashtag #ForzaCinaeItalia (“Let’s Go, China and Italy”), though Italian scholars discovered it was heavily amplified by a network of bots on Twitter.²² Specifically, nearly half the tweets featuring the hashtag “#ForzaCinaeItalia” and more than one-third of tweets featuring the hashtag “#GrazieCina” (“Thank You, China”) sprang from bots that averaged more than 50 tweets per day.²³

The leaders of Hungary, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Serbia also sang China’s praises: “We should thank them with all our hearts, they have proven to be great friends of Serbia and Serbs,” declared Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic on 21 March, after China delivered medical equipment to the country. “I am waiting for Xi to visit Serbia and hundreds of thousands of people will welcome him.”²⁴

However, some countries have brought attention to China’s substandard PPE and overbearing propaganda. For instance, some of the tests Beijing gave to European countries did not work.²⁵ In Spain, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands, governments announced recalls of Chinese masks and testing kits after large batches were found to be defective, undercutting what China sought to portray as goodwill gestures.²⁶ Spanish scientists have found that testing devices from the Chinese firm Shenzhen Bioeasy Biotechnology correctly identify a positive case only 30 percent of the time.²⁷ That has not cultivated a Berlin Airlift-type soft power for China in Europe. In the United Kingdom, a parliamentary committee on foreign relations urged the government to fight a surge in Chinese disinformation. Officials in Germany exposed subtle outreach attempts from Chinese officials hoping to persuade them to publicly praise China.²⁸ Delivering substandard aid defeats the purpose of providing aid in the first place. Furthermore, there are arguments that China should be exporting even more PPE, considering its production levels.²⁹

Despite these blowbacks, Beijing is still striving to maintain a narrative that is well-captured by former Singapore diplomat Kishore Mahbubani:

After its initial missteps in Wuhan (which were clearly disastrous), China firmly deployed good science and robust public policy measures to break the back of the problem. It responsibly released the genetic data as soon as Chinese scientists sequenced the genome of the virus on January 12th. A half century ago, had a similar global pandemic broken out, the West would have handled it well and the developing countries of East Asia would have suffered. Today the quality of governance in East Asia sets the global standard . . . the post-covid-19 world will see

China accelerate both for the public's benefit—and the balance of strong markets and good governance will be an appealing model for other countries. . . . The world after the crisis may see a hobbled West and a bolder China. We can expect that China will use its power.”³⁰

Furthermore, by one metric at least, the Berlin Airlift parallel is applicable: when one looks at it in terms of domestic consumption. The Berlin Airlift generated pride among the US population, and China's foreign medical donations have generated the same type of domestic pride, regardless of any negative commentary by the recipient countries.³¹

Neither

By many metrics COVID-19 has proved to be China's Chernobyl. It was a preventable disaster that was made worse by the information control of an authoritarian government that refused to seem ill-prepared or in over its head. Yet, like Chernobyl, it took quickly unified efforts to contain the damage of the disaster. Chernobyl was both a disaster and a triumph. Will the COVID-19 pandemic bring down the CCP? Though the Party—notably Xi—suffered a major loss of face and China's economy is severely wounded, it is premature to declare that it is a mortal wound to the CCP. On the contrary, Xi seems to be weathering the storm thus far.

By fewer metrics COVID-19 is China's Berlin Airlift. Like the United States in 1948–49, China provided much-needed supplies to a desperate population, which yielded no small amount of goodwill. It could have yielded more had Beijing played its cards right. However, its substandard PPE made China look second-rate at the least and deceptive at the most. The heavy-handed propaganda—coined as “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy”³²—and demands for praise undermined the charitable nature to the donations. If allegations that China is using cyberespionage to pilfer vaccine research are true, then China's standing will take a large hit.³³ China had the opportunity to rise but has fumbled its chances. China's medical aid was welcomed with open arms, but numerous shipments, including those to Spain, Turkey, and the Czech Republic, were filled with thousands of faulty and unusable devices. The accompanying propaganda has done little to erase the memory of Beijing's Chernobyl-like cover-ups that helped enable the global pandemic in the first place. Tellingly, an alleged internal report by the Ministry of State Security's China Institute of Contemporary International Relations reveals a fear of a world turning against China in the wake of COVID-19.³⁴ If China's Berlin Airlift-type aid was successful, Beijing would not allegedly fear a global backlash to it. China could still make a net improvement in its

standing in the Middle East and Africa, but much of that depends on how it handles its One-Belt-One-Road loans during this economic crisis. Furthermore, should China be the first country to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and share it generously, then its Berlin Airlift could become a Noah's Ark moment.³⁵

However, one way this was successful is the domestic Chinese reaction. It is very likely that much of China's soft-power narrative efforts have been for domestic consumption as well; Beijing can distract from cover-ups and crackdowns and instead bolster the populace's sense that China is a global leader in rebuilding and aiding the world in a time of crisis—a Berlin Airlift in other words.

But perhaps it is misguided to apply post-WWII and Cold War parallels to China's COVID-19 actions. This assumes a framework that is fading and may have suffered a fatal wound with this pandemic. Perhaps neither parallel is applicable, because the world is staring at a post-WWI setting, more than a post-WWII setting.

The sobering reality is that a post-COVID order is more likely to resemble the post-WWI world than the post-WWII world. With the right leadership, international institutions and norms could be renewed with a spirit of unity, as was seen in the 1940s. Could international cooperation over nontraditional security threats flower? This seems unlikely. The United States' role as a benign hegemon with shaping power is fading. For example, in 2019, about twice as many Germans prioritized their country's relationship with the United States over China (50 percent vs. 24 percent). Since then, however, the share of Germans who value a close relationship with the United States has fallen 13 percentage points, while the share who prioritize a close relationship with China has increased by 12 points.³⁶ However, China is not filling that role; so, neither a new Chinese benign hegemon nor a renewed US benign hegemon will emerge victorious, barring one being the first to develop and share a COVID-19 vaccine. Rather, both powers will be weakened. In the words of Professor Ashley Tellis: "The absence of the United States in leading the international response to the pandemic has strengthened the perception, now commonplace even among its own allies and partners, that Washington can no longer be relied on to uphold the international order that it once created."³⁷ Consequently, the global environment is not conducive for shaping. The distribution of power is more diffuse; resembling the 1920s more than the 1940s. Agendas among global powers are conflicting. As after WWI, leaders are more concerned with assigning blame than finding common cause and solving problems—or at least creating and/or strengthening institutions that can solve problems. Global inequality is increasing, as is global unilateralism. The drive to constrict globalization is accelerating. Consensus is fading fast, as is cooperation;³⁸ it would be nearly impossible to craft a post-COVID19 version of

the Atlantic Charter.³⁹ The post-WWII alliance structure is at its weakest point in its 75-year history. Emerging technologies and their unique challenges have outpaced the collective ability to contend with them. Ominously, the International Monetary Fund predicts that the economic effects of COVID-19 will force the global economy to ebb and flow for up to three years.

Another disconcerting signal that the world is headed toward a post-WWI atmosphere is the rise of populism and nationalism across the globe. In their excellent piece, Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon make the argument that,

Despite important regional, cultural, and political differences, many contemporary populists embrace multipolarity—an international system composed of multiple great powers rather than one or two superpowers. They do so as a rhetorical aspiration, a vision of a global order that privileges national sovereignty over liberal rights and values, and as a tool to increase their freedom of action by playing alternative suppliers of international and private goods against one another. . . . The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, at first glance, strengthens and fuels these dynamics. The closing of borders and the curtailment of international economic exchange increase the appeal of national fortress narratives conjured by populists about the perils of globalism. . . . this politico-economic shift is not new. During the 1930s—after the Great Depression—economic deprivation and rising unemployment rates fueled the rise of authoritarian leadership across the world. . . . Whether, in a post-pandemic scenario, a revival of political populism leads to a transition in greater government control, or change in a nation-state’s economic preferences, is yet to be seen. What is clear is that the social, political and economic landscape of the post-COVID-19 world will be very different.⁴⁰

Pre-COVID underlying pressures such as China-US tensions could exacerbate, fueled by authoritarian ambition and nationalist populism. Overall, these dynamics resemble the post-WWI world more than the post-WWII world, ultimately making post-WWII metaphors like the Chernobyl disaster and Berlin Airlift inapplicable.

Summary

COVID-19 has presented the global community with a challenge to livelihood, security, and stability at a level not seen since WWII. The challenge was unique to China, given its role as the ultimate source of the contagion.

Was the pandemic China’s Chernobyl? By many metrics, yes it was. It was a crisis that could have been better contained had Chinese health officials and medical personnel been allowed to better disseminate their information. Yet, like Chernobyl, China performed impressive feats of control over the spread, even if it

was via draconian lockdown measures. As bad as Chernobyl was in 1986, it could have been globally catastrophic but was not, and much of the credit to that must go to the efforts of certain Soviet scientists and officials; such is the case with COVID-19 in China proper. Is COVID-19 the beginning of Xi's or the PRC's end, the way Chernobyl was the harbinger of doom for the Soviet Union? Many analysts thought so, but this seems unlikely at this point.

Has China been able to turn this into a Berlin Airlift and parlay that to a role of global provider in a time of need? Perhaps it could have at one point, but the negatives have outweighed the positives. Too many of China's PPE have been defective. Beijing's demand for a certain type of gratitude is souring the otherwise positive sentiment. Perhaps if China is the first to discover a vaccine and accompanying treatment, then it will obtain massive amounts of global esteem, but that has not happened yet.⁴¹ Countries—despite China's largesse—are not inclined to adopt a China model. China's attempts to influence the WHO and EU are done via subtle pressure, not earned soft power.

What COVID-19 is revealing is that, unlike in the post-WWII era, no country is able to provide comprehensive leadership. Since WWII, the United States has played this role, but Washington has stumbled out of the gate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States has the lowest testing rate of any Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development country, and its fumbled responses and political immaturity have only tarnished its global image as a the richest, most powerful country in the world with a cutting edge in scientific expertise. China's fall, rise, then subsequent fall on the leadership scale is not affecting the US image. Nor has Washington's amateurism in handling this crisis boosted China's quest for global elite status.

In sum it seems Beijing's response to the crisis has been neither a boon nor a bust for China. More worryingly, it seems that without global leadership to establish cooperation and consensus, the world could be looking at a post-WWI dynamic—an absence of global leadership—with uncertainty followed by tension.

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