



Challenge China and the WHO - but not while the pandemic rages

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Leave it to the administration. Even when it articulates a sensible strategy, it blows the timing. And is utterly tone-deaf, paying not the slightest attention to what anyone else believes. Or is willing to accept.

Such is the campaign against China and the World Health Organization (WHO) over their failures in dealing with COVID-19. An accounting is eventually necessary. But not now.

The administration's dual campaign is being conducted seemingly oblivious to the fact that most countries around the globe are in survival mode, seeking to turn back a pandemic ravaging their societies. So far the administration, not noted for playing well with other governments, has been rebuffed in its efforts. Which unfortunately will prejudice any attempt to revive the campaign when the crisis has passed.

The People's Republic of China cannot be faulted for initially underestimating the threat posed by the coronavirus. However, officials at various levels ignored growing evidence of mass infections, carried on business as usual as the pandemic developed, denied the existence of human transmission, punished doctors and others who reported on events, and failed to quarantine the initial hot spot once infection was widespread.

The WHO amplified these failings. The organization long ago lost its soul politically when Beijing blocked Taiwan's participation—the island state is barred from even attending the annual World Health Assembly—despite the imperative, evidenced by the COVID-19 crisis, for international cooperation on health issues. Indeed, the WHO refused to engage Taipei even though the latter had among the world's most effective responses to the pandemic and later assisted other nations in their efforts. As the coronavirus spread the WHO accepted and amplified China's deceptions, whitewashing its misbehavior and issuing erroneous guidance to other nations. The organization's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, argued that he was focused on winning Beijing's cooperation, but shielding its deceptions from scrutiny hindered an effective response by other countries.

Of course, nothing excuses the U.S., Europe, and other nations acting like they were merely spectators to a Chinese reality show. Had they begun expanding hospital capacity, producing

medical supplies, and preparing for pervasive testing, the current chaos—and panicked response—could have been avoided.

Still, accountability is necessary. But with total infections and deaths worldwide passing 2.3 million and 160,000, respectively, the current priority is halting the pandemic, rebuilding economies, and preparing treatments and vaccines. Both China and the WHO have important roles to play in assuring a successful result. Although Beijing's numbers remain suspect, it has been providing equipment and consulting on strategies. The WHO remains the international organization best positioned to aid governments in confronting a common health threat.

Yet Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blew up a virtual meeting of G-7 foreign ministers by demanding that the communique refer to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus.” They were more interested in winning Beijing's assistance than scoring cheap political points. The U.S. looked clueless, ignorant the views of its closest allies.

President Donald Trump compounded America's image problem by suspending the U.S. financial contribution to the WHO. Washington is the largest single contributor, providing about \$420 million, or 15 percent of the agency's budget, last year. His action triggered widespread criticism and no nation, even one otherwise critical of China's behavior, joined the U.S. The agency needs reform, but that is not going to occur when most of its members are confronting overflowing morgues, overburdened hospitals, and closed economies. Indeed, given the agency's political dynamic, serious reform will require a concerted effort and thoughtful campaign, which the president's arbitrary—and politically motivated—decision will not promote.

Indeed, the only way to achieve an honest accounting by both China and the WHO is to separate that objective from Washington's slide toward a cold war with Beijing. Many nations hoping to prevent similar mistakes in the future do not want to make an enemy of the PRC or subordinate their policies and reputations to any administration in Washington, least of all the current one. Indeed, the Trump administration's ostentatiously botched response to the pandemic has shredded its credibility.

Any such effort needs to clearly be directed at strengthening the international system to prepare for the next outbreak, which we know will come, but we don't know when and where. How should international organizations and cooperation be strengthened? How should national policies be improved? How can transparency within and between nations be improved? How can international access to potential pandemic zones be assured? And how to avoid a beggar-thy-neighbor response, which leaves countries battling one another over limited but critical medical supplies? None of these questions is likely to be answered, let alone satisfactorily, if asked as part of a Washington-directed campaign against the PRC.

A measure of objectivity also is necessary since China will vehemently resist any endeavor which starts with the conclusion that the PRC is to blame. Only a broader assessment, one focused on what went right and wrong in dealing with the pandemic and willing to report on failures by America and Europe as well, offers any hope of Chinese cooperation.

Similarly, other nations are more likely to participate in an international assessment of the virus than a U.S.-organized attack on Beijing. Even the Europeans have increasingly shown their aversion to being conscripted by Washington to achieve Washington's objectives.

Finally, a modicum of objectivity would be necessary for the result to have any international credibility. Criticism of China's and even the WHO's policies is widespread and unconnected to Washington's efforts. Beijing's efforts to use COVID-19 for propaganda purposes appear to have largely flopped, and not just in America. A U.S. campaign against Beijing is not likely to be much better received.

The Trump administration never seems to lose an opportunity for arrogant overreach. China's Xi Jinping government deserved criticism mishandling the coronavirus pandemic. The WHO has demonstrated its subservience to Beijing. Yet Washington's maladroit response undermines efforts to hold both accountable.

For once, the administration should consider the views of other governments. And think before shooting. Save lives and societies today. Push reforms tomorrow.

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