



Beijing's coronavirus blunder empowers anti-China hawks

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Already substantial public and media criticism of China's domestic and international behavior has become even more widespread and virulent with the onset of the coronavirus crisis. Clumsy and insensitive behavior by Xi Jinping's government exacerbated anger in the United States and provided anti-China factions an ideal opportunity to advance their agenda.

One major blunder was Beijing's lack of transparency during the early stages of the pandemic. Suspicions quickly developed in the United States that Chinese officials had withheld key information for weeks that could have enabled other countries to adopt measures impeding the spread of the deadly virus. In late March, more than a month after the crisis erupted, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo charged that China's government was still withholding important information. Assertions about PRC deception became even more credible at the beginning of April when U.S. intelligence agencies appeared to dismiss Beijing's official statistics about the extent of virus as unreliable.

Conservative politicians, such as Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), and right-wing media outlets eagerly promoted allegations about Beijing's culpability. Fox News commentators led the charge. But even more centrist publications began to feature articles accusing China's government of "deceptive practices" and placing primary blame for the pandemic on Xi's regime. Anti-China agitation on the part of right-wing activists went beyond accusations that Beijing's misconduct had cost the lives of numerous Americans and other victims throughout the world. Conservatives routinely referred to the coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese virus" in an effort to whip-up greater public resentment against Beijing. President Trump himself initially used the latter term before finally backing away from doing so.

Moderate and liberal critics rejected such labels as not only inaccurate, but xenophobic and implicitly racist, and they blasted both President Trump and his right-wing media allies for using them. Analysts taking a softer line on the broader issue of China's responsibility for the onset and spread of the coronavirus, however, were increasingly on the defensive. Conservatives gleefully noted that three consecutive national Harris polls found that more than 50 percent of Americans said they somewhat or strongly agreed with Trump using the term "Chinese virus."

In fairness, most of China's conservative adversaries did draw a distinction between blaming the Chinese people and blaming the Chinese Communist Party. Writing in *National Review*, Hoover Institution scholar Michael Auslin stated bluntly that "the CCP, which for years has claimed to be a responsible member of the global community, showed its true colors when this crisis hit. It can no longer be denied that Xi's regime is a danger to the world. Justice demands it be held morally culpable for its dangerous and callous behavior."

Opinion leaders trying to preserve a conciliatory perspective regarding China found it acutely difficult to do so when Beijing conducted a vigorous propaganda campaign to shift the blame for the global pandemic onto the United States. The Chinese government and state media began promoting the ugly assertion that Washington may have initiated the pandemic as part of a bioweapons program. Stories appeared in China's state-run media referring to the "American coronavirus" and emphasizing the participation of U.S. Army personnel at athletic games in Wuhan in October 2019, just before the first signs of the coronavirus began to appear. A furious Pompeo denounced the Chinese government for making such allegations.

An early March 2020 article published in Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, upset Americans even more. A diplomat in the PRC foreign ministry strongly hinted that his country might impose export controls to withhold antibiotics and other life-saving drugs from American consumers. Those controls, he stated, would plunge America "into the mighty sea of coronavirus." It seemed unlikely that he could have made such an inflammatory statement without the approval of senior Chinese leaders.

The implicit threat in the Xinhua article focused public and press attention in the United States on how the country was heavily dependent (by some estimates, in excess of 80 percent) on pharmaceutical ingredients from China. The heightened realization spurred a conservative media campaign to reduce such dependence on a less-than-friendly foreign power. Alarm about the vulnerability was most evident in articles by conservative and economic nationalist analysts, but it was no longer confined to those ideological factions.

Mounting public distrust of China and anger about Beijing's handling of the coronavirus issue made it increasingly difficult for media defenders of close bilateral ties with Beijing to stay the course. Citing a new Harris poll, columnist Josh Rogin concluded that "the coronavirus crisis is actually bringing Americans together on the China issue." But the nature of that growing consensus should greatly worry Beijing. "Republicans and Democrats now largely agree that the Chinese government bears responsibility for the spread of the pandemic, that it can't be trusted on this or any other issue, and that the U.S. government should maintain a tough position on China on trade and overall, especially if Beijing again falters in its commitments."

Chinese leaders have only themselves to blame for that development. The Xi government's increasingly abrasive policies—including unfair trade practices, schemes to erode Hong Kong's political autonomy, escalating attempts to bully democratic Taiwan, mistreatment of the Uighur minority, and Xi's tightening authoritarian rule inside the PRC—had already provided abundant ammunition for China's enemies in the United States. But Beijing's arrogant, duplicitous behavior in response to the coronavirus pandemic has given America's China policy hawks a gift they scarcely could have imagined.

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