

WHO and China: A Case of Geopolitical Misdirection

By [Hassanal Noor Rashid](#)

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Who is at fault?

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a real roller-coaster ride as far as geo-politics is concerned.

Through the chaos and the barrage of information and updates on the on-going pandemic, there are still those, especially among the political elite who have moved ahead of the pandemic management curve and have begun investing time and energy into calling for accountability and reparations from those they claim were the chief cause of many catastrophic global, social infrastructure failures.

As of 20th April 2020, the United States has over 764,000 cases of Covid-19 with a staggering number of lives lost at over 40,000.

The question that is on everyone's mind is how did a supposedly first world country like the United States, which has spent trillions of dollars in its overly inflated military budget, continue to send aid worth USD\$3.8 billion to Israel, and touts itself as the global superpower unrivalled by any other, do so poorly in mitigating this crisis, but has allowed it to cripple its societal and economic balance at such an unprecedented scale?

Many are familiar with the rhetoric now that the United States (US) have directly blamed the World Health Organization (WHO), especially its chief Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, of not only failing to characterize the appropriate level of severity of the virus, but also for being too China-centric, depicting both of these as failings that have led to the present level of the pandemic.

As a result, Trump has decided to cut funding for the WHO, a crude retaliation for the perceived failing of the WHO to effectively inform about the severity of the virus.

The Trump Administration has also levelled criticism towards China's reported cases of the Covid-19, accusing it of inaccuracies and false reporting, which is what was claimed to have misled many on the severity of the virus.

The varying and predictable responses were given, and blame was laid first and foremost at the WHO and China's feet.

But is this truly a fair assessment?

Authority, responsibility and reality

It has to be acknowledged that during the initial phase of the virus pandemic, there was lacking a sense of urgency when it came to understanding the severity of the virus. The

hardest affected country then was China, beginning in January, with over 80,000 cases.

The WHO, in the early stages of the pandemic, did mention that there was no evidence of human to human transmissions, that there was no need to impose any travel restrictions or bans to affected countries, and it did mention, too, that there was no need to wear face-masks.

Obviously, these previous statements did inform in some way on how seriously people took the disease, and perhaps contributed to the perception and misinformation that the virus was no worse than the flu.

So, is the WHO at fault for not considering the issue as severe from the very beginning?

Partly.

As an authoritative and trusted world body, its advice on matters pertaining to public health is crucial for policymakers and world leaders to ensure appropriate action and decision-making.

But with China reporting a downward trend of infections and local Covid-19 cases by February 2020, the worst was thought to be over. It was assumed that as the totalitarian measures taken by China to contain the virus had worked.

China's virus looked like it was mainly China's problem and there was no need to worry.

However, the pandemic, had begun to ramp up around the globe only in March 2020 with South East Asia and much of Europe suddenly begun turning into the new epicentres of the virus, with many falling to the virus at unexpected levels.

With this in mind, the situation that the WHO found itself in was one of shock, to the core, as within the span of a couple of months, the virus had attacked more viciously than ever and had outpaced our ability to respond.

The Chinese trust deficit: The China COVID-19 numbers

The first case of Covid-19 was reported by Beijing on December 31, 2019.

Was there an attempt at concealment, of the epidemic initially?

Strong evidence suggests that there was censoring. Those who spoke out about the virus, most notably Dr. Li Wenliang, who was the first to whistle blow on the virus was censored.

However, such secrets as the scale of the infection, cannot be kept hidden long and by January the whole world knew about the virus.

One may also recall that when the virus had hit its peak in China, on February 13th, Xi Jinping had moved to remove Communist Party officials who were in charge of the Hubei Province and Wuhan city. They were thoroughly replaced with Beijing's hardliners.

Soon after, the city was in full lockdown, and the number of cases started pouring in.

But are these numbers trustworthy? After all the Chinese government has had a long-

standing reputation for secrecy and censoring,

It is wholly understandable why people would mistrust their internal reports.

This move was made after the previous local government had reportedly attempted to subdue to the severity of the virus. Drawing from the country's previous experience with the SARS pandemic, the Chinese government most likely knew that the secretive approach it had previously taken would not work.

As Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations had noted, the truthfulness in China's reporting may be trustworthy, mainly because it is in its best interest to report the accurate numbers. After Xi Jinping's firm reshuffling of the Hubei Province leadership, the Chinese President ordered more resolute efforts to bring the outbreak under control.

A comparison of China's fatality rate by the virus with those outside of the Hubei province, and its regional neighbor, South Korea, closely matched. Data corroboration such as these confirm the validity of the numbers there. Hubei Province began reporting consistent updates of cases and fatalities as well and their numbers were higher because the number of cases overwhelmed the local healthcare system and given the early stages of the virus's discovery, many didn't know how to best treat the virus.

The biggest spike in the number of cases on February 13th, 2020, was when it had begun to use CT scans on patients' lungs rather than just traditional lab-test confirmation, allowing people to be isolated faster. China had changed the way it had detected cases several times but given that the pandemic was in its infancy, it is understandable.

Many of the numbers had been listed out in a comprehensive report on February 28th by the Chinese CDC and the WHO, which highly detailed the age brackets, methods on how the virus was contracted and the affected areas.

And finally, unlike the SARS outbreak which was only reported four months after the first case, the Covid-19 cases were reported within days of the first cluster which had appeared in Wuhan.

Between January 30th to February 16th, China had conducted 320,000 tests in the Guangdong province alone, which were all reported on a fairly regular basis.

China has been fairly transparent with its reporting and documentation, during the initial stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic and throughout, even sharing the mapped-out genetic sequence of the virus was revealed within weeks of the first case.

It is to China's credit that it had managed to contain the virus as well as it did, especially in a country of 1.39 billion people.

As Matteo Chinazzi from the Laboratory for the Modelling of Biological and Socio-Technical Systems at the Northeastern University in Boston had noted in his publication to *Science*, China's efforts had cut the number of Covid-19 cases by 77 percent.

This understanding of the differences in governance and cultural make-up between Western and East-Asian societies explains why the Chinese experience cannot be replicated

elsewhere.

Such factors which many have pointed out, is due to the highly-controlled governance of the Chinese state, its technologically sophisticated surveillance infrastructure, and highly coordinated social-mobilization; no other country can tout the same level of social mobilization as China does.

Its hard-handed approach towards maintaining social cohesion and control, may be seen by others as a human rights travesty, but it has allowed China to mitigate the spread of the virus domestically.

Decisive crisis management and the lessons learned

With all that has been mentioned so far, does it still stand to reason that the WHO and China are to be blamed for the current crisis shaking much of the world?

Did countries like the U.S and many others in Europe not have enough time to adequately prepare, and if they had more heads-up and more trustworthy numbers would the impact have been mitigated?

Despite having news of the virus in early January, there was no caution taken to successfully mitigate its spread in the West.

There have even been reports that indicated the U.S' own military intelligence agencies had tried to raise alarms about the epidemic in China as early as November 2019, well before even China had first reported it to the WHO.

Reportedly, many analysts at the National Center for Medical Intelligence, a subsidiary of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, had alerted Donald Trump's administration officials months before. When the report had finally reached the President's attention it would then purportedly undergo weeks of vetting and analysis.

So, if the U.S knew that the virus was already a severe issue then, how can it stay on its claim that the WHO and China were responsible for the severity of the US and European cases?

The WHO funding cut, and the accusations laid towards China are more indicative of an internal political dispute that is being played out in the U.S. with geopolitics involved.

With China having recently lifted the lockdowns on Wuhan, it has begun to re-ignite the engines of its economy. Depending on how the crisis plays out, some speculate that China may have the economic advantage to get ahead of the curve while its rivals are still in quarantine and lockdown, with their economies at a standstill.

To the elites of the hegemon, this is unacceptable.

This perhaps also explains why President Donald Trump had expressed intentions to re-open the U.S economy in May, a prospect which many of his health advisors have deemed as overly optimistic.

So perhaps the desperation of restarting the U.S economy, to rectify the surging joblessness crisis, the need to counter-balance China's own reboot, is the main driving factor in this

case.

It is no secret that much of the perceived success of U.S President Donald Trump, relies heavily on the alleged economic boom that he engineered bringing the US to new heights.

The Make America Great Again dream is quickly being undone by Covid-19.

If the U.S were to slump even further because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this will provide more proverbial ammunition for the President's political rivals to tear him down and threaten the future of his presidency.

To hope for a well-guided future

With all that has been mentioned, laying blame for the Covid-19 on China and the WHO doesn't hold much water, and perhaps doesn't hold much relevance in the present situation.

The crisis that has been unfolding, had begun back in January 2020, but given the spread of the virus and the impact beginning to take shape in March 2020 around the world, there was perhaps little to no time to adequately prepare.

A lot of the blaming and finger pointing are exercises in political disaster control that is frankly not needed at this time.

It only serves to confuse and endanger, which does not benefit anyone.

What is needed is strong decisive leadership and management from not just the political elites, but from local governments and community leaders. In the U.S much praise has been lauded towards Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has been regularly updating on the virus and its impact towards the citizens of New York. In Malaysia, the Health Director General Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah has received much praise in his handling and management of the pandemic with many Malaysians looking to him for guidance.

Praise needs to also be given to the local groups and front-liners whose initiatives are helping to us all ease through the crisis, as none are playing a small part in these trying times.

But if the Chinese experience is to be examined and contrasted with what is going on elsewhere, the lesson to be drawn here is that perhaps it is not just the preparation of a crisis that helps mitigate its impact, but, more importantly, the management of it which determines the outcome.

Rarely are we actually able to fully prepare adequately, but at this time, strong leadership, coordination and cooperation are the essential to succeeding against the virus.

In times of peace there are politicians, but in times of crisis, the true leaders emerge.

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Hassanal Noor Rashid is a Programme Coordinator for the International Movement for a Just World (JUST).

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