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- PANDEMIC RESPONSE
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- SECURITY STRATEGIES

New Threats

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INTERNATIONAL POLITICS – A PERIL FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY? WHAT SHAPED THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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The narrative around the COVID-19 pandemic is significantly focused on its future implications. This article, however, explores the pandemic retrospectively. It does so by giving an account of the way the COVID-19 crisis was shaped from the very beginning to understand the drivers behind some of the nowadays' national, regional, and international issues and what can be anticipated from the world's leading actors beyond the crisis. China, the European Union, and the United States, among the front-liners of the pandemic and bearers of authority in international politics, are central to this discussion¹.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic cannot be regarded as purely a health issue. Since the onset, it has affected more than 21 million people across 215 countries and territories². But the novel coronavirus also unsettled the institutionally endowed international powers: China, the European Union, and the United States. These actors could have pre-empted the amplitude of the soon-turned pandemic, at least at the regional level. However, the politicisation of the virus early on has played a major role in the development of the crisis. As it appears now, the virus and the pandemic are of a much wider meaning for these three actors. In China's case, it was defined significantly by its domestic politics, but even more so by its international agenda. For the EU, the matter was shaped by, and did shape in turn, its regional affairs

and international politics equally. In the US, the pandemic was defined substantially in terms of domestic politics, with occasional references to its foreign policy. Despite having different backgrounds, these actors' responses to the virus were detrimental for international security and not reassuring for the international environment. Their fault was possibly in harbouring internal isolationism on political grounds.

How Political Approaches Shaped a Public Health Issue

The Chinese case

China was confronted with the novel coronavirus at a time of insecurity and political ambition. President Xi Jinping's policies on power centralisation, censorship, acts of human rights infringements, and

1 The analysis examines the facts that took place prior to August 15, 2020.

2 WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard, World Health Organization, 15 August 2020 [<https://covid19.who.int/> access: 15 August 2020].

heavy investment in multilateralism and foreign partnerships have shaped a governance model far from being unanimously endorsed at home or appealing to Western powers³. This is why China continued to seek domestic order, both locally and nationally, and an uninterrupted advancement of the country in international politics, especially with the new threat in sight.

The outbreak in Wuhan, province of Hubei, reported in December 2019, was first approached with the intent to contain the existence of the problem, rather than contain the virus itself. Local authorities had suppressed the information and warnings coming from the medical community about the virus, which had “severely disturbed the social order”⁴. Even after notifying the World Health Organisation about the outbreak, the government resumed the tactic, contributing to delays/censorship in public and media communication about the threat⁵, delays in confirming human-to-human transmission⁶, ordering laboratories to destroy samples of the virus, or reprimanding doctors and whistle-blowers⁷.

The government’s coronavirus narrative, however, has pledged transparency and responsibility. The country’s official timeline of COVID-19 portrays the authorities as quick to inform the public about safety measures, release briefings, establish guidelines on early discovery, diagnosis, and quarantine, identify the virus, and regularly inform the international community, all in early January⁸.

The authorities’ belated response to the already manifesting consequences of the virus discredited the narrative. Only on 20 January did President Xi declare a national mobilisation, followed by a lockdown in Wuhan and Hubei⁹. But amid the increase in cases, public criticism, and concern about the virus, the authorities had to politically grasp the issue and show they were doing the best they could, with President Xi in command. The mobilisation was striking and aggressive: rapid testing, quickly built hospitals, cut-off transportation, a contained population under a wide-mandated lockdown, and an across-the-country surveillance¹⁰ facilitated by contact-tracing apps and facial recognition¹¹. Political-

- 3 M. Pei, *China’s Coming Upheaval*, “Foreign Affairs”, May/June 2020 [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-03/chinas-coming-upheaval access: 12 July 2020].
- 4 *Coronavirus: What Did China Do About Early Outbreak?*, “BBC”, 9 June 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52573137 access: 25 June 2020].
- 5 S. Cook, *China Media Bulletin: Coronavirus-era Repression, Propaganda, Censorship, Surveillance and More*, “China Media Bulletin” 142, Freedom House, March 2020 [https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin/2020/china-media-bulletin-coronavirus-era-repression-propaganda#A3 access: 25 June 2020].
- 6 BBC, n4.
- 7 K. Gilsinan, *How China Is Planning to Win Back the World*, “The Atlantic”, 28 May 2020 [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/china-disinformation-propaganda-united-states-xi-jinping/612085/ access: 25 June 2020].
- 8 *China Publishes Timeline on COVID-19 Information Sharing, Int’l Cooperation*, “Xinhuanet”, 6 April 2020 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/06/c_138951662.htm access: 25 June 2020].
- 9 J. P. Cabestan, *China’s Battle with Coronavirus: Possible Geopolitical Gains and Real Challenges*, “Aljazeera Centre for Studies”, 19 April 2020 [https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/china%E2%80%99s-battle-coronavirus-possible-geopolitical-gains-and-real-challenges access: 25 June 2020].
- 10 H. Brueck, A. M. Miller, S. Feder, *China Took at Least 12 Strict Measures to Control the Coronavirus*, “Business Insider”, 24 March 2020 [https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-coronavirus-quarantines-other-countries-arent-ready-2020-3 access: 25 June 2020].
- 11 Cook, n5.

oriented decisions were taken, too: new party chiefs for Wuhan, new censorship rules on the media,¹² and underreporting of cases¹³, arguably to stifle criticism and downplay the damage, coupled with domestic, pacifying propaganda, ran by state media, on “people’s war”, heroic medical workers, and Chinese people¹⁴.

China has evidently adapted its political response, more so than the public health approach, as the issue evolved. It was first a non-problematic China, turned into an efficient China, ultimately championing with a resolution of the crisis owed to its citizens. The approach was especially critical in the midst of public and party pressure, doubting Xi’s leadership, and in anticipation of a difficult economic recovery affecting the working class, therefore the public’s support for the leadership¹⁵. But the country’s authorities had also initially isolated themselves from the issue, leaving the virus among its citizens, and facilitating both the domestic and international spread of COVID-19¹⁶. By concealing the country’s experience, China also, potentially, denied a

timely and clear understanding of the virus to the rest of the world.

The World Health Organisation, responsible for the assessment of COVID-19, has played a contentious and unclear part in the crisis. It has been criticised for biased actions owed to political links with China¹⁷. Others claimed that the WHO was obstructed early on from accessing information about the virus or patient cases¹⁸. But the WHO director-general’s statements on transparency, timely cooperation, record identification, and containment measures attributed to China seem to counter the latter claim¹⁹.

The fact is, the organisation had difficulties in evaluating the situation²⁰ and was somewhat ambivalent in its assessments. First, it argued against travel restrictions in late January, as countries were issuing them against China²¹, and later claimed a quite successful containment of the virus, with very few cases around the world²². Soon, the narrative changed to calls for countries to “intensify preparedness”, criticism towards them not being prepared to adopt China’s

12 Pei, n3.

13 Cabestan, n9.

14 J. C. Weiss, *How Coronavirus Changes the Political Outlook in China and the U.S.*, “The Washington Post”, 23 April 2020 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/23/how-coronavirus-changes-political-outlook-china-us/ access: 26 June 2020]; see also Cabestan, n9.

15 Cabestan, n9.

16 J. Wu, W. Cai, D. Watkins, J. Glanz, *How the Virus Got out*, “The New York Times”, 22 March 2020 [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/22/world/coronavirus-spread.html access: 26 June 2020].

17 Cabestan, n9.

18 *How China Blocked WHO and Chinese Scientists Early in Coronavirus Outbreak*, “NBC News”, 2 June 2020 [https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/how-china-blocked-who-chinese-scientists-early-coronavirus-outbreak-n1222246 access: 26 June 2020].

19 *Coronavirus 12 February, 2020 Speaker Key*, World Health Organization, 12 February 2020 [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruste/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-full-press-conference-12feb2020-final.pdf?sfvrsn=ef1ba2bf_2 access: 26 June 2020]; *WHO, China Leaders Discuss Next Steps in Battle Against Coronavirus Outbreak*, World Health Organization, 28 January 2020 [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/28-01-2020-who-china-leaders-discuss-next-steps-in-battle-against-coronavirus-outbreak access: 26 June 2020].

20 *Timeline of WHO’s Response to COVID-19*, World Health Organization, 29 June 2020 [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline access: 7 July 2020].

21 *Coronavirus: US and Australia Close Borders to Chinese Arrivals*, “BBC”, 1 February 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51338899 access: 7 July 2020].

22 World Health Organization, n19.

measures, and concerns for the level of spread, severity, and inaction of countries, as it declared COVID-19 a pandemic, on 11 March²³. Whether or not China affected the performance of the WHO, this agency, with its international representation, was not necessarily entirely neutral²⁴ and on top of the novel coronavirus. But this was the response that largely explained the crisis to the rest of the world.



A constructed image about the crisis through domestic propaganda or state control of the media was, in turn, crucial for maintaining the party and the leadership's power

China's domestic and foreign actions, driven by President Xi, revolve around governance of power and image. The political containment, followed by prompt tackling of the virus in China, aimed at the maintaining/assertion of power, which created a certain image of China. A constructed image about the crisis through domestic propaganda or state control of the media was, in turn, crucial for maintaining the party and the leadership's power. China employs the tactic similarly at the international level, whether it is the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g. in Africa), the strategic engagement with certain European countries (e.g. 17+1

discussions), or the tight cooperation with a multilateral platform, the WHO, for its own political agenda. Within the COVID-19 pandemic, China used international aid and propaganda for self-empowerment and the disempowerment of other actors – the EU or the US – initiated right as the crisis travelled to the rest of the world.

The European Union's case

Public health is deferred to member states' competence. The European Union can, nonetheless, coordinate and foster cooperation in this area among its member countries²⁵. In cases of serious cross-border threats to health, prerogatives are enhanced and preparedness is key²⁶. Certainly, no country/region could fully anticipate the breadth of the COVID-19 crisis. But the fact remains that the EU, alongside member states, did not seem to prepare a contingency plan for COVID-19, despite the red flags: a declared public health emergency of international concern, a first case in France, and unregulated borders and travelling.

The first actions taken in January and February, critical months for the entire region, were telling: sharing of information, repatriation of EU citizens, and mobilisation for researching the virus. Those contrasted with the weight of the international action: delivery of substantial medical aid to China, mobilised alongside member states, and investment in "global preparedness, prevention and containment of the

23 World Health Organization, n20.

24 H. Brueck, *The Rest of the World Is 'Simply Not Ready' for the Coronavirus*, According to a WHO Envoy Who Just Returned from China, "Business Insider", 26 February 2020 [https://www.businessinsider.com/what-works-to-fight-covid-19-lessons-from-china-who-2020-2 access: 28 June 2020].

25 *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, Article 186, OJ C202/1, 2016 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016E168 access: 30 June 2020].

26 *Decision No 1082/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2013*, OJ L 293/1, 2013 [https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/preparedness_response/docs/decision_serious_crossborder_threats_22102013_en.pdf access: 30 June 2020].

virus²⁷, while cases spread within the EU. A mismanaged Europe that soon became the epicentre of the pandemic²⁸ created harsh rifts between the EU and member states and brought into question the functioning and priorities of the EU itself.



The European Union's focus on the international component and expectations have isolated it further from its member states, and opened it to external probing

Members were unilaterally closing their borders and adopting different containment strategies²⁹, while appropriate measures were still in the talks at the EU level³⁰. Germany and France banned exports of medical equipment,³¹ and member states individually sought manufacturers for the lacking personal protective equipment³², as the EU awaited offers under the Joint European Procurement Initiative, to come only later in March³³. Meanwhile, the EU

Commission president criticised the lack of cooperation and argued against internal borders and travel bans, with major social and economic implications³⁴. The EU, therefore, expected member states to act according to their competence, but to deal with the crisis as a whole, show solidarity, and maintain the open borders of the Single Market during a pandemic that exceeded their capacities, contradicted the logic of regional mobility, and required effective regional management to prevent its spread in the first place. The EU also chose to dedicate great and consistent effort to the international response to COVID-19, as a practicing global actor and aspiring global leader. The vast financial assistance to the Eastern Neighbourhood and other European countries, Middle East, African countries, the “Team Europe” package, involvement with G20 and the Coronavirus Global Response³⁵, although well-intentioned and necessary, might have side-tracked the EU.

The European Union's focus on the international component and expectations have isolated it further from its member states, and opened it to external probing.

27 *Timeline of EU Action, European Union*

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/timeline-eu-action_en access: 3 July 2020].

28 *Timeline: How the New Coronavirus Spread, “Aljazeera”*

[<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/timeline-china-coronavirus-spread-200126061554884.html> access: 3 July 2020].

29 *Commission Chief Warns against Unilateral Virus Travel Bans, “EURACTIV”, 13 March 2020*

[<https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/commission-chief-warns-against-unilateral-virus-travel-bans/> access: 7 July 2020].

30 *Timeline – Council Actions on COVID-19, European Council*

[<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/timeline/> access: 7 July 2020].

31 EURACTIV, n29.

32 B. Stockton, C. Schoen, L. Margottini, *Crisis at the Commission: Inside Europe's Response to the Coronavirus Outbreak, “The Bureau of Investigative Journalism”, 15 July 2020*

[<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2020-07-15/crisis-at-the-commission-inside-europes-response-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak> access: 25 July 2020].

33 *Coronavirus: Commission Bid to Ensure Supply of Personal Protective Equipment for the EU Proves Successful, European Union, 24 March 2020*

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_523 access: 7 July 2020].

34 EURACTIV, n29.

35 European Union, n27.

Italy's case is representative. Upon dealing with approximately 15,000 cases in March, asking the EU for help, and having received no assistance, the country fast became subject to China's international aid: equipment and medical personnel³⁶. It was then that the EU countries responded with solidarity: Germany took in Italian patients; Poland, Denmark, among other countries, sent medical aid³⁷.

The EU's vulnerability provided a window of opportunity for China: It reached out to other European countries, employing "mask diplomacy", playing into the region's divisions, and working in disinformation and propaganda. China's campaign was meant to discredit the performance of European democracies and illustrate a dysfunctional EU and a good-willed and helpful China able to take over when the EU could not, but was also part of a greater narrative centred on the pandemic and China's political standing. The country's international campaign sought to display the success and superiority of its political system, foster the image of an engaged global actor, and, ultimately, paint over China's mistakes in managing the virus in the first place³⁸.

The European Union's approach to engaging China has taken a turn since the

pandemic. The EU initially pledged caution and pragmatism: maintain cooperation, where possible, and awareness of reform prerequisites in the country and the questionable parity/reciprocity between the two³⁹. The assistance offered to China in February might have been an act of good will and cooperation, a response of a global actor, as well as an attempt to signal equal play level. But the recent approach towards China has been more upfront, despite the striving for a strategic dialogue.

The EU backed the calls for an investigation into the origins of the virus⁴⁰ and has questioned Beijing's disinformation campaigns⁴¹. The political implications of the pandemic had the EU reassess its own agenda, too. The Joint Roadmap for Recovery projects a more hands-on EU: still interested in building its international presence in world politics (pandemic response, multilateralism, and partnerships), but also aiming to build its own trademark, resilience, and self-sustainability, including in relation to China (the green and digital transitions). The roadmap finally recognises the system's faults during the crisis in terms of cooperation, executive management, and overlooked fields, such as health security. These are to be amended by policies, but especially by strong economic measures

36 J. Barigazzi, *Italy's Foreign Minister Hails Chinese Coronavirus Aid*, "Politico", 13 March 2020 [https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-foreign-minister-hails-chinese-coronavirus-aid/ access: 7 July 2020].

37 *Coronavirus: European Solidarity in Action*, European Union, 26 June 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response-0/coronavirus-european-solidarity-action_en access: 7 July 2020].

38 E. Brattberg, P. Le Corre, *No, COVID-19 Isn't Turning Europe Pro-China (Yet)*, "The Diplomat", 15 April 2020 [https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/no-covid-19-isnt-turning-europe-pro-china-yet/ access: 7 July 2020].

39 P. Le Corre, E. Brattberg, *How the Coronavirus Pandemic Shattered Europe's Illusions of China*, "Carnegie Endowment", 9 July 2020 [https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/09/how-coronavirus-pandemic-shattered-europe-s-illusions-of-china-pub-82265 access: 14 July 2020].

40 S. Amaro, *EU Chief Backs Investigation into Coronavirus Origin*, "CNBC", 1 May 2020 [https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/01/coronavirus-eu-chief-backs-investigation-with-china-into-origin.html access: 14 July 2020].

41 Le Corre, Brattberg, n39.

(investments in most affected countries and revitalisation of the Single Market)⁴², an approach similar to the economic-centred measures taken throughout the crisis. The road towards ensuring a budget for the fair socio-economic recovery, although successful with the 750 billion euro package, shows an ambitious, yet divided and politically unstable European bloc⁴³.

The European Union's response to COVID-19 raises questions about the contribution of the bloc to international politics and security, shaped not by global participation as such, but by merely the EU state of affairs. The recovery plan fills in certain gaps in the system and might stabilise the region, but those will likely be temporary economic remedies to political issues inside the EU (the North-South divide, political reforms in certain countries, or EU and member states' disparities). With this new agenda, which enshrines the pursuit of global actorness, the bloc risks to isolate itself from the region and its issues again and open it up to foreign incursions, already exploited by China. Irrespective of its foreign engagements, that kind of the EU will still affect international politics.

The United States' Case

"We're last, meaning we're first"⁴⁴, claimed recently the US president Donald Trump, misinterpreting the gravity of the death

toll due to COVID-19, a pandemic in which the United States has actually been faring poorly⁴⁵. The US administration has arguably employed a mistaken approach to the situation from the beginning, at the cost of the country's population and image.



The lack of a hands-on approach at the central level raises concerns of a US domestic isolationism – people and other authorities were left to deal with COVID-19 themselves

The first two months of alleged control over the virus were limited to a declared public health emergency, a suspended entry from China for non-US citizens, and a coronavirus task force setup, but this was heavily downplayed by delays in testing and praises for China and President Xi for handling the virus and for transparency⁴⁶. Such a positive account of China might have been related to the trade war détente at the beginning of 2020. However, the claim on America's preparedness did not live up to the reality beginning with March. Cases increased, states took charge and declared shutdowns, the US closed its borders with Europe, much to the European leaders' dismay,

42 *A Roadmap for Recovery*, European Council, 21 April 2020 [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43384/roadmap-for-recovery-final-21-04-2020.pdf> access: 14 July 2020]; See also, *Next Generation EU*, European Union, 27 May 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940 access: 14 July 2020].

43 J. Gill, L. Chadwick, *EU Summit: Leaders Reach Landmark €1.82 Trillion COVID-19 Recovery Deal and Budget*, "Euronews", 21 July 2020 [<https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/21/eu-summit-deadlock-see-talks-stretch-into-sunday> access: 23 July 2020].

44 C. York, *Donald Trump Makes Bizarre Claim US Is Beating Coronavirus*, "Huffington Post", 4 August 2020 [<https://bit.ly/2XELPoT> access: 7 August 2020].

45 World Health Organization, n2.

46 C. Peters, *A Detailed Timeline of All the Ways Trump of All the Ways Trump Failed to Respond to the Coronavirus*, "Vox", 8 June 2020 [<https://www.vox.com/2020/6/8/21242003/trump-failed-coronavirus-response> access: 16 July 2020].

by a unilateral decision, medical supplies were lacking, and most importantly, the US started to face an economic toll⁴⁷. This was not the great America that Trump had promised upon his election in 2016, and not an America to boast about in the upcoming election. It appears that the president would not take responsibility for an issue that he does not fully comprehend.

It is understandable why the administration tried to minimise any traces of the pandemic inside the country. With a constant high number of cases, Trump has lobbied for the reopening of the economy, including non-essential businesses, despite states' limited capacity, has claimed the right to overrule governors' safety orders⁴⁸, and has been conducting visits across the country where he was focusing on other issues⁴⁹. President Trump also politicised the novel coronavirus with a narrative about the media's fake news on the dangers of COVID-19⁵⁰ and the Democrats' use of the virus to unsettle the public, the economy, and the Trump administration⁵¹, building a narrative for re-election purposes.

The lack of a hands-on approach at the central level raises concerns of a US domestic isolationism – people and other authorities were left to deal with COVID-19 themselves. States and the federal government were competing for medical equipment due to supply shortages⁵²; state officials had disconcerted measures in place and disputes over safety rules⁵³; there were testing delays and conflicting messages from the administration. These overshadowed the fewer accomplishments: the economic relief bill and the research done on the virus and a vaccine⁵⁴.

The United States' coronavirus crisis is primarily centred on domestic issues, but the country has had notable, albeit limited, interaction with foreign actors. The ongoing frustration with China's power and economic growth potential, coupled with its role in the pandemic and less-than-expected results from the trade détente⁵⁵, has given reason for the US to both reassert its foreign agenda and deflect responsibility. Trump named the virus the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus"⁵⁶, went as far as requesting the UN Security

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 M. Reston, *Trump Turns Blind Eye to Pandemic and Focuses on Political Grievances*, "CNN", 11 July 2020 [<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/11/politics/us-election-trump-coronavirus-florida-roger-stone/index.html> access: 16 July 2020].

50 M. Coppins, *Trump's Dangerously Effective Coronavirus Propaganda*, "The Atlantic", 11 March 2020 [<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/03/trump-coronavirus-threat/607825/> access: 16 July 2020].

51 E. J. Gomez, S. Galea, *Politics May Kill Us, Not the Coronavirus*, "ThinkGlobalHealth", 22 April 2020 [<https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/politics-may-kill-us-not-coronavirus> access: 16 July 2020].

52 A. Zurcher, *Coronavirus: Things the US Has Got Wrong – and Got Right*, "BBC", 1 April 2020 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52125039> access: 16 July 2020].

53 B. Walsh, *The U.S. Divide on Coronavirus Masks*, "Axios", 24 June 2020 [<https://www.axios.com/political-divide-coronavirus-masks-1053d5bd-deb3-4cf4-9570-0ba492134f3e.html> access: 16 July 2020].

54 Zurcher, n52.

55 K. Johnson, *China Puts the Final Kibosh on Trump's Trade Deal*, "Foreign Policy", 1 June 2020 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/china-ends-trump-trade-deal-phase-one/> access: 16 July 2020].

56 *Trump Says Coronavirus Changed 'Great' Relationship with China*, "Aljazeera", 11 August 2020 [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/trump-coronavirus-changed-great-relationship-china-200811154645551.html> access: 11 August 2020].

Council to confirm this origin in a COVID-19 resolution⁵⁷, and argued that the limited death toll is owed to his early decision to ban travel from China⁵⁸.

China, in continuation of its international propagand, was fast to claim that the US had brought the virus to the country and described its COVID-19 domestic failures as “signaling the end of the American century”⁵⁹. The exchange itself is signalling a more alienated relationship between the two, amid the US distancing from WHO, an organisation it heavily funded and that is considered by the administration as having had a part in the “mismanaging and covering up” of the spread of the virus⁶⁰. The following US appeals for an immediate investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in China and the WHO’s change of action were ultimately not successful⁶¹, with the country ultimately initiating the process of withdrawal from the organisation. These dynamics might be significantly exploited in the election campaign as well as future US policies⁶².

The United States continues to fulfil at least some formal role as an international actor, through its existing agencies and partners. Early on, USAID and the State Department mobilised assistance in fighting the pandemic for countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia.

The action was headlined: The US is “leading the humanitarian and health response to COVID-19”⁶³. This narrative, however, is apparently not upheld by the administration, which downplays the amplitude of the involvement and the importance given to it.



As the pandemic continues, China, the European Union, and the United States will have to be less political and more practical. None of them can afford internal isolationism or more economic losses

The United States’ response to the novel coronavirus and its lack of leadership did not inspire the international community. Most criticism might have been put on hold, in anticipation of the future presidential election. It may be that international actors will elaborate and act on their approach towards the US once it becomes clear who will define the next four years of American politics. Alternatively, it may be that the US, which is progressively shrinking to its own institutions, is becoming of less interest for other international actors. But even a US with a diminished role in international politics will in itself affect international security.

57 R. DiResta, *For China, the ‘USA Virus’ Is a Geopolitical Ploy*, “The Atlantic”, 11 April 2020 [https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/chinas-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/609772/ access: 25 July 2020].

58 Peters, n46.

59 Gilsinan, n7.

60 Peters, n46.

61 C. Lynch, *Trump Stumbles in Effort to Confront China at WHO*, “Foreign Policy”, 19 May 2020 [https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/19/trump-stumbles-confront-china-who-coronavirus-world-health-organization/ access: 25 July 2020].

62 The US is considering to pursue further economic decoupling from China and reduce its dependence on key materials, including medical products. See Cabestan, n9.

63 *State Department: The United States Is Leading Humanitarian and Health Assistance Response to COVID-19*, USAID, March 2020 [https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/mar-2020-us-leading-humanitarian-and-health-assistance-response-covid-19 access: 25 July 2020].

The Potential (or Not) of Alleviating the Crisis

National/regional and international responses to COVID-19 have shown mostly how unreliable countries and institutions have been in managing the crisis. The received or distributed foreign aid and multilateral calls for joint action illustrate just how inward-oriented and strategic the international agendas of major actors are, just as is international isolationism. In the long term, none of these approaches benefit the international environment.

As the pandemic continues, China, the European Union, and the United States will have to be less political and more practical. None of them can afford internal isolationism or more economic losses, especially with the lack of a vaccine so far. China might continue to employ restrictive measures to combat the oncoming waves, and will likely respond quicker to new clusters. The EU promises to react faster and with greater coordination, with a short-term health care-focused plan for potential future outbreaks already elaborated by the EU Commission⁶⁴. The US population will likely have to rely on or make the most of the management at the state or local levels (a few of those leaderships have been lauded for their pertinent calls⁶⁵).

International aid will become critical, especially as countries are working on a vaccine. But the global prevention of COVID-19 may be once again politicised. President Xi pledged to invest in strengthening the global response to the pandemic and the developing countries' health care systems⁶⁶. The Chinese researchers are doing good progress in developing a vaccine, and Xi will be expected to make it a "global public good", as announced⁶⁷. The European Union seeks to provide member states with a potential vaccine, but remains committed to act globally, under the Coronavirus Global Response for universal access to vaccines, alongside with tests and treatments. It is also exploring possible alternatives, including reserving future vaccines from companies with other partners⁶⁸. Meanwhile, the US appears in a rush to provide a vaccine to its citizens. Under the Operation Warp Speed, the country is assuming financial risks to speed up the manufacturing of a successful vaccine⁶⁹, as "part of President Trump's multi-faceted strategy for safely reopening [the] country and bringing life back to normal"⁷⁰.

Efforts to ensure national/regional and international security seem to be competing and overlapping, rather than concerted,

64 *Coronavirus: Commission Strengthens Preparedness for Future Outbreaks*, European Union, 15 July 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1340 access: 25 July 2020].

65 A. Zurcher, n52.

66 C. Lynch, n61.

67 Ibid.

68 *Coronavirus: Commission Concludes Talks to Secure Future Coronavirus Vaccine for Europeans*, European Union, 31 July 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1439 access: 7 August 2020].

69 C.T. Lopez, *Operation Warp Speed Accelerates COVID-19 Vaccine Development*, US Department of Defense, 16 June 2020 [<https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2222284/operation-warp-speed-accelerates-covid-19-vaccine-development/> access: 7 August].

70 *Trump Administration's Operation Warp Speed Accelerates AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine to Be Available Beginning in October*, US Department of Health & Human Services, 21 May 2020 [<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/05/21/trump-administration-accelerates-astrazeneca-covid-19-vaccine-to-be-available-beginning-in-october.html> access: 7 August 2020].

thorough, and ultimately safe for people. The outcome of such efforts – who will live up to the global pledge, when or how the vaccination will come about – remains to be seen.

Management of Regional and International Security Crises: Patterns of Action and Interest

Management of regional or international security crises is seemingly expected of the leading, influential, or resourceful global powers: countries or institutions. Such actors as China, the EU, and the US will have to recognise that their unilateral, domestically driven or oriented actions, beyond their international agendas and extent of cooperation, will have greater implications. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unfortunate case for these actors. Their immediate and in some instances long-term responses were narrow, and depicted a wrongful assessment, politicisation, and lack of accountability for the issue.

China is decisively pursuing power and validation as a power on the international scene. The country's leadership will likely continue to explore multilateralism to secure its image, attract partners, and sort out the competition with the US. China may act globally not necessarily to serve globally, but to secure international (and domestic) acceptance of its political rationale and behaviour first. It remains to be seen how open or welcoming the world will be towards China's future endeavours.

The European Union has sought to become more relevant as an international actor, irrespective of the situation at home. There is now, however, more recognition of the importance of EU and member states' performance as a regional body. It is uncertain whether the EU will manage to balance both its domestic resurgence and global participation, or gain political traction at the domestic and international levels as much as the US or China does.

The US will, apparently, not lead any response to current and future regional or international security crises for anyone else, for the time being. It will continue to act separately and will be selective and direct in its foreign engagements, particularly those that either benefit or endanger an "America first" agenda (e.g. with China). Although the country's official interest lies in building a stronger country rather than stronger international communities, its actions attest to a failed prioritisation of "America first" and the primacy of the Trump administration's interests.

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