

CHINA, COVID-19, AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE

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What is clear is that today China is interested in the planetary pie. And again, she is arrogant toward anyone who questions how she cuts it.

Jorge Montojo

Ever since the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic China has been the target of widely distributed claims that she intentionally “misrepresented” the [severity](#) of the outbreak and failed to raise the alarm worldwide.

Indeed, reports suggested Chinese authorities minimized the dangers to the public, [suppressed those dissidents inside China who raised the alarm](#) over the rapidly spreading pandemic, and censored criticism of the Chinese government [deliberately holding back](#) critical information about the onslaught of Covid-19.

From the point of view of the Chinese leadership, however, Covid-19 became a golden opportunity to rapidly expand and push her own new global leadership narrative. Exploiting the almost complete paralysis of Western leadership, faced with the whirlwind spreading of the disease, China immediately raced to catch pole position as the benign and determined world leader at the forefront of battling the rapidly spreading pestilence. Trump’s America fumbling the ball repeatedly, the EU’s paralysis and panic reflexes, and global confusion on what exactly Covid-19 can and cannot do, offered Beijing a virtually wide-open and unfettered propaganda field.

Beijing's "corona strategy" developed along two axes. In the early phase, as the disease caught countries by complete surprise, China acted as the benign world leader ready to give emergency help to those in need. Chinese propaganda widely distributed the now familiar photos and newsreels showing Chinese cargo aircraft disgorging medical supplies at European airports (a number of European governments though [rejected the offers](#) finding the Chinese-made equipment substandard and/or defective). This "positive amplification" earned Beijing thanks and, even, admiration for its honest "emergency" response from some European nations ([Italy, in particular](#)).

As the crisis roared out of control, however, "positive amplification," while not completely abandoned, was slowly sidelined in favor of an **aggressive campaign** against the "failures" and "procrastination" aimed mainly at the Trump administration. Beijing pushed a narrative of American "unreliability" and, even, deliberate concealing of the facts in response to [similar accusations directed at Beijing by President Trump](#). The clash of the two global giants jolted world markets and gave rise to fears of a wider economic war that could easily unhinge the world economy. In the event, China backpedaled the war of words and rushed [to deny she was trying to supplant the US role in world affairs](#).

Chinese refutations aside, Beijing's global strategy since the early 2010s has focused on what has been colloquially termed "the New Silk Road" or, according to more recent Chinese nomenclature, the [Belt and Road Initiative](#). The BRI is a far reaching global strategic politico-economic plan driven, primarily, by China's burgeoning economic and trade power. [To boot:](#)

Announced in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also known as One Belt, One Road) aims to strengthen China's connectivity with the world. It combines new and old projects, covers an expansive geographic scope, and includes efforts to strengthen hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure, and cultural ties. As of October 2019, the plan touches 138 countries with a combined Gross Domestic Product of \$29 trillion and some 4.6 billion people.

While the BRI continues to make inroads across the world, response to it in Europe and America remains indecisive and fragmented. Particularly regarding the USA, the constantly gyrating Trump verbal response; growing popular dissatisfaction at state level over what conservatives often describe "tyrannical and unconstitutional lockdown measures" limiting personal freedoms; and mass economic dislocation damage America's global "brand" and undermine American global power.

The situation in “united” Europe is no better—and often it is worse. The pandemic has exposed the deep political and ideological fissures in the EU edifice and has Brussels boxed in as it tries to simultaneously follow the *uber* Berlin diktats **and** reassure restive state members, especially those in the South and/or belonging to the former Soviet bloc.

Against this backdrop, is China’s aggressive “global health-and-welfare good will” campaign a real-enough strategic threat to American (and, thus, Western) global preponderance?

It is far too early to draw definitive conclusions, as the pandemic is still in progress and may still cause [far worse damage](#) to the world system, but a number of hypotheses can be made as follows.

The emergence of “deglobalization” is currently accepted as almost unavoidable as Corona-19 hammers developed economies and national audiences demand retreat behind protectionist walls to save jobs and incomes at home. American failure to take the lead against the pandemic appears to offer the golden opportunity to China, yet Beijing faces its own domestic crisis of confidence because, suddenly, the Communist Party of China, [appears to falter](#) regarding the formula, dating back to [Deng Hsiaoping](#), of guaranteeing order and rising prosperity in exchange for curbs and restrictions on liberties by the state.

Meantime, in fraying and fracturing Europe, China is silently pushing an intense spying operation a glimpse of which was recently revealed by British intelligence warning the Belgians [the Chinese eavesdrop the European Commission building by using Malta’s nearby embassy as a “spy tower.”](#) Malta’s rapidly expanding ties with China since 1972 are no secret. The Maltese [have thrown the door to Maltese citizenship wide open for wealthy Chinese investors](#), whose “wealth,” it can be reasonably surmised, stems in large part from the Chinese state treasury. Malta is thus an illuminating example of how Chinese “Silk Road” strategy is unfolding with ever bolder targets. Similarly, China’s Road is already making decisive inroads into the Balkans (see [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#)).

But, China, despite her spectacular growth in recent decades, is now deeply vulnerable: her massive export policies are threatened by the sudden serious contraction of Western consumer markets, which shows no signs of decelerating—not to mention growing [Western wider worries about China’s rise](#).

With exports faltering, China will also soon feel the bite of states, which have benefited from generous Chinese lending policies, defaulting on their loans. And in the distance, popular dissatisfaction with Xi Jinping’s repression is growing, [which could spell trouble for the Chinese leader](#). While China won’t

be imminently sinking into her own Hong Kong-like public protest tribulations, Corona-19 has already caused expanding cracks in the seemingly miraculous “authoritarian communist capitalism” model (if such a term could be rationally accepted).

Yet, there is always the “optimistic” China-First scenario as analyzed in [Kishore Mahbubani’s recent book *Has China Won?*](#) Mahbubani highlights how “the US’s social and economic model has stopped delivering for most of its people” and how “the US has failed to develop any coherent strategy to deal with a resurgent China d how.” Putting almost all of her weight on military power and enfeebling her diplomats, the US, the author claims, has allowed American society to grow poorer and less resilient. In the end, though, even this author—obviously fond of China—does recognize the US’s many strengths including “...an individualistic culture; the best universities in the world; a magnetic attraction for the world’s best and brightest (including 351,000 Chinese students); and its strong institutions...”

So, the jury is still out—and only time will finally tell.