



PERSPECTIVES

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China and the Coronavirus Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic is providing insights into the conduct and thinking of the Chinese leadership, which has far-reaching implications both internally and externally.

The coronavirus is not the first pandemic to be exported from China to the rest of the world. In this instance, the outbreak was initially believed to have been triggered by cross-species transmission originating in a market in the city of Wuhan selling exotic wildlife for domestic consumption, though it was subsequently argued that the cross-species transmission originated at the [Wuhan Institute of Virology](#).

China's leadership, which is known for the tight control it exercises over its citizens, has enabled and even encouraged the wildlife markets in Wuhan and other cities from which coronavirus and other diseases are believed to have originated. After the SARS epidemic of 2002-04, the Chinese government shut down those markets, but reopened them within a few months in response to demand from upper class consumers who wanted the exotic and very expensive meat only available at such markets. In acceding to this wish, the government favored the privileged minority at the expense of the broader population, and not for the first time.

The spread of the coronavirus pandemic was sharply exacerbated by the regime's lack of transparency and strict constraint on free communication and discourse. The outbreak could possibly have been contained if the local party leadership in Wuhan had been alerted to alarms coming from the area, but all such voices were quickly silenced. The regime's tyrannical control over the population, the media, and all public discourse did, however, allow it to deal with the crisis efficiently and quickly once the virus began to gather momentum inside the country. As is generally the case in China, governmental instructions were fully enforced and did not meet significant resistance.

In mid-March, about three months after the outbreak began, a senior party official announced the imminent removal of traffic restrictions in low-risk areas to allow residents to return to their workplaces. The Chinese economy is trying to return to normal by assessing the degree of risk in the various provinces and allowing entry into low-risk areas.

A comparison to the SARS epidemic less than two decades ago illustrates a striking change in China's global position. SARS caused the infection of about 8,000 people worldwide and killed about a tenth of those people. The coronavirus pandemic, by contrast, has resulted in the deaths of some 290,000 people out of over 4 million confirmed cases so far. (It is difficult to ascertain an accurate number of cases and deaths as methods of measuring differ from country to country and some states are actively concealing their figures.) The dramatic extent to which the coronavirus has spread around the world is a direct result of China's closer ties with many countries. It is no wonder that another major outbreak was in Iran, which is one of China's strategic allies.

The reach of China's global soft power is also reflected in the way it uses its powerful propaganda machine, which it has established in many countries via Chinese media outlets, hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world, and penetration of local media. Beijing's strenuous public relations efforts have influenced public debate about the virus all over the world. China's object is to entrench a narrative in which it is not responsible for the plague, which, Beijing claims, could have erupted anywhere.

It is premature to assess the impact of the epidemic on China's international status and future relations with the West and other regions of the world, but the reach of Beijing's message about its efforts to send equipment and medical aid to poor countries—and the World Health Organization's touting of these benevolent Chinese acts, dismissal of Chinese responsibility for the global crisis, and highlighting of the purported failure by the US to assist the world in a similar fashion—suggests that Beijing has come a long way in its ability to project soft power.

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