

## China loses control of its story about coronavirus outbreak

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### Body

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When Roger Roth received an email from the Chinese government asking him to sponsor a bill in the Wisconsin state legislature praising China's response to the coronavirus, he thought it was a joke. "I've never heard of a foreign government approaching a state legislature calling for a law passed," Roth said last week. "I thought it couldn't be true." He then discovered that he had been sent by the Consul General of China in Chicago. "I was astonished and replied by letter, "Dear Consul General, what madness!" he continued.

From deplorable treatment of African citizens in southern China to the export of faulty medical equipment, or official support for the conspiracy theories that blame the U.S. military for the outbreak, most of the Communist party's efforts to control the international narrative have failed.

Some assume that the West's chaotic response allows China to fill the vacuum of world government. While considering questionable data, China reported fewer than 5000 deaths, compared to nearly 30,000 in the U.S. and nearly 20,000 in Italy and Spain. But Beijing's attempts to take advantage of the situation are more likely to leave it isolated on the world stage when the crisis subsides.

Wang Jisi, a legendary academic at The University of Beijing, argues that the consequences of the virus brought Chinese-American relations to their worst since formal ties were forged in the 1970s. According to him, the economic and technological decoupling between the two countries is "already irreversible".

The turn has also been surprising in the UK, where influential conservatives call on the prime minister to be more severe with China, the British press has become more critical, and intelligence agencies vowed to focus on the threat coming from Beijing. In Europe and Australia, governments blocked Chinese companies from buying low-priced assets amid economic carnage. And Tokyo has \$2.2 billion to help Japanese companies move their supply chains out of China.

Even North Korea, China's only ally with a mutual aid pact, was the first country to close its northern border at the start of the outbreak, even though Beijing opposed banning international travel. Russia followed him quickly. Even Iranian officials have criticized China for hiding the extent of the outbreak.

Some of the reproaches are clearly unfair. Western populist politicians, such as US President Donald Trump, criticize Beijing for diverting and distracting attention from its own mistakes. There is also a sloa of racism in the call to close the "disgusting wet markets." But Beijing could have gained much more sympathy if it had quickly switched to a strategy of transparency and cooperation. Instead, he detained those who criticized his cover-up and began a global propaganda campaign to question China's origin of the virus and vindicate the superiority of its authoritarian system.

Many multinationals have suffered greatly since China sealed its borders and cancelled visas last month. The expulsion of much of the American press will also harden international attitudes. The Chinese government's chief

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spokesman even threatened to withhold medical supplies and block medical exports to North America to "turn the U.S. into a hell of a coronavirus."

All of this will speed up the call for Washington and other governments to cut quickly with Chinese supply chains. This seemingly self-destructive behavior makes more sense when the domestic political context is taken into account.

This is the biggest crisis facing President XiJinping since he took office in 2012. The legitimacy of the Communist Party was damaged by the initial mistakes and then there was repression. Xi knows that the looming economic crisis will further erode his support. In the 2008 financial crisis, Beijing identified that annual growth should be at least 8% to avoid social unrest. China's economy contracted 6.8% in the first quarter of this year.

Stepping up excessive nationalism may distract the population, even if in the medium term it damages China's global reputation. That explains why diplomats risked turning someone like Senator Roth, a so far neutral bystander or even a possible ally of Chinese trade diplomacy into an enemy.

The Senator from Wisconsin is now planning a very different bill than Beijing proposed. While praising the Chinese people, "he will undress the brutal Chinese Communist party so that the world can see the damage it did to the whole world for having covered up this coronavirus," Sen Roth said. It is likely to be approved by a large majority.

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