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How China set forth the global coronavirus crisis into motion

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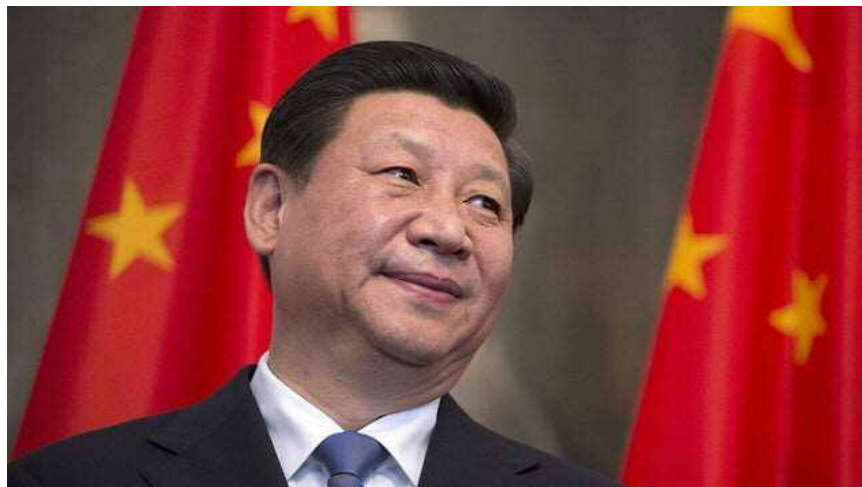
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As the shroud of crisis had started to lift at the center of the coronavirus epidemic in China, Beijing launched a powerful campaign to project an image of global leadership while the United States and countries across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East have taken on water. During a call with the Italian foreign minister last month, the Chinese foreign minister had expressed his hope that their “joint fight against the outbreak” would catalyze a “Silk Road” of health care, alluding to the hallmark economic Belt and Road Initiative of President Xi Jinping. Chinese diplomats have proselytized the deft handling of the outbreak by Beijing, as their state agencies sent hundreds of thousands of masks and thousands of testing kits and medical supplies to Iran and South Korea last month.

This blustering in Beijing is more pernicious than false advertising. After its early mismanagement of the outbreak, China is brazenly leveraging what is now a global crisis to advance its narrow aims. As Beijing jockeys for leadership in existing international institutions and tries to mobilize alternative platforms, it is systematically undercutting the ability of these important multilateral systems to provide objective, independent, and transparent assessments that the world needs in times of crisis.

Even before this crisis, China made overtures to international institutions such as the World Health Organization to shape the narrative around it. Tedros Adhanom, the director general of the World Health Organization, a few years ago touted the role of the Belt and Road Initiative in advancing access to quality health care and lavished praise on the proposal by Xi for

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a health "Silk Road" to promote the exchange of knowledge and replicate the Chinese health model in Belt and Road Initiative countries.

Since the coronavirus first appeared in Wuhan, Adhanom refrained from criticizing Beijing for fear of losing access to China and instead has gone to great lengths to accommodate Xi. Adhanom has flown to Beijing to praise the Chinese government for its handling of the coronavirus, even though Chinese officials denied the human to human transmissibility of the virus for weeks, detained doctors for "spreading rumors," and barred World Health Organization officials from entering the country.

While China has effectively silenced the World Health Organization from criticizing its efforts to contain the coronavirus, it has also floated the idea of creating a Chinese alternative to the institution. This is reminiscent of its efforts to create the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to compete with the International Monetary Fund, even as the International Monetary Fund added the renminbi to its special drawing rights basket.

Even as Beijing leverages its clout within the World Health Organization and other international institutions to peddle a narrative that it is leading the global fight against the coronavirus, the United States and its allies remain leading contributors to the World Health Organization. American contributions amount to 22 percent, while Chinese contributions amount to a mere 12 percent. China also remains a distant second to the United States as the largest contributor to the United Nations overall.

These numbers, however, belie the rhetoric that the highest levels of the American government have deployed in multilateral fora. Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly two years ago, [President Trump](#) had contended that the United States would "reject the ideology of globalism and accept the doctrine of patriotism." As Beijing tries to retool the United Nations and other international institutions to its advantage, it leaves in its wake a global system that is struggling to recalibrate absent a clear and strong commitment from Washington toward multilateralism.

The United States should take new steps to stave off Chinese efforts to undercut the integrity of critical institutions such as the World Health Organization and ensure that the Chinese style of leadership stops at its borders. The Department of State, along with the Department of Health and Human Services, must coordinate with American allies and partners to pressure the World Health Organization to provide a fair and honest accounting of how China has handled the outbreak, particularly in the hospitals not staged to serve the purposes of state propaganda.

The United States should also initiate multilateral consultations with allies and partners at the United Nations and other international institutions to promote the protection of whistleblowers working in health care and to ensure open and transparent reporting on future global health crises unfettered by state censorship, propaganda, and the spread of false information. Finally, the Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services need to work with their counterparts to disseminate accurate data about the scale of the coronavirus.

The ability of China to silence the World Health Organization during the spread of the novel coronavirus is emblematic of the fact that even in a period of crisis, the Chinese government prioritizes control over public safety. The coronavirus pandemic should be an unequivocal wakeup call for the United States and its allies to collectively oppose Chinese efforts to hollow out the existing rules order and advance alternatives that are detrimental to the free flow of information and global public health.

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