The COVID-19 crisis has sharpened the debate between China and the United States over future leadership of the global order that has been dominated by the US since the end of the Second World War. Global Asia looks at China’s vision for a world order that could displace that of the US.

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G-Zero: China and the US Fail the World over Covid-19

By Zhao Suisheng

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As a result of US incompetence and indifference under Donald Trump and China’s rigid insecurity and mistakes, the world has no global champion to lead the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Trump’s ineptitude helped put the US at the epicenter of the crisis, but China’s leaders, consumed with propaganda and short-term gain, have not been able to lead either.

In this ‘G-Zero’ world marked by a leadership vacuum, writes Zhao Suisheng, global institutions have malfunctioned and people have suffered.

FROM CHINA TO ITALY to America and beyond, the Covid-19 pandemic has cost more than lives and livelihoods. It has rendered a heavy blow to the already shaky American global leadership established after the Second World on the basis of democratic values backed up by economic and military power that could be counted on in a global crisis.

But the US was ill-prepared to fight Covid-19 and instead ended up as the global epicenter of the pandemic. As it unfolded, instead of co-ordinating with its allies and international organizations to fight the common enemy, the Trump administration focused on blaming the World Health Organization (WHO) and China, and was not even trying to co-operate with allies. Canceling American flights to European countries, the Trump administration didn’t even bother to give a heads up before making the announcement. Overwhelmed by the virus at home and failing to protect its own citizens, the US set a bad example for the world and offered no leadership abroad. Numerous observers bemoaned Washington’s performance. “This is perhaps the first global crisis in more than a century where no one is even looking for Washington to lead,” said one. The Trump administration’s response to the coronavirus marked “the death of American competence.” The world has come to the “post-American order.”

In contrast, China’s aggressive, authoritarian and multifaceted response was effective in quickly containing the outbreak. Coming out of the crisis stronger than many countries, the Chinese government took initiatives to assist other hard-hit countries by shipping medical equipment and sharing its experiences. Some commentators quickly speculated that the pandemic provided an opportunity for China to replace US global leadership. As two prominent American policy analysts suggest, the pandemic has reshaped the world order because the Trump administration failed the test of US leadership. Beijing has moved quickly to take advantage of the opening created by US mistakes, positioning itself as the global leader in pandemic response.

But is China ready to step into the breach and become a global leader? This article argues that while US failure has indeed created a global leadership vacuum, China’s rhetoric has not matched its actions in comprehensively providing the global public goods, such as co-ordinating multilateral responses to the pandemic, global economic and financial recovery and enhanced WHO independence. Sino-US infighting has paralyzed multilateral responses to the pandemic and left a void of global leadership.

CHINA’S PERFORMANCE TO CONTAIN THE CORONAVIRUS

The outbreak was initially seen as China’s “Chernobyl moment” and even “the beginning of the end” for the Chinese Communist Party. The dire geopolitical consequences at a time of growing US-China tensions would play to Washington’s considerable advantage, some thought. Dragging its feet initially, the Chinese government quickly came to understand the scale of the threat and made a difficult decision to quarantine Wuhan’s 11 million people on January 23 and then extend the quarantine to the entire country of 1.4 billion people as it mobilized vast resources to fight the coronavirus on a scale never seen before.

China’s authoritarian state has many effective instruments at its disposal to ensure that Chinese people co-operate and obey the stringent quarantine measures, which included welding doors shut to confine residents to their apartments. In addition to the immensely powerful state bureaucracy and police, the government conducted “communitiy policing” by residents monitoring each other’s activities and reporting violations. To boost detection rates, temperature checkpoints were installed outside all buildings and shops and inside public places. The government efforts were backed by an arsenal of propaganda in the media and large street banners calling on people to be hygienic and follow orders. The state also introduced Big Data and monitoring technology for effective surveillance. In a high-tech country where privacy is limited, people were assigned QR codes on their phones that tracked contacts with infected people or visits to high-risk zones. The code was an entrance requirement for many places to track and stop the spread of the virus.

These stringent measures delivered positive results. China announced zero new domestic cases on March 18 and reported zero coronavirus deaths on April 7. The 76-day lockdown on Wuhan was lifted on April 8. China reopened places to track and stop the spread of the virus.

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China’s herculean effort provided an opportunity for the country’s leadership to buttress its claim about the superiority of the China model. Launching an international campaign to turn a pandemic that started in China into a diplomatic offensive, the Communist propaganda machine was proactive in highlighting the strong capacity of the authoritarian state in contrast to the failure of democratic countries to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Beijing celebrated China’s superior model not only because it quickly contained the virus but also because many other countries, including democracies, had to follow China’s lead to close...
their national borders, impose stringent quarantines and erect barriers to the movement of people. America's borders with Canada and Mexico remained open during the Second World War but were closed for the Covid-19 pandemic.

Like China, some democratic countries used surveillance technologies to enforce quarantines on people who tested positive for Covid-19 or other potential viruses as they emerged, putting a new twist on vital questions about privacy, accountability and safety. For instance, Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service, used cellphone location data to track Israeli citizens during the outbreak. South Korea did the same.

**CHINA OVER-REACHES WITH ITS FACEMASK DIPLOMACY**

During the initial fight against Covid-19, Chinese diplomacy was geared to demonstrate China's solidarity with the world. After China seemed to contain the coronavirus, Chinese social and state media began to promote its generosity in assisting hard-hit countries and cast itself as the leader of the global pandemic response. China leveraged its dominance of the global medical supply chain by providing aid to Europe and other countries through so-called face-mask diplomacy.

But China only tactically exploited the political vacuum left by the US. According to a seasoned China watcher, "It is simply inconsistent with Beijing’s political playbook, as well as China’s perception of its still-limited national capabilities, for it to assume sweeping global leadership or drive an effective multilateral order that was not simply a direct expression of China's own national interests and hierarchical values." 3

As a result, China’s rhetoric does not match the reality on the ground. While the quantity of Chinese assistance was far from impressive, China often conflated its aid with sales. The equipment it sold was expensive and often defective. Recipients in the Netherlands, Spain, Canada and Turkey rejected Chinese-made testing kits and protective equipment as substandard. The head of Finland’s emergency supply agency was fired for spending millions of euros on defective Chinese facemasks. While China was very active publicizing its assistance to African countries, public attention in Africa was riveted on stories of widespread discrimination and even racism against African expatriates in southern China, triggering for the first time a large mobilization of African governments and diplomats protesting how their nationals are treated in China.

Ironically, China's foreign-aid propaganda catered primarily to the domestic audience to push back against criticism about aggressive containment measures and silencing of early warnings about the outbreak. This acted as a constraint on the scale of Beijing’s aid and led to a tendency to frame China’s assistance in ways that highlight the benefit to China, perpetuating the perception that China’s assistance was targeted at furthering China’s strategic objectives and narrow national interests.

China’s diplomatic blunders are a manifestation of China’s insecurity. Although the coronavirus was rapidly contained thanks to strict confinement measures, the Chinese government was under pressure for more accountability and transparency. The Communist Party leadership faced a genuine crisis of governance at home for its initial cover-up and repression. Despite censorship, Chinese social media were filled with messages criticizing the government. Several liberals, such as Tsinghua University Professor Xu Zhangrun and political activist Xu Zhiyong, publicly denounced Xi’s power concentration.

In the meantime, some foreign organizations and governments even filed lawsuits demanding Chinese compensation for damages caused by the pandemic that began in China. Although it is unlikely that overseas legal initiatives will ever succeed, they made many people in China nervous. To divert attention, the Chinese government allowed its foreign ministry spokesperson to falsely claim that the US Army developed Covid-19 and used it against China. It soon had to back away from this reprehensible claim.

These actions underscored the lack of confidence of a regime that saw itself as besieged, vulnerable and fragile. China’s propaganda offensive aimed to whitewash its initial missteps by depicting Beijing as a heroic leader in the global struggle against the pandemic.

**CHINA-US RIVALRY IN THE G-ZERO WORLD**

Although Trump failed to assert US global leadership, America is still far from a “Suez moment” — the British intervention in the 1956 Suez Canal crisis that marked the last gasp of an empire being...
replaced by the United States. The US at the time had surpassed the UK on every diplomatic, economic and military metric a generation before the Suez crisis. China's rise is impressive, but China is far from dislodging the US in terms of per capita GDP, military and technological power.1

In the good old days, America would have teamed up with its allies and global institutions to manage the pandemic. But the US under Trump's “America First” policy in effect abandoned its global leadership. While the US was short of medical supplies during the pandemic, the Trump administration increased tariffs on Chinese medical products before the pandemic. Higher prices on imported equipment resulted in lower purchases and depleted inventories, including medical supplies in advance of the crisis.

After the inaction allowed the virus to spread inside its borders, the Trump administration pivoted from denying the crisis existed to blaming national response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Its actions helped establish the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2002. The Security Council also passed Resolution 1308 on HIV/AIDS in Africa in July 2000, transforming a public health concern into a matter of international security by recognizing the importance of a co-ordinated international response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Its actions helped establish the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2002. The resolution empowered the UN Secretary General to create the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response, the first UN emergency mission directed at a public health crisis.

Confronting a public health threat that dwarfs any pandemic since the Great Influenza of 1918, however, Sino-US infighting prevented the Security Council from issuing a resolution or even a declaration. China held the rotating presidency of the Security Council in March and insisted that involvement in Covid-19 was unwarranted mission creep and an intrusion into the sovereign affairs of UN member states. China's UN envoy explained that this “public health” matter did not fall within the Security Council’s “geopolitical” ambit.

Washington also dragged its feet, demanding that any resolution specify the Chinese origins of the coronavirus. The Chinese blasted Washington for politicizing the outbreak and blaming China. To avoid embarrassment about its lack of transparency in handling the initial outbreak in Wuhan, Beijing was willing to block the Security Council resolution.

Estonia, a rotating member of the Security Council, proposed a joint statement on March 24, expressing “growing concern about the unprecedented extent of the Covid-19 outbreak in the world, which may constitute a threat to international peace and security.” China rejected the draft because it included a phrase that all countries show “full transparency” in their reporting on the outbreak. China interpreted it as a veiled attack on its handling of the coronavirus.

While the big-power rivalry paralyzed any UN response, the G7 and G20 were not able to coordinate a global economic strategy to protect critical supply chains and avoid prolonging and deepening the recession after the pandemic. Former Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt tweeted on April 1, “This is the first great crisis of the post-American world. The UN Security Council is nowhere to be seen, G20 is in the hands of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the White House has trumpeted America First and Everyone Alone for years. Only the virus is globalized.”

The WHO remains the technical focal point for pandemic response within the UN system, but it lacks the authority to cut through the political obstacles and is undermined by US withdrawal. Turning the tide on the pandemic and dealing with its economic fallout will require unprecedented international co-operation, including prompt collective decisions on matters that are fundamentally political, rather than purely technical, in nature.

The Covid-19 pandemic could be a moment for the US and China to tackle a shared challenge because, as a non-traditional security threat, it overwhelms rivalry and enmity, diluting the concept of zero-sum, military-led national security. Like an earthquake, the coronavirus is non-discriminatory and unbiased with regard to wealth and nationality, and democracy versus autocracy.

Unfortunately, the global leadership for international co-operation was absent when it was required most urgently. The mistrust and infighting between China and the US hampered global co-ordination. While the great powers regress toward protectionism, isolation, and conflict, the pandemic underscores the importance of co-operation. The US and China still have shared interests even as they compete in other spheres. Co-operation can bring win-win results while infighting and short-sighted self-promotion results in misery in the fight over Covid-19. It’s up to all the states in the world, particularly the major powers like China and the US, to work together to help fill the void in global leadership.