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# COUNTRY CASE STUDIES IN THE GLOBAL WORLD

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## A CRUDE AND SIMPLE CALCULUS: LESSONS FOR THE CCP FROM COVID-19

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*COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented disruptions in countries around the world politically, socially, and economically. But it has also shown the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that China's influence vis-à-vis those variables can reap enormous benefits in the wake of a global health crisis. Since 1979, China has embarked on a grand geopolitical campaign to influence its political standing within international organizations, mold public opinion through its propaganda efforts in foreign nations, and become an indispensable element in the global economy as a hub of manufacturing. The impact of COVID-19 on the internal politics in other countries has demonstrated that this campaign has been far more effective across a range of domains than previously thought. Ultimately, COVID-19 has provided the CCP with lessons for a crude, yet simple calculus. One where China can leverage its influence politically, socially, and economically knowing that another global health emergency can reap far more in geopolitical gains than any backlash it may receive while crippling some of its biggest rivals in the process.*

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In late 2019, hospitals in Wuhan, China, began filling up with patients carrying an unknown illness. As more people began falling ill, the Chinese government arrested healthcare professionals who spoke out about a deadly virus emerging in the city. In early January 2020, China's National Health Commission ordered biological samples taken from patients diagnosed with the new, highly contagious disease to be destroyed (Sherwell 2020). Residents who took to the Internet to report on what was happening were detained (Yuan 2020).

COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China. That fact is clear. What is in dispute is whether the disease was the result of an animal-to-human (zoonotic) transmission in one of the city's live animal markets, or a lab-leak from the nearby Wuhan Virology Institute (WVI), China's only Biosafety Level 4 research lab which has conducted gain-of-function research on genetically similar coronaviruses (Arbutnott, Calvert, and Sherwell 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) has been steadfast in its

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support for China and the latter's response to COVID-19. It has also been equally unflinching in its position that a zoonotic source is the most likely cause while dismissing the potential of a lab-leak from the WVI, despite the growing number of high-profile individuals who point to the lab as the most likely point of origin (Henderson 2021).

This dispute is central to the events that transpired over the course of 2020 due to the role of the Trump administration as a polarizing force which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been able to leverage in its favor, elucidating distorted lessons for the CCP that will likely have repercussions in the years to come. Namely, 1) China can continue with domestic market activities and virological research with little pushback from international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO); 2) broad segments of Western societies including media, big tech, and academia are willing to forgo tough scrutiny of China in favor of damaging domestic political opposition or financial gain; and 3) decades of outsourcing to China has created a state of dependency for much of the world, demonstrating that a modicum of uncertainty is all that is needed to grind the world's economy to a halt, alter foreign political landscapes, and reset diplomatic relations in China's favor.

### **Wet Markets, Bio-Labs, and Control of the WHO**

Live animal markets are a holdover from the disastrous policies that followed Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' and the collapse of the country's agricultural base, when Chinese were encouraged to hunt and sell wild animals to shore up the food crisis. Following China's shift to a market-based economy beginning in the late 1970s, the country's economic expansion saw a rise in incomes across the country. The emerging middle and upper classes that grew from these reforms also grew a taste for the exotic which the live markets continue to cater to.

But the markets are also cauldrons of zoonotic diseases waiting to happen. Crowded and lacking in basic sanitation, the waste products falling from disparate species stacked on top of one another, as well as the slaughter and preparation of animals near their cages and in front of waiting customers, provide the ideal conditions for the spread of zoonotic diseases (Woo, Lau, and Yuen 2006).

That was the case with SARS in 2002 when a similar virus jumped from animals to humans in a live animal market in the city of Guangdong. The Chinese government pledged then to shut down the markets which it did initially only to allow them to reopen not long after. The same is occurring today as these markets continue to operate throughout China (Guzman 2020). The threat of a similar outbreak in the future did not go unnoticed, however. In 2007, researchers at the University of Hong Kong concluded that the markets were a 'time bomb' that 'should not be ignored' (Cheng *et al.* 2007: 683). The Chinese government chose not to heed their advice.

The zoonotic hypothesis for COVID-19 is based largely on evidence provided by the Chinese Center for Disease Control regarding infected samples from the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan. The samples were taken from the western portion of the market where wildlife is sold, leading to speculation that an intermediate species such as pangolins, civet cats, or ferrets transmitted the disease to humans (Konda *et al.* 2020). Aside from the possible transmission at a live animal market, other similarities with viruses resembling COVID-19 include analogous animal hosts and the widespread contact between humans and wild animals involved in the wildlife trade (Holmes *et al.*

2021). Other parallels in COVID-19's genetic sequence indicate that it could use a similar receptor binding domain, namely angiotensin converting enzyme II (ACE2), as the original SARS virus to enter human cells (Mackenzie and Smith 2020: 146).

Global interconnectedness has historically been the link between the emergence of zoonotic diseases and subsequent pandemics (Widdowson 2021: 120–122). Mounting evidence suggests that more SARS-, MERS-, and COVID-like viruses currently circulate among wild animal species, many of which inhabit Southeast Asia and are smuggled illegally into China for use in traditional Chinese medicine (Wong *et al.* 2020). The enduring market for wild animals either for food or traditional medicine in China, thus, perpetuates the potential for zoonotic transmissions as a catalyst for novel viruses in the future.

But the other suspect is the WVI located 12 kilometers from the market which has, coincidentally, been studying the same family of bat-derived coronaviruses as COVID-19 obtained from an abandoned mine in southwestern China in 2013 (Arbuthnott, Calvert, and Sherwell 2020). At least one of the viruses the institute has been conducting experiments on using gain-of-function research resembles COVID (Guterl, Jamali, and O'Connor 2020).

During the SARS outbreak, the WHO officials took the Chinese government to task over its coverup of the disease, stating that had the government been forthright, many lives would have been saved. This time around, the WHO and its director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, a former Ethiopian communist rebel whose native country has received billions of dollars in aid from China, not only took CCP officials at their word when they stated that there was no human-to-human transmission, but commended China for its treatment of the disease.

This treatment has included the coverups and destruction of evidence mentioned above, but also the public humiliation of men and women for not wearing facemasks (The Telegraph 2020); forced quarantines and detaining whole communities in their homes (Burke, Ciechalski, and Liu 2020; Wu 2020); and demanding that other countries continue to allow flights from China (Sen 2020) even after the initial discovery of the virus was made (a sentiment echoed by the WHO) (Nebehay 2020), while simultaneously locking down travel between Chinese cities by its own citizens.

Wuhan alone saw more than five million residents leave the city for the upcoming Lunar New Year on domestic and international trips prior to the city's lockdown on January 23, 2020 (Kinetz 2020), a full three weeks *after* human-to-human transmission was established by Chinese doctors. Even after domestic travel to and from Wuhan from other Chinese cities was halted, the international flights out of China to Europe and North America continued. An estimated 430,000 traveled to the USA on 1,300 direct flights to 17 cities before the travel ban on foreign nationals who had been to China two weeks prior to the ban's enactment on January 31 (Eder *et al.* 2020).

The CCP's largesse to organizations such as the WHO – less than half of that contributed by the USA in 2020 – has received superficial scrutiny and will likely continue to ensure its standing as a respectable member of the organization. This is alongside the dozens of executive positions China occupies within UN agencies and international organizations ranging from the International Criminal Court, International Telecommunications Union, to the UN Human Rights Council (USCC 2020). As the US cut back its engagement with the UN during the Trump administration, it created a vacuum which China was more than happy to take advantage of to elevate

its prestige and influence on the world stage, and particularly among developing nations dependent on the UN (Kliment 2019).

Being embedded to such an extent in ostensibly neutral international bodies is particularly disconcerting regarding Taiwan. WHO officials repeatedly evaded questions over the island nation's lack of representation, Chief Deputy Aylward going so far as to terminate a Skype call with a Hong Kong reporter who dared broach the subject (Mulier 2020). This is despite the fact that it was Taiwan, not China, that first sounded the alarm of human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 which the WHO promptly ignored due to the country's non-member status (Chen 2020).

The WHO has reiterated that the virus was more than likely the result of a zoonotic source (WHO 2020). Yet, the WHO is also relying on information provided by the Chinese government which has tightly controlled even domestic research into the origin of the virus (Gan, Hu, and Watson 2020). During a recent visit in early 2021 to Wuhan by WHO investigators as part of a 'cooperative exchange' with Chinese authorities to identify the pandemic's origin, the WHO team not only concluded that a lab leak was 'extremely unlikely' (based on a three-hour tour and interviews of employees) but that it was possible that the virus arrived via frozen food (Su 2021). A claim that has been widely promoted by the Chinese government.

The team's cursory dismissal of a possible lab leak is also notwithstanding the fact that the inspection was not a forensic one; the Institute is accused of destroying laboratory evidence of the virus between December-January 2020 (Markson 2020); and the admission early on by WVI's director, Shi Zhengli, that she was initially worried that the virus escaped from the lab given its research on bat-derived coronaviruses and lack of potential bat hosts in that area of central China (Baker 2021). The WVI's director, in other words, was aware of the likelihood of a leak of a similar virus from her own facility.

One of the WHO's team members and spokesman, Peter Daszak, is also the director of EcoHealth Alliance, a non-profit that has helped secure funding for the WVI from the National Institute of Health in the USA. To say that the WHO's investigation has been lacking or there may well be a conflict of interest among its members is clear. Why the WHO has been able to get away with such a deficient investigation with all the world watching is less so.

### **A Confluence of Discontent: Media, Big Tech, and Academia**

A perhaps needed thought experiment is to imagine COVID-19 occurring during the presidency of Barak Obama and question how the mainstream media in the United States would have approached the Chinese government's handling of the virus in the weeks that followed its spread around the globe. One can only speculate. But given the unequal nature of the media's relationship with Obama compared to Donald Trump, it is unlikely that the virus would have been leveraged in such a way as to hurt the former politically as it did the latter.

As it stands, Trump's bombastic demeanor provided the ideal visage the Chinese government needed to play the US media to its advantage. As the Trump administration began calling out China for its latest pandemic, the CCP cried racism, an accusation few in Western media dared question but were more than willing to parrot (Chiu 2020). The 'Chinese virus' suddenly became a racist slur (Stone 2020) while untowardly behavior towards Chinese in the West became the center of attention, and not the CCP's central

role in covering up the disease and facilitating its transition to a worldwide pandemic. Meanwhile, the CCP declared victory over the virus, claiming it had been contained in Wuhan and that China was the safest country in the world; a claim readily repeated by Western media (Johnson 2020) despite renewed lockdowns of Chinese cities.

Far from raising condemnation, the top-down, authoritarian measures inflicted on the Chinese populace have garnered admiration from mainstream Western media and public health officials who claim, ironically, that countries like the USA could not cope with similar restrictions (Hjelmgaard, Lyman, and Shesgreen 2020). *The New York Times* published a lengthy and exuberant piece over Xi Jinping's 'people's war' against the pandemic and how the Chinese government 'won' (Myers *et al.* 2021). CNN went so far as to publish a story nearly identical to a report by Chinese state-run media lauding the People's Liberation Army Navy's efforts in controlling the virus compared to infection rates on the US Navy ships (Lendon 2020; Liu 2020).

American tech firms aided this narrative by allowing Chinese government officials to use their social media platforms, demonstrating the role of those platforms as the ultimate gatekeepers for information and perhaps the political winds that are driving them. This is despite the fact that those same platforms – YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter among others – are banned in China.

In 2019, Twitter allowed the Chinese state-run news agency *Global Times* to promote disinformation regarding China's Muslim internment camps in Xinjiang (Gallagher 2020). At the same time, Dr. Li-Meng Yan, a Chinese virologist who did some of the earliest research into the disease, accused Beijing of covering up the virus's origin which the latter strongly denies. Dr. Yan's Twitter account, with more than 60,000 followers, was subsequently suspended by the tech company (Murdock 2020).

By August of 2020, around 100 Twitter accounts from Chinese diplomats pushed out nearly 17,000 posts a month (Scott 2020), while posts from conservative US politicians were routinely fact-checked or censored for alleged breaches of policy (Hanania 2019). What followed was the peculiar scene of an American company flagging posts from a sitting US President about potential fraud with mail-in voting (Silverstein 2020), while allowing – and acknowledging – disinformation by members of the Chinese government (Rodrigo 2020) during China's most aggressive push for power since the formation of the People's Republic in 1949.

But Twitter is not alone. Facebook (Peek 2020) and YouTube (Chumley 2020) (which is owned by Google) have banned content they define as misinformation regarding COVID vaccines. The video share application, Zoom, has also come under fire, but in this instance for sharing user data with Chinese law enforcement and intelligence services. Although the US company, a Zoom executive was caught censoring discussions surrounding topics the Chinese government disapproves of as well as providing the latter with the names, phone numbers, and email addresses of individuals *outside* of China (Harwell and Nakashima 2020).

The unpopularity of Donald Trump within large sections of American media and tech industry has almost certainly played a role in the aggrandizement of China in battling the virus compared to the US, and the willingness to accept the Chinese government's highly questionable narrative regarding its economic recovery (He 2020; Shih 2020; Boot 2020). A willingness that has been eased along by the millions paid by the Chinese government to promote its state-run media in major American newspapers (Stieber 2020), and an almost bottomless capacity of Western corporations (Smith

2020) and financiers (Wei, Davis, and Lim 2020) to keep the CCP and, thus, its maneuverings abroad afloat in the hopes of turning a profit within China.

A more fundamental question could be raised regarding the philosophical shift in Western societies away from the primacy of the individual and towards the needs of the state. This transition obviously did not occur over night but rather through the decades-long march through the institutions by the CCP's ideological confederates in the West, thus, providing China with dividends that pay out at seemingly exponential rates. The lack of historical knowledge of Marxism's century of devastation around the world is, for the most part, ignored within many Western universities. In its place has emerged a distinctively toxic self-loathing for the West and its traditions. Socialism, not liberal, democratic capitalism, is increasingly embraced by young people for whom Marxism is not the failed ideology of the past but a roadmap for the future.

This became apparent during the protests that occurred throughout the US during 2020. What began as legitimate dissent over the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, took a dark turn as rioters burned and looted dozens of cities and attacked state and federal buildings. 'Systemic racism' became a household term while calls for dismantling capitalism – the social, political, and economic foundation of the USA – could be heard from elected officials (Dorman 2020). Through its nihilistic conception of a world through and only through the lens of race, class, and gender, Western academia has produced a generation of graduates who are more than willing to tear down monuments in their own countries in the name of social justice, but are willfully silent on the plight of people living under truly oppressive regimes in the non-Western world.

For their part, many US academics have gone to lengths to address the issue of the pandemic's appellation and the inequities of the West rather than the more difficult and perhaps financially injurious issues of China's rise as a global power such as the treatment of Uyghurs, Tibetans, practitioners of Falun Gong, or ahistorical claims to the entire South China Sea. The undue influence the CCP has over the US universities through China's investment of roughly 1.5 billion dollars between 2014–2020 (Pentchoukov 2020), as well as the extensive network of Confucius Institutes that have been accused of being nothing more than a vehicle for CCP propaganda (Volodzko 2015), have helped provide a sheen of legitimacy to the Chinese government and likely bought the silence of countless academics. The willingness of so many in Western academia to provide cover for China in exchange for research grants and lucrative international tuition from the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students – government and military affiliated and otherwise – will likely continue so long as Chinese funds flow into university coffers.

What this confluence of interests has meant for the CCP is a blue ocean of positive coverage and a juxtaposition with the West in general and the USA in particular which belies a deeper ideological drift within Western societies towards technocratic authoritarianism; and even more so given the blundering way in which the 2020 US election was conducted. A nation that can put a man on the moon but somehow cannot collect ballots in a timely manner much less count them correctly, provides ample fodder for those that see the 'China Model' as the future and an insurance policy against the messy and unpredictable business of the popular vote.

### **Outsourcing Uncertainty**

It would not be unreasonable to think that all of these events would, and perhaps should, have led to a massive backlash against the Chinese government, especially for its grow-

ing domination of the UN and related international organizations. Yet, even the fact that as the virus began to spread within China the CCP began hoarding medical supplies (Weissert 2020) before COVID began arriving on foreign shores, or that much of the aid from China has proven to be ineffective and unusable (Dudik and Tomek 2020), seems to make little difference in terms of diplomatic criticism. 'You throw a peach to me, and I give you a white jade for friendship,' as a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson put it (Walsh, Walden, and Zhao 2020). But for those countries that produce nothing of their own and instead have come to rely on China for their medications and supplies, there is little more they can do but grin and bear it.

By June 2020, the story had come full circle with powerful optics that are hard to match. Politicians and world leaders personally thanked the Chinese government for its help in fighting the disease (Stojanovic 2020). Chinese doctors were shown in Western and Chinese media being applauded as conquering heroes by people from Italy to Cambodia as Chinese planes arrived with medical equipment and medicine (Kuo 2020); the same equipment and medicine China monopolizes and is making a profit on selling to countries hardest hit by the pandemic.

Despite action taken on a number of fronts by the USA and other nations against the Chinese government, any resentment is bookended by the unintended consequences delivered upon the CCP's strategic rivals. The USA now has the most official cases of COVID-19 in the world with more than 700,000 deaths at the time of this writing. The previously roaring US economy ground to a halt while decades of outsourcing manufacturing to China has left it without basic supplies, providing the country with an economic gut-check the likes of which it never saw coming and has proven ill-prepared to handle.

Even with the Trump administration's tariffs on Chinese imports, in 2020 China still enjoyed a more than USD\$300 billion trade surplus with the USA. Remarkably, over the past 35 years the USA saw fit to outsource to China crucial items it would need in just such an emergency – including 97 per cent of all antibiotics (Huang 2020) – chalking up a trade deficit of more than USD\$5.5 trillion since 1985 (US Census Bureau 2021), all while the CCP demonstrated in word and deed its intention to dominate the USA and be the lone sun in the sky.

The US, UK, Japan, and others have taken action to ban Chinese tech firms such as Huawei from their new 5G networks, but the world is a big place and filled with countries that are neither rich nor democratic, and where human rights violations are a part of everyday governance. For nations that struggle to keep restless populations in check, images of a Chinese citizenry unwilling or too fearful to engage in their American counterparts' penchant for vocal discontent in the face of official decrees can offer a stark contrast as to which governmental model can keep a tighter hold on the reins of power. And when coupled with offers from China for training seminars on Internet censorship, hardware, and facial recognition technology (Radu 2018), that difference becomes even more glaring.

This disconnect between the unwavering belief in sustained economic development and the facts surrounding China's rise as a global power is predicated on the West's naïve assumption that China would become like other capitalist, democratic nations the richer it became. Instead, that assumption seems to have finally met the rough road of reality: China does not want to become like other nations; China wants other nations to become like China.

Article 1 of the Chinese Constitution explains why the notion of a potentially less authoritarian CCP was not so much a failure of imagination as an overreliance on it: ‘The socialist system is the basic system of the People’s Republic of China. The defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China. Disruption of the socialist system by any organization or individual is prohibited’ (PRC 2018). Unlike other nations, the Chinese state does not exist independently of the CCP; it exists for the perpetuation of the party itself. China was never going the route of South Korea and Taiwan of the 1980s simply because it is more like Germany and Italy of the 1930s.

Decades of enabling China’s rise and turning a blind eye to intellectual property theft, currency manipulation, and rampant abuse of human rights under the guise of globalization has allowed the CCP to achieve a level of economic success at a speed unheard of in human history. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a more open China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the developed nations of the world, and the USA in particular, ignored the working classes in their own countries in favor of outsourcing manufacturing to the seemingly bottomless well of Chinese labor. This supposedly ‘win-win’ narrative – China’s economic development in exchange for cheap consumer goods – served as the impetus for ignoring the more loathsome aspects of the CCP and cloaking China’s emergence out of the dark ages of Maoism with a veneer of respectability.

For Deng, China’s peaceful rise had a more long-range agenda, one where the driving mantra was to ‘Hide your strength, bide your time.’ China, in other words, was to build its capacity to match the developed world, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for its eventual eclipse of the USA as the world’s most powerful nation. At its core, the belief that China should be seated at the head of the table of nations is nothing new. Rather, the CCP’s neo-middle kingdom mentality is merely the latest iteration of a very old idea (Mauldin 2019), a modern example being the patron-client system the CCP has been steadily building through its Belt-Road Initiative (BRI).

From Costa Rica to Tanzania and Sudan to Sri Lanka, the CCP’s transcontinental infrastructure program has created – quite often at the expense of ordinary Chinese – a network of reciprocal relationships reminiscent of China’s imperial tributary system, entrapping poorer nations with loans for projects they could never otherwise afford. Laying the groundwork for transforming another’s prospective dam or port into a Chinese strategic asset should the recipient nation fail to honor its debt; the BRI could potentially act as a force-multiplier, providing Beijing a foothold in countries throughout the world without ever firing a shot.

The CCP still has the ironclad backing of the UN which views the BRI as ‘intrinsically linked’ to its sustainable development goals (Guterres 2019), with a new joint geospatial and big-data center in Hangzhou seen as instrumental in achieving those goals. Regardless, it seems, of the impact of the BRI on developing nations accruing vast amounts of debt or the potential for the CCP gaining control over vast swaths of data from countries around the world regarding everything from topographic information to social behavior (Rosett 2020). In the end, the West’s chronic outsourcing to China leading to the latter’s eventual dominance and rivalry in everything from antibiotics to telecommunications has led to a place where globalization and development have become ends in themselves, irrespective of the country, manner, or method that sees them through.

### **Biden's Reset**

In early February of 2021, *Time* magazine published a notable article outlining the efforts by numerous elements of American society – from labor groups, media, big tech, protestors, to corporate CEOs – to work in concert with one another to prevent Donald Trump from winning re-election (Ball 2021). Their efforts are illustrative of the deep divide that permeates countries like the USA and China. Whereas in the USA, a president can be removed by disparate actors actively engaged in lobbying state governments to change voting laws and convincing tech companies to limit the types of content posted on their websites, such actions in China would be all but inconceivable. Media companies are controlled by the Chinese government; Chinese civil society groups are tightly monitored and regularly hounded out of existence; every company with 50 or more employees must have a member of the CCP on site; and companies are required by law to hand over user data to the Chinese government upon request.

Authoritarianism married to the market system has produced incredible economic growth for China while allowing the CCP to grow in strength; the opposite of what was expected to happen with its opening up decades ago. None of this, however, foretells the future and China may in the end be the biggest loser of the pandemic. Despite Xi's call for a 'dual circulation' economy where China controls the world's supply chains while increasing domestic demand (Yao 2020), the retreat from China as a manufacturing base by foreign companies may prove to be a handicap that is not easily overcome. The country's diplomats, at the encouragement of Xi and the CCP's Propaganda Department, have also taken an increasingly belligerent tone towards other countries alienating many in the process (Erlanger 2020). And perhaps more importantly for China's domestic stability, there is also the lingering threat of food and energy shortages (Yang 2020; Wang 2020) given that the country no longer grows enough food to feed its own populace and has cut coal imports from Australia due to the latter's investigation into COVID-19's origin.

Whether the Biden administration will continue the combative stance of the Trump administration is also questionable, particularly given the events January 6th, 2021, when rioters stormed the US Capitol building over alleged fraud during the US presidential election, and the rushed second impeachment of Donald Trump. Biden has stated that under his administration China will receive 'extreme competition,' but the approach will differ from the previous administration and focus on the 'international rules of the road' (Fallert 2021). Yet, this is alongside his adoption of similar language the CCP has used for years such as his recent statement regarding the 'different norms' between China and the West (DeMarche 2021); a tone that would have been anathema to the previous administration.

Similar conciliatory acts such as the executive order banning federal agencies from referring to COVID's point of origination (either China or Wuhan), appear to have made little impression on China's leadership. During the first meeting between the US Secretary of State Tony Blinken and his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, in Alaska, it was the Chinese delegation lectured that the US side for, among other things, 'deep-seated' human rights challenges (Nikkei Asia 2021). The fact that Yang felt confident enough to say this at a time when the Chinese government hoards Uyghur Muslims into internment camps (380 in Xinjiang region alone) (Graham-Harrison 2020) and harvests organs from political dissidents (Smith 2019) makes the scene all the more remarkable. But it also represents a well-studied strategy by the CCP to exacerbate ethnic tensions

in the West to its own advantage, regardless of what occurs to ethnic and religious minorities in China.

Biden has also made some questionable steps regarding China's technological and ideological influence within the USA that run parallel to several 'red lines' issued by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a forum held in Beijing just over a month after Biden's inauguration (Yang 2021). This includes a suspension of Trump's Executive Order 13920 which forbade the use of bulk electric equipment made by foreign adversaries (namely China and Russia) in the US electrical grid (Hillyer 2021). Another is the withdrawal of a proposed rule that would require US schools and universities to disclose financial ties to Chinese state-run Confucius Institutes (Dunleavy 2021), essentially eliminating the need for educational institutions to be transparent regarding their ties to the controversial organizations.

A reversal of these policies and others will certainly be met with approval by the CCP, although as the recent meeting in Alaska shows the USA should not expect any show of thanks from China. They will also serve as fodder for Chinese propaganda to demonstrate the United States' acquiescence to China's demands and a return to the status quo of the pre-Trump years. But even more telling, any reversal will also likely elicit applause by the Trump administration's critics on both sides of the political aisle who have labeled any policy by the administration as toxic, regardless of what it may hold for the USA, much less the peoples of Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, or even Taiwan.

That many now appear to share a common vision with the CCP for centralized control of economic, social, and political matters in hindsight may not be that surprising given the potential of democracies to deliver off-script results such as a Brexit or Trump presidency. Whether one refers to this as the 'China Model' or an alternative to liberal capitalism, the indirect message is that totalitarian governments are more adroit and better able to handle crises, while democratic nations that champion the rights of the individual and bind themselves to notions of freedom of speech, movement, and association are ill-suited for the task (Yuan 2021).

### **A Crude and Simple Calculus**

With that said, many people and organizations in the developed world have been declaring that the 'underlying systems are broken,' for many years (Gmür 2012). Those same actors now see the pandemic as an opportunity for a 'Great Reset' of every industry and all aspects of every society (Haskins 2020); what the UN Secretary-General has explicitly called an 'opportunity for change' (Guterres 2020), and what others see as the potential for a new global identity (Rodrigue 2021: 164). The CCP, however, appears to see a different type of reset. One in which the West adopts much of the population control policies of China and the technocratic, anti-liberal outlook of a totalitarian state. Nations around the world have used the pandemic as an excuse to invoke unprecedented restrictions on international travel (Kakkar 2021: 148–149) and rollback civil liberties (Hodal 2020), while concerns have been raised within the highest judicial corners regarding attacks on religious freedoms (De Vogue 2020).

Perhaps in a less volatile political era, and especially a less volatile political climate in the USA, this may not have been the case. But the crude yet simple calculus that has emerged for the CCP appears to be one where everything can remain even-keel so long as a non-threatening US administration and compliant West are present. When circum-

stances change, however, and especially in such a marked way as the Trump administration's policies towards China, then all bets are off. Add to this mix a US president – or perhaps any foreign leader – that is roundly loathed by political and media elites at home and abroad, and the path towards undoing policies negatively affecting China through a potential ‘accident’ and release of another pandemic becomes all the more viable; particularly when a foreign leader's political adversaries are more than willing to give the CCP a wide berth as they play out their own political dramas back home.

If anything, the CCP's attitude seems to be ‘*Sure, we're responsible for the virus – so what of it?*’ It has learned that much of the world is too reliant on it to complain, while the potential for another pandemic can ground the major economies of the world to a halt once again. In the long run, lockdowns and forced economic recessions hurt free and open countries like the USA more than China, and the more those in the West call for greater authoritarian measures such as those used by the CCP, the greater parity the Chinese government can achieve by bringing other countries on par with it. The need for a hot war becomes even more distant when a low-level biological one – accidental or otherwise – can do twice the job at a fraction of the cost.

But what COVID-19 has also borne out is the shortsightedness of countries around the world that outsourced their basic manufacturing capacity to China in exchange for cheap consumer goods and medical supplies, the latter of which would be needed in case of a global health emergency. That all too many now realize that a regime that has a long and disreputable history of oppressing its own people may, in fact, not have the best interests of people in other countries in mind either, makes the irony of COVID-19 – from its origin, cover-ups, to transition into a global pandemic – all the more tragic. The next several years will be pivotal in determining whether the lessons outlined above will have any staying power. If enough of the international community can muster the resolve and reset their collective relationship with China, then there is the real potential for a curtailment of the CCP's influence in domestic and international spheres. If not, then the world is a step closer to a future determined by it.

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