



Don't Let the Chinese Communist Party Use the Coronavirus to Its Advantage

March 27, 2020 **Michael Sobolik** *National Review*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Global Health; China

When it comes to the global coronavirus pandemic, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is acting as both the arsonist and the firefighter.

The first response of China's authoritarian government was intimidation. The CCP actively suppressed knowledge of the virus's existence in Wuhan by silencing physicians and prohibiting medical professionals from publishing findings that could have saved lives. When the party could no longer deny the viral outbreak, it dithered in December and January as cases of the disease in Wuhan and neighboring cities skyrocketed, caring more about its monopoly on power than the welfare of its people. And in February, as the coronavirus spread throughout the world, foreign minister Wang Yi pressured neighboring countries to keep travel with the People's Republic of China (PRC) open for reputational reasons. Now, however, China is seeking to whitewash its failings — and blame the virus on other nations, such as the United States.

That historical context is important. According to a study at the University of Southampton in Australia, had China's political leaders acted quickly, they could have lowered the number of cases within their own country by 95 percent. Instead, the party's political paranoia turned a localized viral outbreak into a global crisis, with over 22,000 deaths reported worldwide. According to the International Monetary Fund, the global economic impact of coronavirus will approximate that of the Great Recession of 2008, and possibly surpass it.

That, however, is only if the figures we now see coming out of China are accurate. Given the CCP's reputation of altering figures for its political benefit, the death toll and economic impact are likely far worse.

As it stands, the institutional failure of China's government is stress-testing the health-care systems of every nation on earth. Italy's hospitals are overwhelmed, and the United States is on pace to run out of ventilators in four weeks. In Iran, one person is dying every ten seconds from COVID-19.

Amid this crisis, the CCP today is hard at work — not to right its wrongs, but to rewrite the past. The party is waging a multi-front propaganda campaign that shifts the blame for coronavirus to the United States, while claiming that China's response bought time for the rest of the world to prepare. The Chinese government is also presenting itself as a global health provider, shipping face masks and test kits to nations with shortages.

Of course, China is right to give this medical equipment to nations in need. But its government is bundling misinformation with this aid.

These lies serve a higher purpose for the party: turning coronavirus into a net positive for the CCP. Consulting firm Horizon Advocacy published a report last week, based on Chinese government and state media sources, that details China's plan to position its economy in strategic sectors to box out other industrialized nations still reeling from the virus's impact. According to China's State Administration of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense, China must jumpstart its economy to "pave the way for international market expansion after the epidemic is over."

Polymakers in Washington should take this gambit seriously. But they shouldn't assume that America's friends and partners do. In recent years, China — working via companies such as Huawei and through its much publicized "Belt and Road Initiative" — has greatly expanded its global economic footprint. Yet far too many of China's trading partners remain blind to the true nature of China's political system and the threat it poses.

The United States must blunt the CCP's disinformation campaign. Doing so begins with fostering unity at home.

To date, most public debate in the United States has centered around President Trump's decision to call COVID-19 the "Chinese virus." The president did not choose his words out of racist animus — nor did countless journalists and pundits who used the same phrase throughout the month of January — but in response to CCP propaganda.

Yet the phrase, while accurate, fails to distinguish between the Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party. The citizens of China are not the instigators of this crisis, but rather the first victims of the party's self-interested response to it.

This distinction is more than public-relations messaging; it is a critical nuance that American leaders must internalize. We cannot stand up to the CCP if we fail to differentiate between victims and victimizers — just as Americans cannot unite the world while assuming the worst about one another.

The Chinese Communist Party started this fire. But they are angling to emerge from its ashes as a savior. While acknowledging its current helpful efforts, Americans must stand together and call the party what it is: an instigator.