



To Hold China Accountable for Delayed COVID-19 Action, Target the ‘Great Firewall’

April 28, 2020 *The Diplomat*

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Shocking details have emerged in recent days about the central role of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the coronavirus pandemic. In April, senior Communist Party leadership dithered for a critical six days after realizing that the outbreak in Wuhan could morph into a pandemic. This comes after a damning estimate from the University of Southampton, which estimated that the Chinese government could have reduced its number of COVID-19 cases by 95 percent if it had acted to mitigate the disease three weeks sooner. Instead, during this time, local apparatchiks silenced medical professionals and ordered the destruction of viral samples. Perhaps most alarming of all: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cut air travel from Wuhan to other Chinese cities in January, but didn't bother to ban international travel.

True, the Chinese Communist Party is not responsible for the mistakes of governments around the world, including the U.S. government, in their preparations for and response to this pandemic. But Beijing nonetheless bears responsibility for concealing the virus' scope and strength, cloaking the true number of cases and deaths within China, and dragging the world into a global health crisis.

That the CCP has repeated many mistakes of the 2003 SARS crisis should surprise no one. This political regime has displayed a striking acumen for retaining its monopoly on power – a focus matched only by its callous indifference to the lives of human beings and the health of the global community at large.

For the time being, Washington's focus must remain on beating COVID-19 and reopening the economy at the appropriate time. Once the worst has passed, however, policymakers will face the urgent task of holding the CCP accountable. Even now, appropriately calibrating a response has proved challenging.

Some members of Congress have fixated on the economic damages of coronavirus and sought to pin them on the PRC in different ways, whether by seizing Chinese assets in the United States or by canceling treasury bond payments. But such steps would risk undercutting centuries of customary international law and upending the global financial system. Moreover, these approaches fall short of a long-term strategy. Exacting a pound of flesh for something China has already done may feel cathartic, but that is unlikely to favorably shape the CCP's future behavior.

President Donald Trump's decision to freeze U.S. contributions to the World Health Organization (WHO) gets closer to good strategy. America is far and away the principal funder of WHO programs in both assessed (mandatory) and voluntary contributions, and accounts for about 20 percent of the organization's entire revenue. Washington can exercise real leverage there, and is right to call out the WHO for amplifying CCP talking points at key inflection points during the virus' spread. Even so, securing more jobs for American personnel within international agencies will prove difficult for an administration that has, rightly or wrongly, dismissed their relevance up till now. And even if the president succeeds in his bid to reform the WHO, it would fail to account for China's complicity in the coronavirus.

Instead of seeking to merely punish the CCP or targeting its proxy organizations, American policymakers must recognize the crux of this crisis: the CCP's authoritarian control over information.

Human rights advocates have long sought to scale China's "Great Firewall" and bring the uncensored internet to PRC netizens. In the wake of the coronavirus, Washington must recognize that CCP disinformation and propaganda are more than ideological or values-based concerns. They pose a transnational threat – one that is now proliferating globally.

Take, for instance, the recently-announced social media partnership between the United Nations and Tencent, a PRC conglomerate. Tencent's messaging app WeChat allows the CCP to surveil and censor the communications of hundreds of millions of users, including Uyghur expats with family members imprisoned in re-education camps. It takes little imagination to recognize the risks of conducting diplomatic affairs over these platforms. The UN subsequently reversed its decision, but only under immense pressure.

Washington must raise the cost of the CCP's Orwellian actions. This pressure could include sanctioning foreign entities for censoring coronavirus data, prohibiting U.S. government employees from conducting official business over software developed by PRC companies known to surveil and censor data, and increasing funding for NGOs developing technical workarounds for the Great Firewall.

Such ideas are already gaining traction within the Washington Beltway, and they merit more attention. After all, it is clear that the CCP will not reform on its own accord. If the United States fails to address the root cause of this crisis and loosen the Party's grasp on information, we will soon find that the world is no safer than it was before the coronavirus came.

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