



Founded after the turmoil and devastation of the Second World War, as part of the initial United Nations response to immediate need, the Geneva-based World Health Organization (WHO) and its many dedicated professionals represent a continuation of the League of Nations and its innovative health commission, writes Noel Hadjimichael.

It is a thought leader and a persuader. But the politics, self-interest and ego of the member states of the UN have plagued the work, focus and integrity of its narrative. Too easily it has been sidelined by notions of collaboration, coalition building and outright collapse of moral authority in the face of geopolitics. Physician heal thyself could not be more relevant now as we tackle a pandemic of immense impact and worrying resilience. The novel coronavirus — which, after originating in China, has gone on to wreak havoc around the planet partly because of Beijing's failure to promptly share all the information it had about the initial outbreak — is changing the way the world looks at China.

Beijing has been accused of shirking its obligations to the WHO. It hasn't helped its case lately by pushing internationally what Chinese patriots have applauded online as "wolf warrior diplomacy" : a campaign of strident propaganda, trying to shift the blame and threatening to restrict exports of critical medical supplies.

The debate that has been unleashed over the effectiveness and truthfulness of China's local, regional and national response to the virus has been an eye opener for many. Right wing, left wing, civil libertarian and social democrat pluralists have all raised the alarm over the timing of the outbreak, the acknowledged poor treatment of the initial whistle blowers and the veracity of the very statistics that have been critical for others to assess the implications for economics, public health and strategic transport services. A major world player, a P5 member of the Security Council, the engine room for the world trading system for 20 years is being assessed as an unreliable or untrustworthy source of critical data.

It is not the frontline medical teams or the people of China who have been found wanting – it is the ugly recognition that a society with deep roots in suppression of civil society, declining transparency in public discourse and aggressive information control is uniquely well qualified to throw petrol on the bonfire of natural or man-made pestilence.

There are now key words and phrases that have entered into the discussion over the family dinner table, the Zoom board meeting or the virtual catch up: social distancing, flattening the curve, ISO or pandemic. Adults worry about a Great Depression and teens worry about the eradication of jobs, freedoms and connection.

The path that brought us to this place has its origins in Cold War strategy, arrogant commercial self-interest and ambiguous human rights stances that would make the generation that won the peace in 1945 wince with shame and cold fury.

The China that builds a blue water navy and creates islands in the South China Sea, offers billions in investment whilst undermining domestic manufacturing capacity and eagerly plunders the opportunities of Africa in a fashion that would make a nineteenth century colonialist blush is no minnow in the world of diplomacy, narrative building or exercise of geopolitical muscle. She is the creature of misplaced Western opportunism, cheap compliant labour, exciting technological advances and a preparedness to accept submission in the face of advocacy. Three big shifts in the global treatment of China, taken for immediate and understandable reasons, forged the path to today's crisis of accountability and trust. Political, economic and cultural surrender of glaring proportions. The surprise by some over Covid-19 and the WHO is no surprise at all.

From the 1970s, in the Nixonian world of realpolitik, the begrudging kowtow to the "One China Policy" make a mockery of any resistance to the extra-territorial claims of the PRC. Taiwan was not to be allowed to be seen as a self-governing State. It was to be relegated to a troubled and tiresome renegade province. The Communist undemocratic state to be given its way in all things diplomatic and legal. Whilst an imperfect evolving democracy was shunted to the "too hard" basket. Better to keep Beijing onside than just push back. It was only right that the USSR could be played into a corner with its awkward ideological ally/competitor. This was followed by the acquiescence of the Tibet occupation, the difficult future of Hong Kong and the continued repression of religious, racial and cultural minorities.

From the late 1990s and early 2000s, the progressive expansion of world economic engagement with China with its convenient exchange rate, undisturbed labor compliance and sweetheart deals for those seeking to invest in manufacturing, mining and construction sectors was the story of successful robust globalisation. Consumer growth by China's burgeoning middle class for foreign products like German cars, French perfume or Aussie beef easily paved the way for zero debate regarding the transition of blue-collar jobs from Duisburg, Dunkirk or Devonport to the rapidly urbanised regions of China. Joining the WTO (World Trade Organisation) did not see China reform its economy into a liberal or market driven society. However, it did provide access to markets across the globe on positive terms and enticed investors to see the PRC as a safe bet for precious capital. Money that was often funded via the very mutual funds, superannuation and pension savings of the very workers being replaced in places with higher wages or more difficult environmental conditions.

A cultural surrender by educators, research bodies and the arts sector has been the final shift that has positioned China as virtually "shame proof" regarding the treatment of dissidents (otherwise often heralded in other societies as democrats, liberals, social reformers or humanitarians) and its enticement of elite opinion by means of economic power. How easily silenced is the campus academic, journalist, trade union activist or cyber freedom advocate when China is the new market for overseas students, fresh campus sites or lucrative tours of cities boasting urgent desires for Western cultural visits. Civil society discourse is hampered when entrepreneurs and opinion leaders alike tiptoe around the sensitivities of a China that

plays various cards of victimhood from generations ago.

The powerhouse nuclear military capacity, immense manufacturing strength and disciplined populace that confronts its neighbours and its competitors is not ignored.

We have seen the WHO like many international organisations show due deference and courtesy to one of the great societies on the planet. That is right and proper. However, responsibility regarding the accountability and accuracy of any engagement resides with us all. We should demand an inquiry into the circumstances of the Wuhan outbreak. Not for shallow or petty political point scoring. But for the natural and normal requirements of the charter, aims and reputation of the global health "canary in the mine". Hundreds of thousands of victims and millions of sufferers deserve better.

Decisions made and decisions delayed by local, regional and national authorities in China may have made this pandemic much more difficult to understand. A preparedness to dismiss or demur is just too irresponsible for words.

The China that has wrapped much of the world in a belt of strategic and harsh debt or a road of convenient economic potholes should not be allowed to escape scrutiny.

A China that buries its past regarding the glaring failures of the Mao era, colludes to diffuse any recognition of its unsavoury surveillance state or silences its diaspora even when citizens of democratic communities is no candidate for political, economic or cultural equality.

Three short and sharp reversals of policy across a number of key democracies may just trigger awareness from the regime in Beijing that actions have implications.

The end to the One China Policy gives credence to the successful and vibrant democratic nation that is Taiwan. A champion in this Covid-19 pandemic. Dismissed and marginalised by those wishing to placate a powerful bully. If not now, when?

The end to the facade that WTO, multilateral and bilateral trade arrangements with China make for a healthy or harmonious economic framework. Trade that fails to reflect the national interest can be shown to be self-defeating. Ask so many nations scrambling to get either pharma or personal protective equipment in today's crisis from an unreliable or recalcitrant provider.

The end to cultural, media and artistic amnesia over the human rights abuses of a society that has sought to retain some of the most repressive political conditions in this era of the smart phone, sophisticated global consumerism or sensitive liberal elite values. If opinion leaders on both the right and left value pluralism, the rule of law and universal human rights protections, a robust debate is warranted.

Who benefits if candid or comprehensive neglect of the facts occurs? The citizen of the globe's great Asian power deserves the same answers as the medical doctor in Lombardy or the grieving widow in Lancaster Pennsylvania. With great power, comes great responsibility.

Who should stand in its way?

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