

Strategic Analysis Paper

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The Wuhan Coronavirus and Its Impact on China's Foreign Relations – Part One

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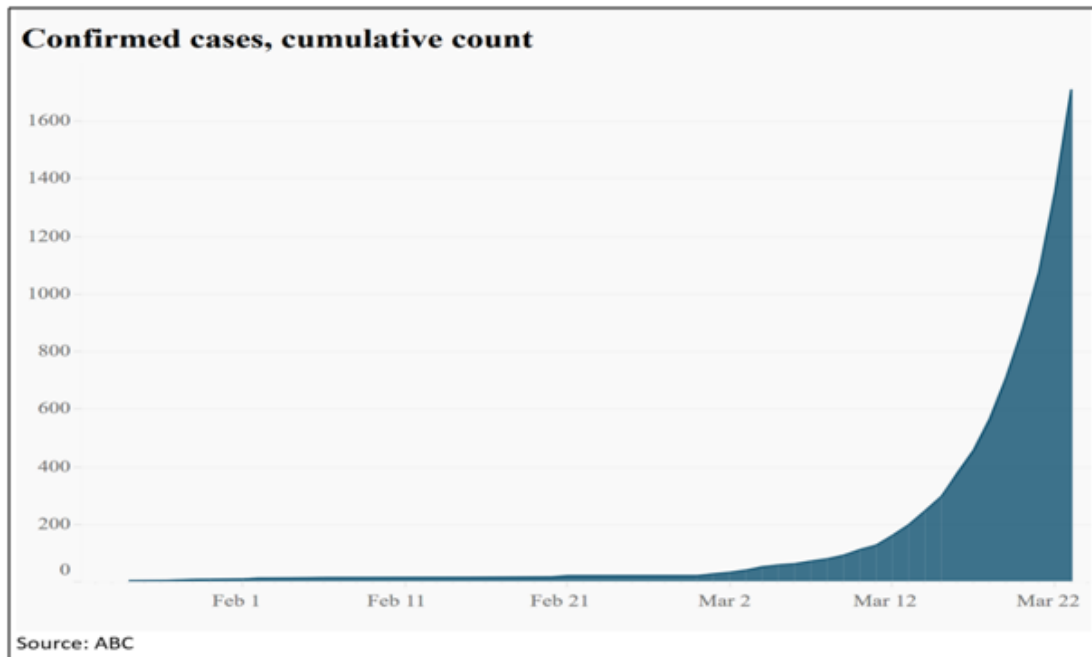
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Key Points

- China has semi-officially denied that the coronavirus that is currently sweeping across the world originated there.
- Beijing has also claimed that it is a role model in its handling of the pandemic.
- Those claims are vigorously disputed by Western countries.
- The West is also becoming increasingly exasperated with China's lies, double standards and apparent willingness to steal, blackmail and coerce.
- The West is now re-evaluating its individual and collective relationships with China.

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic, which has swept through many parts of the world, had infected over 330,000 people globally at the time of writing and caused around 15,000 deaths by 23 March. In [Australia](#), the number of confirmed cases has moved past 1,700, with 37 per cent of those being reported between 21 March and 23 March. This graph below shows the infection rate in Australia.



In the [US](#), the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases had surpassed 32,000 by 23 March, having grown ten-fold from a week earlier. New Zealand moved to the highest state of alert and closed its schools on 25 March, while [India](#) declared a “people’s curfew” on 22 March, leading to virtually empty streets in the capital, New Delhi, and in its financial capital, Mumbai. While most Indians complied with the curfew, many did not, leading the government there to declare that those who violated the curfew would face up to six months imprisonment. The following day, thirty states and union territories announced that 548 districts had been [locked down](#) completely and partial curfews announced in 58 districts of three states. Fearing for its safety, [Nepal](#) shut its borders with China and India. Iran, which has the most number of cases in the Middle East, estimated at over 23,000 of 23 March, and around 1,800 deaths, and Italy, with the number of confirmed cases hovering around 80,000 and the death toll at 8,000 by 27 March, are now, with China, the global epicentres of the infection. Other countries also have high mortality rates. The number of deaths in Spain, for instance, at the same time was around 5,100.

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Global Fatalities United States					
Country	Deaths ▾	Deaths / 1M pop ▸	New Deaths ▸	Confirmed Cases ▸	Confirmed Case Fatality Rate ▸
Italy	9,134	151.1	-	86,498	10.56%
Spain	5,138	110.0	-	65,719	7.82%
China*	3,295	2.4	+3	81,394	4.05%
Iran	2,378	29.1	-	32,332	7.35%
France	1,995	29.8	-	32,964	6.05%
United States	1,701	5.2	+5	104,205	1.63%
United Kingdom	759	11.4	-	14,543	5.22%
Netherlands	546	31.7	-	8,603	6.35%
Germany	351	4.2	-	50,871	0.69%
Belgium	289	25.3	-	7,284	3.97%

Source: RealClear Politics; as of 27 March 2020

Apart from the loss of lives, the pandemic (the World Health Organisation [declared](#) the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic on 11 March) has had a major impact on world economies. On 2 March, the Tourism Authority of Thailand [estimated](#) that the number of tourists would fall by around six million, forcing the government to inject around [US\\$12.7 billion](#) (\$21.9 billion) into the economy to stimulate it. In the US, the President of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis suggested that the [unemployment](#) rate could rise to around 30 per cent, leading it to seek to [inject](#) US\$1.5 trillion (approximately \$2.6 trillion) into the economy; the stimulus package was [defeated](#) by the Democrats in the Senate. In India, electronics manufacturing organisations such as Samsung, Oppo, Realme and Vivo [suspended](#) their operations. India's lockdown in a number of states will see its economy negatively affected, as will Australia's decision to shut restaurants, cinemas and bars its own, after it noted that voluntary measures were insufficient to slow the rate of infections. The UK's decision to isolate large segments of its society, to enforce work-from-home policies and to pay workers who had lost their jobs will place a future toll on its economy. Other European countries face similar [economic slow-downs](#).

The coronavirus has, in short, catapulted the world to the [brink](#) of an [economic recession](#). The fear that they could be held responsible for that state of affairs and for other reasons has led world leaders to seek scapegoats to blame. It may be beneficial, therefore, to attempt to discern why the world's economies and societies have so rapidly been brought to a state of near-recession and [pandemonium](#).

Analysis

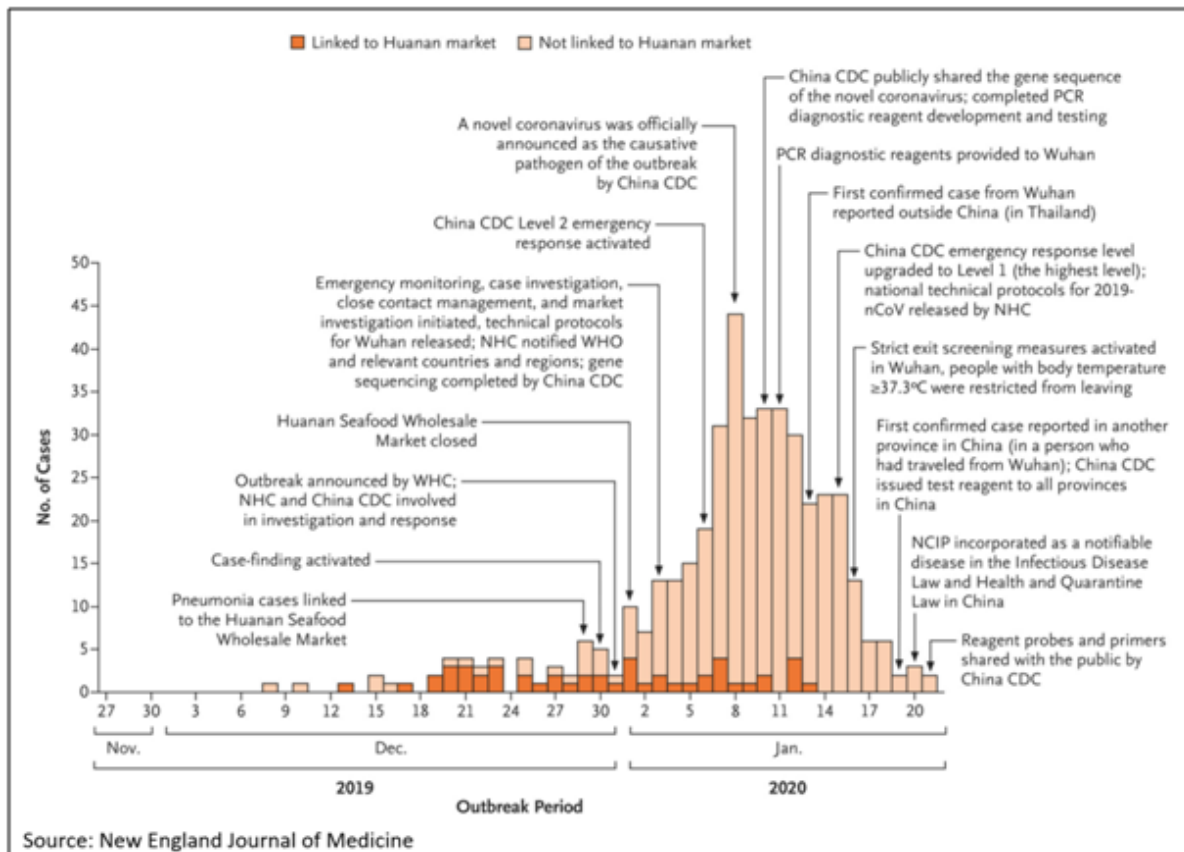
The coronavirus outbreak first presented early in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan in Hubei Province. On 10 December 2019, a seafood merchant at the city's Huanan market, believing herself to have a cold, went to a local clinic to obtain some medication then returned to work at the market, which sold wildlife, including bats, as food. By 18 December, the merchant was semi-conscious in a hospital in Wuhan. She would be joined in hospital by several other merchants from the Huanan market. The medical staff at the hospital failed to make the connection between these patients and the market. When they finally did in late December, they quarantined those people who exhibited the symptoms that the Huanan market vendors did and informed their superiors that they suspected a new viral strain was in the offing; they were prevented by the Chinese authorities from informing even their peers, leave alone the general public.

The case of Dr Li Wenliang is one example of the Chinese authorities taking action against the messenger instead of listening to the message. When Dr Li observed seven cases of a virus that resembled SARS, he notified fellow doctors in a chat group about a potential outbreak. He was summoned four days later to the local office of China's Public Security Bureau, where he was forced to sign a [letter](#) that accused him of making "false comments that had severely disturbed the social order". The letter continued, "We solemnly warn you: If you keep being stubborn, with such impertinence, and continue this illegal activity, you will be brought to justice – is that understood?" Faced with the prospect

of being confronted by China’s all-pervasive and powerful security apparatus, Dr Li wrote, “Yes, I do” beneath the question and signed the letter.

Dr Li contracted the disease after treating patients who had it and died soon after. His death caused much [anger](#) across China. Unwilling to acknowledge that they had made a mistake in announcing that the virus could not spread from person to person, leave alone accept the responsibility for their actions, the Chinese Communist Party’s first course of action was to find a scapegoat. The National Supervisory Commission [declared](#) (Chinese) that local authorities in Wuhan mishandled the situation and followed “irregular” and “improper” law-enforcement procedures. That admonishment led the Wuhan Police to offer an official [apology](#) to Dr Li’s pregnant wife, acknowledging their “inappropriate handling on the matter”.

Worse official incompetence was to follow. On 7 January 2020, Chairman Xi personally ordered officials to take all necessary steps to control the outbreak. Even then, however, the authorities continued to insist that the virus could not be transmitted between people. It is now evident that, based on a speech made by Mr Xi that was published in a Party magazine in February, that he was leading the anti-virus effort. It is all the more telling, therefore, that it was while he was personally in charge of that exercise that the authorities in Wuhan celebrated the Lunar New Year and then allowed around [five million people](#) to leave the city to travel to their homes across China for the holidays. The authorities announced on 20 January that the virus could indeed be spread between people. China locked down Wuhan and three other cities on 23 January but by then it was too late. The virus had spread across China and internationally.



Aiding the spread of the disease, the World Health Organisation, now virtually a Chinese mouthpiece and fully [compliant](#) with Beijing's wishes, [tweeted](#) in January:

Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel #coronavirus (2019-nCoV) identified in #Wuhan, #China

The Organisation's Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, despite all the evidence available, refused to declare a pandemic for months, thanked China for "making us safer", and [informing](#) a gathering of international foreign and security policy leaders in Germany on Saturday that his organisation was encouraged that there had not yet been widespread transmission outside China and that "the steps China has taken to contain the outbreak at its source appear to have bought the world time".

Political correctness played its part. The Mayor of Florence, in Italy, encouraged the people of his city to [hug Chinese people](#) to demonstrate that they are not racist. After President Trump and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced travel restrictions on China, Mayor Dario Nardella [tweeted](#), using the hashtag #AbbracciaUnCinese (#HugAChinese), "We follow the directions of the health authorities and we use caution, but no psychological terrorism" and excoriated those who "could not wait to use this excuse to hate and insult." (It is to be noted, when referring to this and China's claims of racism when it is directly associated with the coronavirus pandemic, such as when the term "Wuhan virus" or "China virus" is used, that a group of Chinese scientists who were employed at the Wuhan Institute of Virology wrote in a 2019 [journal article](#) titled "Bat Coronaviruses in China", that it was "highly likely that future SARS- or MERS-like coronavirus outbreaks will originate from bats, and there is an increased probability that this will occur in China." That article was preceded by another in 2007, which concluded presciently with the words:

The presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of eating exotic mammals in southern China, is a time bomb. The possibility of the re-emergence of SARS and other novel viruses from animals or laboratories and therefore the need for preparedness should not be ignored.

Racist or not, it is, nevertheless, those Italian provinces that have close ties to China that have, for the most part, been affected by the coronavirus. The first two people who were affected by the virus were from Wuhan. They were discounted by Italian authorities as having been the source of the pandemic in Italy, however. By 25 March, around half of all the confirmed cases in Italy were concentrated around Milan in Lombardy. The town of Lodi, with a population of around 230,000, had more than eight infected people per 1,000 residents, eight times the national average. Lodi [conducted business](#) (Italian) of more than US\$2.3 billion (\$3.7 billion), or \$16,000 per citizen, with China. Milan, which transacted business worth US\$9.4 billion (\$15.2 billion) with China in 2018, has more than 6,000 coronavirus cases. Bergamo Province has more than 7,000 cases and Brescia 6,000. The table below gives an idea of the (likely coincidental but nevertheless troubling) correlation between conducting business with China and the heightened risk of contracting Covid-19.

Province	Vol. of Business with China	Covid-19 Confirmed Infections
Lombardy	US\$20 Billion (\$32.4 Billion)	32,000
Veneto	US\$6.4 Billion (\$10.4 Billion)	6,400
Emilia Romagna	US\$6.2 Billion (\$10 Billion)	10,000
Piemonte	US\$4.6 Billion (\$7.5 Billion)	6,000

Campania, the most densely populated region in the country, on the other hand, transacts around US\$2 billion a year but had fewer than 1,200 confirmed cases and the province of Prato, despite its large Chinese population, had only 178 cases.

Iran, another country that, like Italy, signed onto China's Belt and Road Initiative, has also suffered horrific losses after the pandemic struck the country. The authorities there have traced the outbreak to Qom, a city of around a million people. As one [report](#) notes, "China Railway Engineering Corp. is building a [US]\$2.7 billion [\$4.4 billion] high-speed rail line through Qom. Chinese technicians have been helping refurbish a nuclear-power plant nearby." Iranian medical authorities suspect that either Chinese workers or Iranians who travelled to China from Qom spread the coronavirus there. The Iranian authorities acted late to stem the spread of the virus, but on 1 February they banned all flights to and from China. They excluded Mahan Air, an unofficial airline for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. As the report notes, Mahan Air "had carried out eight flights between Tehran and China between Feb[ruary] 1 and Feb[ruary] 9 to transfer Chinese and Iranian passengers to their respective home countries." That could explain why so many high-level Iranian officials were infected by the coronavirus, including First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri and more than 20 lawmakers. Mohammad Mirmohammadi, an adviser to Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, was the senior-most Iranian official to die of the disease.

Any feelings of collegiality that the West may have had towards China in the wake of the pandemic, however, soon dissipated. It was [alleged](#) early in March that Chinese laboratories identified a mystery virus as a highly infectious new pathogen by late December last year, but were ordered to stop testing, destroy samples and suppress the news. If that allegation is correct, the order was likely issued so as not to embarrass the Chinese Communist Party or China, since it was there that the SARS virus had originated and China is now seen as [the origin](#) of several epidemics. The Chinese Communist Party, moreover, is, as one report observes, [more concerned](#) with how to "control the society" and "manipulate public opinion" than it is with stemming the spread of illnesses such as this one. It goes on to note that Authorities in the city of Shiyan, for example, listed their working targets as: "monitor closely petitioners and people whose benefits have been severely damaged", in other words, those people most likely to dissent against the authorities, "strictly prevent key people and groups from assembling and making trouble", and "punish heavily the people who spread improper speech or rumours related to the epidemic".

The Chinese Communist Party has, more recently, downplayed the severity of the epidemic domestically and taken to announcing that the measures that it employed to stem the spread of the virus have succeeded to the extent that there have been [no new domestic reports](#) of Covid-19. In fact, says one Chinese expert on Covid-19, Dr Li Lanjuan, a [second](#)

[outbreak](#) (Chinese) of Covid-19 could occur due to the increasing number of infections detected among new arrivals from abroad (See [here](#) for video of Dr Li's statement). In other words, any more infections within China are due to external factors; the Chinese Communist Party has successfully fought off the epidemic, which was, according to them, likely introduced into China by [American troops](#). In an "Update on new coronavirus pneumonia outbreak at 24:00 on March 18", the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China [announced](#) that there were no new infections across the country (Chinese). The objective is evident: the Party cannot be seen to have caused the deaths of thousands of Chinese citizens. The blame, therefore, has to be shifted. That reasoning could explain why China now [blames the US](#) for the pandemic, denying that Covid-19 originated in Wuhan and that it is responsible for deaths worldwide. The Chinese Communist Party has a crisis on its hands and must deflect the blame in any way that it can. It has to propagate the idea, therefore, that the pandemic is not of its making. As an adjunct professor at the University of California at Berkeley's School of Information who studies China's Internet [notes](#), "It's more than just some disinformation or an official narrative. It's an orchestrated, all-out campaign by the Chinese government through every channel at a level you rarely see. It's a counter-offensive." When, therefore, three *Wall Street Journal* correspondents – two Americans and an Australian – published an opinion column that called China the "real sick man of Asia", they were [expelled](#) from the country by Beijing.

China's claim that there have been no further reported cases is, however, disputed (see, for instance, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). As one [report](#) observes, leaked documents from the Shandong Centre for Disease Prevention and Control show that between 9 February and 23 February, authorities in Shandong Province under-reported the number of infections every day. The true number of infections, according to those documents, is around 52 times higher than that reported. One [study](#) by American scientists suggests that the cumulative infections and deaths in China could be five to ten times higher than that reported by Beijing. [Another study](#) observes that "If [non-pharmaceutical intervention strategies] could have been conducted one week, two weeks, or three weeks earlier in China, cases could have been reduced by 66%, 86%, and 95%, respectively, together with significantly reducing the number of affected areas." A [leaked video](#) from China shows lengthy queues at a hospital in Chongqing, giving the lie to China's claim that it has defeated the pandemic. [Reporters Without Borders](#), moreover, notes that China has cracked down on all independent information outlets. One consequence of China's strategy is the [question](#) now being asked: can China's statistics on the Covid-19 pandemic be trusted at all? China, as an analysis notes, must [bear the blame](#) for the pandemic and is [not the role model](#) it would like to be.

China also appears to have gone on the offensive to disseminate its narrative across the world; that is evident from its expulsion of the initial three American journalists. China has taken to [monitoring](#) news publications for articles and other material critical of the Communist Party and exacting harsh penalties on their authors. A spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry [accused](#) President Trump of racism over the latter's use of the term "Wuhan Virus" to describe the Coronavirus. It is interesting that China has chosen to disregard the cultural genocide that it has enacted in [Tibet](#) and [Xinjiang](#) in making that accusation. At the United Nations, China [blocked](#) an effort by Estonia, a non-permanent

member of the United Nations Security Council, to convene a meeting to discuss the Covid-19 pandemic, likely because it did not wish to respond to the rather pointed questions that would have been raised. The Chinese Communist Party, it appears, will go to any lengths to deflect the blame for the deaths of people in China and around the world from itself. It is likely based on that perception that US Senator Marsha Blackburn said in a [press release](#) that “the Chinese government [had] to take responsibility what she called “its abject failure to be forthright about the severity of its COVID-19 crisis at its inception”. She noted that “Chinese officials destroyed early COVID-19 test kits, suppressed information and refused international assistance”, and added that “The Communist Party is so petrified of the truth that they kicked out journalists and fabricated a story of where the virus originated. It’s time the Communist Party admits to the serious missteps that heightened the severity and spread of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.” The press release stated that Senator Tom Cotton and [Representatives Jim Banks and Seth Moulton](#) led companion resolutions. [Senator Joshua Hawley](#), additionally, called for an international probe into China’s “cover up” of the coronavirus.

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