

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, January 28, 2020.



Opinion

As coronavirus spreads, anti-China sentiment must give way to a global effort to contain the disease



- China's president has not only expanded the reach of the Communist Party but ignored Deng Xiaoping's advice for China to lie low as it grows economically
- Despite Western unease at China's trajectory, the world must join forces to extend to the country the help it needs at this critical juncture

Tom Plate

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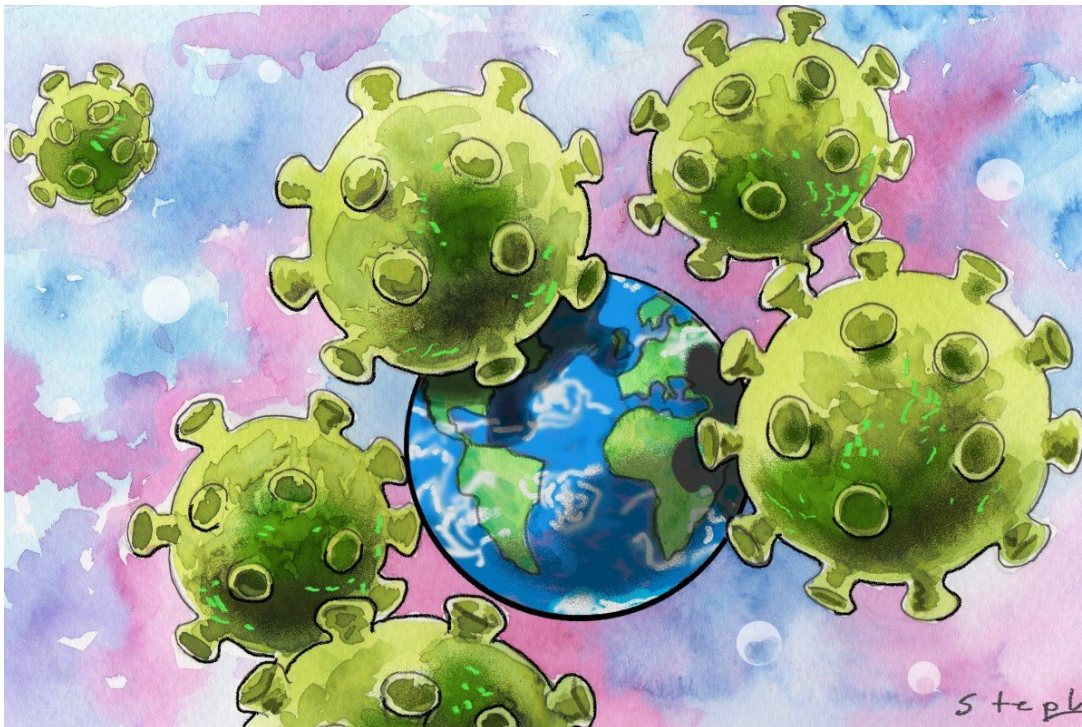


Illustration: Craig Stephens

There is no certainty as to where and when the coronavirus outbreak will end, but where it all began is not in dispute. And that speaks to a point I have emphasised before: China's future will be determined mainly by what the mainland Chinese do among themselves, for themselves and – last, but not least – to themselves.

The West overestimates what it can do to China and underestimates what China can do to itself. Washington is foolish to embark on the impossible task of trying to contain China, but Beijing must do better at the necessary work of containing its worst features.

Further evidence is hardly needed, but the “one world” idea – that “we’re all in this together” – is revalidated as this new virus penetrates multiple cities within China and travels across borders and international time zones.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party, having tightened its control over its people and organisations (private as well as public), must now prove they have the governing will and necessary health care infrastructure in place to contain this viral enemy.

Blame for the outbreak is being levied almost as quickly as the coronavirus is spreading; China’s many sins, past and present, real and imagined, are now being cited.

Some ideologically anti-communist Americans, who would almost rather die than witness China’s success under continued communist control, are near the “I told you so” point: in the current crisis, they find symbolic confirmation of communism’s diseased nature. This may be a kind of ideological dancing on graves, as it were, but it is almost as sincere as it is cruel.

As China has proceeded apace in its global restoration, it attracts envy in some quarters as much as admiration in others. For the longest time, of course, it was the United States that had that distinction.

Neither the envy nor the blame game is new: the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, writing 100 years ago about Germany versus England, noted the latter had to bear the burden of “taking the lead”, while Germany was reaping the coy “advantages” of comparative underdevelopment.

Wuhan Virus

	Cases	Deaths
Mainland China	2839	82
Hong Kong	8	--
Macau	7	--
Taiwan	5	--
Rest of Asia	28	--
Europe	3	--
North America	6	--
South America	--	--
Australasia	5	--
Rest of the world	--	--

[Source: China's NHC, state media, other authorities](#)

Total

2901

cases

82

deaths

SCMP

That was to change, too: the historic disadvantage ploy is waning as a defence for China’s shortcomings. Having ignored paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s wise dictum that China should keep a low profile as it builds itself up, Xi adopted a much less modest approach to the return to prominence.

So there’s no place to hide now: the Wuhan coronavirus may wind up dimming Xi’s sheen more than anything that has happened since 2012, perhaps even more than the Hong Kong troubles.

Many outside China in Asia – much less so in the West – believe the Xi government is increasingly more competent and less corrupt than its predecessors and does try to offer good governance.



A limousine carrying Chinese President Xi Jinping drives out of the Tiananmen rostrum during celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing on October 1, 2019. Photo: Xinhua

Since 2012, when Xi assumed office as the general secretary of the Communist Party, China has had the benefit of a clear-eyed plan to drive the country to global leadership. But in meeting the needs of 1.4 billion people, the daily problem is to keep the country steady on its feet; utopia can wait.

Wuhan, where the coronavirus outbreak originated, is a metropolis of 11 million. This is 1.5 times the population of Hong Kong and four times that of Chicago.

If as many as one per cent of the people of Hong Kong were to become infected by this virus, that in itself would be a big number (74,000 or so) – but less than for Wuhan, and much less than for somewhere like Shanghai.

When Lee Kuan Yew, modern Singapore's founder, showed off his achievements to China's economic reformer, Deng responded: "If I only had Shanghai, I too might be able to change Shanghai as quickly. But I have the whole of China!"

I know I make this point perhaps too often but, China is home to around 1.4 billion people. The sheer enormity of governing a population this size would test any leader – whether Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lee Kuan Yew or Xi; no one is perfect.



Visitors stand in front of a screen showing former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping at an exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, at the National Museum of China in Beijing on November 14, 2018. Photo: Reuters

Consider Xi's insistence on pushing the party into just about every arena. Its cadres now permeate not only government enterprises but private firms and have tightened their grip on universities. This is understandable but unsettling and may well be the bridge too far.

Any professor can tell you that students benefit from open discussion, but not those under surveillance. Businesspeople resent having anyone, much less party operatives, looking over their shoulder, second-guessing. Can you blame them?

What about the hardworking health care community? Was it spooked by the party? Have pushy party members been overruling qualified medical personnel? This is only speculative but it's the kind of question Xi should ask when the time comes.

Now is not the moment for that, of course. We must focus our energy on how to get out of this, rather than how we got into it. The time will come for an overall review, and possible recrimination and reorganisation. Something obviously went tragically amiss in Wuhan but, for now, the emphasis must be on cooperation at all levels.

Confronting a coronavirus like severe acute respiratory syndrome or Middle East respiratory syndrome, all doctors of conscience must view themselves as being without borders. Scientific excellence and medical heroism are now needed – without political surveillance or dogma.

The West should offer all relevant medical supplies and whatever else is needed in the required abundance and, yes, at no cost. Like it or not, we are of one world, Chinese and Americans alike. We all need to be all in, all the time, and perhaps especially now.

Clinical Professor Tom Plate, distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University, is vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute, also based In Los Angeles. One of his books is Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew