

Is China the boogeyman ?

害怕中国?

“Holding China accountable” for COVID

Assigning “blame” for COVID-19 is harder than some think, both at home and abroad. We have to consider the degree of difficulty, the possibility for error, and other factors. Assigning blame for political reasons doesn’t help.

“The US has evidence that China grossly understated the number of fatalities it suffered from COVID-19.” If, in his virtual UN address last week, President Trump had made this statement, it would have been a major story. Instead, when the President said China should be “held accountable” for COVID-19, he referenced two less serious offenses by China which made his point less compelling.

China attracts suspicion by silencing COVID-19 discussion

China has been silencing any internal discussion or criticism of its handling of COVID-19, including among doctors and political dissidents. Of course this gives the impression China has something to hide which encourages speculation as to actions and decisions China made relative to the virus.

Meanwhile, Democrats Blame Trump

On the other hand, the Democrats are busy blaming Mr. Trump for his response to the virus, despite the fact that even medical experts weren’t certain as to what should be done and that, given the performance of Democratic governors and the comments of even Joe Biden himself early in the outbreak, it is anything but clear that any other politician would have done better. Some might argue the Democrats are blaming Mr. Trump for no reason other than the fact that he was President at the time, not because he underperformed anyone else. That would be unfair, as would blaming China simply because the initial outbreak started in China.

So we have reason to be suspicious of China and also the need to avoid blaming China for political reasons.



Assigning accountability is difficult in practice

Holding China accountable is easier said than done, and not just because there is no real mechanism to seek retribution. Is China culpable? What did they do wrong? How serious was the infraction? Was it intentional? What impact did it have? Below is a brief description of the issues that would have to be considered to assess China’s culpability in the spread of COVID-19.

How much impact is China’s fault?

South Korea is much closer to China and more economically intertwined, yet the impact of COVID-19 there, in terms of both fatalities and economic slowdown, was much less than the US. Plus, even in the US, there is debate as to whether the economic shutdown was overdone, particularly in light of new data indicating the fatality

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rate of COVID-19 is actually very low. Whose fault would it be if the US response was suboptimal or otherwise off the mark?

Mismanagement or Misdeeds

As the crisis unfolded, it was clear that most experts (doctors, scientists, disease control specialists) did not have a playbook for dealing with the virus. Many countries, including the US and throughout Europe, struggled to find the right approach to many issues including travel, work, treatment, quarantine, masks, etc. If China committed deliberate misdeeds or acts of gross negligence that would certainly be serious. But if China simply made judgements which, as with other countries, appear to be wrong in hindsight, should they be held accountable any more than any other country?

Misdemeanor or Major Crimes

What if China did something wrong but the impact was limited? For example, Mr. Trump mentioned that China delayed admitting that the virus was transmittable among humans for several weeks. There is credible evidence this is true. However, this occurred so early in the crisis it isn't clear it impacted decisions eventually made by America and other countries. Plus, knowing the disease can be transmitted and understanding its severity are very different. It isn't clear having that information a few weeks earlier would have changed decisions down the line.

Cover Up: Criticism or Secrets

Unfortunately, as this stage of its development, China doesn't allow for any criticism of its government. Silencing voices and jailing dissidents is the norm in China, not the exception. While this is a major problem itself, it also means that, just because China is censoring discussion, doesn't mean it is hiding nefarious actions. Rightly or wrongly, Mr. Trump is being criticized for his management of the virus response, not for deliberate or nefarious actions related to the virus. In China that kind of thing results in censorship and punishment of dissidents. Maybe China isn't hiding secrets, just squelching criticism.

If China committed any serious infraction, it is likely to be related to a lack of honesty and transparency—lying in order to understate the impact of the virus.

Frankly, there's no reason to think China would intentionally release or spread this virus. Plus, we have to allow for the possibility that China made mistakes, as other countries have. If China committed any serious infraction, it is likely to be related to a lack of honesty and transparency—lying in order to understate the impact of the virus. A small lie in this regard would be a small thing. But a big lie would be a big deal.

Trust in China will take a hit

Lastly, it should be said that, regardless of what other revelations are made, trust in China will take a hit due to COVID-19. China did not have a good reputation for transparency before COVID-19 and, despite China's protestations to the contrary, the pandemic didn't help. With another example that China is not always willing to match global standards, businesses will perceive that the political risk of doing business in China remains high. Businesses are already concerned about trade war risks. They know that other issues—Cyber (Huawei, TikTok, etc.), South China Sea, media and diplomatic personnel, Hong Kong, etc.—carry the risk of destabilizing relations enough to impact business. COVID-19 will only draw more attention to overall political risk.

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