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Chapter 19

China after the pandemics

How to survive international scepticism and domestic distrust?

Cátia Miriam Costa

Even six months after its outbreak, nobody yet knows the real impact that Covid-19 will have on human behaviour, societies and politics. People struggle worldwide to make sense of a challenge of such magnitude that it affects the way they work, conduct their relationships with family and friends, and organise their life safely. Above all, people expect to get back to their 'normal' life with a sense of security. While rationality pushes for solutions and alternative models of behaviour at the individual, national and international level, instinct drives the search for culprits, to identify who is responsible for this pandemic. If emotional reactions prevailed over an analytical and rational assessment of the situation, then disinformation, fake news and propaganda could find a fertile ground and even turn into a threat for both domestic stability and international peace. The choice of a rational approach largely depends on how political leaderships and national institutions look at this new context.

The language and the narrative of Covid-19 contribute to shape the framework for debate. To suggest that '*we are at war*' against this new virus, as many politicians and the media have repeatedly said, may be misleading not only in terms of discourse but action too. This is not a war. It is a fight, perhaps even a battle against a virus but most of all it is a recognition of the fact that science and technology do not have immediate answers for everything and that humanity is still fragile in its relationship with nature. War might in fact arrive, for real, afterwards, with the potential for conflict and competition that a lack of resources, economic crisis, and social unrest may bring. War is a human phenomenon, based on a sequence of conflictive events leading human groups against other human groups. The struggle against Covid-19 is not a war. Yet, it can be the episode accelerating the change that the world was somehow already experiencing because of the tension provoked by technological change, and economic, trade and power shift.

The economic and technological competition at the international level between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China may just be the beginning of a broader trend: the revision of the model of globalisation and international governance. The pandemic has accelerated this process and given it a new framework. People are now aware of the limitations in the control of nature and even of their own lives. Complex interdependence indeed failed precisely when people most needed it to supply masks or other equipment to face the pandemic. That begs the question who is most prepared for leading change.

Chinese challenges: pacifying society at home

Unlike most people think, during the pandemic in China there was a widespread conviction that the leadership of the country should introduce some reforms in politics. People demanded more transparency from authorities and, simultaneously, that the government listen

to ordinary people. The recognition of and tribute to the doctor who identified the virus for the first time were just one of the ways ordinary people found to show their disappointment with local authorities and the central government. The gratitude they expressed to this doctor was somehow a challenge to the political power, demanding public policies that favoured the citizens and not the maintenance of power. President Xi Jinping responded to this quest by introducing massive measures to contain the pandemic. Furthermore, the central government introduced a different approach to its communication strategy on the virus, making citizens an integral part of the solution that the government had planned.

Even before the pandemic, Chinese civil society had long demanded a type of national and local governance closer to the citizens' interests. Issues like environment, climate change, sustainable development and healthcare entered the public discussion. Concurrently, the demand for more transparency in public policies also arrived in the public sphere. It is no longer about increasing family incomes. It is about having a sustainable and healthy life. The pandemic contributed to increasing domestic distrust because people lost confidence in authorities during the initial mismanagement of this crisis. In spite of regaining ground as time passed by, Chinese authorities will have to introduce domestic governance reforms to accommodate the new demands that will arise from civil society. The increase of social and political demands can be contained if the authorities find a way to get back to strong economic growth and ensure the redistribution of benefits. The mobilisation of the armed forces with excellent results in the control of the pandemic, the collective effort of the Chinese people to solve the crisis, and the international anti-China discourse can help regroup Chinese society, strengthen the incumbent administration and boost national unity. Nonetheless, if the authorities are not able to manage the aftermath of the pandemic effectively, restoring economic growth and promoting social improvement, unrest is possible.

The central government and President Xi Jinping are aware of the increasing demand for transparency and more open public policies. These demands do not come exclusively from inside the country but also from the Chinese diaspora overseas. Chinese migration is today a significant pillar of the Chinese presence in the world. The central authorities in Beijing connect with expatriates as a way of maintaining a worldwide network of influence. Nowadays, Chinese migrants are more and more educated, wealthy and skilled, able to participate actively in social life in their host countries. Their role as '*intermediaries*' or '*brokers*' between China and the countries in which they live has increased significantly.

The Chinese authorities will face distrust as one of the main domestic challenges. This is relevant to economic recovery too as confidence is a major factor for economic success. Moreover, from a cultural perspective, trust is the basis of Chinese human relationship and a pillar of the Chinese understanding of profitable relations for everyone. This principle, based on Confucianism, also defends the respect for hierarchy, which allows change if order is respected. The Chinese government is perfectly aware of this. Beijing understands that the Chinese Dream project can fall apart if people do not have confidence in its key pillar. Therefore, restoration and enhancement of domestic trust is the primary challenge China is going to face the next months or even years.

China in the international arena

International relations are now reshaping and adjusting to a new context. A post-Covid-19 scenario is in the making, while states are still struggling with the virus and the uncertainty it will bring. Some analysts foresee a new order, dismantling the liberal multilateral order, in the guise of a 'new Cold War' bringing the US and China into confrontation. Some others, more cautiously, suggest that the countries displaying more resilience to and better management of the crisis will become (or remain) the world power(s). Some aspects of an alleged new order deserve further attention.

Before the pandemic, globalisation was already called into question. Many states expressed doubts about the benefit they were getting from the existing model. The US was the first to problematize globalisation and the way it was designed (largely by the US itself) as soon as globalisation no longer clearly gave leadership to the US. At the same time, Washington started to mistrust and undermine the multilateral system. On the contrary, China emerged as a defender of multilateralism and globalisation. Beijing now tries to present itself as an advocate in favour of the current system of international organisation and regimes. After all, this system allowed the significant growth and internationalization of China's economy on the world stage.

Moreover, China has promoted both the globalisation model and a diplomatic practice of '*bilateralism through multilateralism*', based on the organizations that it created and participates in, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-CELAC Forum or the Macau Forum. Furthermore, the Chinese flagship international project, the Belt & Road Initiative, follows a model anchored in multilateralism as it seeks to stimulate an international network based on bilateral agreements and regional initiatives. Accordingly, China now feels comfortable with the international mechanisms in which it takes part. Interestingly, these mechanisms are similar to those that the European Union uses for cooperation with Africa or Latin America. When China was unable to participate in existing international organisations, Beijing introduced equally multilateral initiatives, creating for example international financial institutions and development banks.

Globalisation and multilateralism suit China's interests. They favour Chinese presence on the global stage and, at the same time, they do not compromise the maintenance of strong bilateral relations. China did not revolutionise or substantially change any model of international relations. Instead, China adapted itself successfully to, and took full advantage of the existing international order. Even when China reached a position as decisive player for such order, Beijing refrained from defying it. China respected traditional mechanisms and complemented them with new ones following the same or a similar model. In reality, not much has changed in the post-World War II international order since China has taken its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council in since 1971. At least, not because of China's will or actions.

China mainly played with the rules set by others and used a pragmatic '*join the club*' approach. Recently, China has become perhaps 'too equal' to other major powers, thus being perceived by other states as a potential threat to their status and interests. Yet, looking back, China has only applied the rules of the game and turned them to its advantage. Beijing's successful *Research, Development and Innovation policy* was financed through both domestic research initiatives and Chinese investments in foreign research projects. This resulted in China moving from the position of '*factory of the world*' to that of '*laboratory of the world*', based

on science and technology. China has also dislocated intensive labour industries to other developing countries, and, at the same time, it has enhanced its own high technology industries. This change has taken place in approximately in the last decade or so, and has occasioned tensions with competitor countries.

In this context of intense international competition for trade and technology, the Covid-19 crisis broke out. The fact that the virus originated in China, and from there it expanded to the whole world, spurred international scepticism and wariness towards China. To be clear: For some countries, Covid-19 became a topic to add to the competition about trade, 5G or other technological advance. Some countries now have suspicions about the real origin and diffusion of the virus as well as about China's actual responsibilities and role in the pandemic. The US was the first to air the idea that China should pay some compensation for the economic losses caused by the virus to other countries; other states, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, followed suit. China reacted firmly and with disdain to such allegations. In fact, Beijing now presents itself as a champion of international solidarity and China has sent medical equipment and other aid to countries harshly hit by the virus. Some observers and even some political leaders, mainly in the West, consider these initiatives, the so-called '*mask diplomacy*', just a way to promote *soft power* and overcome the reputation damage that China suffered from the spread of the pandemic.

China is unlikely to overcome this scepticism easily. Countries such as the US or Australia are particularly critical. Still, China can use multilateralism to support states in difficulty and continue its international projects. It will not be easy, but interdependence may help the Chinese strategy and discourse of complementarity, mutual interests, and international solidarity. Ultimately, China does not need to change or reject the current international order to maintain its relevant role within it. An intensification of competition, both about the narrative of the crisis and the reshaping of the international system, is likely to occur.

Conclusion

After the pandemic, China will have to confront its model of development and foreign policy strategy. The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated a process that was already ongoing in Chinese society. The growing demand for transparency already existed in China. At the international level, China has only raised more scepticism, especially from those countries that are now afraid that China can overcome the crisis faster and better than they do. China is at a crossroads. The next steps will determine if its political model remains viable. Still, if China were isolated internationally, the country may be tempted to increase its own domestic industrial and technological capacity on the one hand, and look for more non-traditional partners internationally. This may result in a clear loss for the West. Cooperation in areas like science and technology remains the best option to engage with China and to promote a peaceful international environment.