Covid-19 ‘Enhanced China’s Position in the World Order’

Abstract Even though China was the first country to have to deal with the outbreak of Covid-19, its handling of the virus has actually served to enhance China’s position vis-a-vis traditional powers like the US and Western Europe.

The world economy came to a screeching halt in 2020 following the outbreak of Covid-19, a respiratory illness caused by the novel coronavirus, officially called SARS-CoV-2. To curb the rapid spread of the virus, many countries have implemented lockdowns and other unprecedented physical distancing measures, restricting huge swathes of the global population to their homes.

As the world scrambles to invent a vaccine amid rising numbers of deaths, there is intense speculation regarding the origin of the virus. While some blame China for the start of the pandemic, the origin of the virus is yet to be determined. Despite challenges, China has managed to keep its casualty figures from the virus relatively low compared to some Western countries.

In an interview with DW, Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singaporean diplomat and distinguished academic, spoke about the response of China and East Asian nations to the pandemic and how it compared to that of Western nations.

DW: The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have changed the world order drastically. How has the health emergency shaped China’s position in global affairs?

Kishore Mahbubani: Before the pandemic broke out, China was slowly heading toward becoming the world’s number one economic power. China initially stumbled into tackling the health crisis and made some crucial mistakes. The muzzling of the whistleblower, Li Wenliang, was an unfortunate event.

But once China recovered, it took care of Covid-19. The world was amazed at how effectively China put a stop to a very dangerous virus. All of this enhanced China’s position in the global world order.

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How did China manage to keep a low death rate from the Coronavirus?

China's low death rate is in line with other East Asian countries—Singapore, Japan, South Korea—and territories like Taiwan and Hong Kong. China controlled the pandemic by locking down the country quickly and decisively. That was the secret in keeping the death rate so low.

China has very strong institutions of administration which have strengthened over the years. In comparison, the US has weakened its public service agencies, defunded, demoralized, and delegitimized them. That's another reason China has done better in the management of the crisis.

The US has accused the World Health Organization (WHO) of being "China-centric" in its policy. How will the WHO's role shape up in light of growing political discontentment in the US?

I was Singapore's ambassador to the US for over 10 years. During my time there, I keenly observed how countries tried to cut funding for the UN. In the case of the WHO, even though it's such a critical organization for the world, the West, which includes both the US and the EU, have weakened the WHO by reducing mandatory contributions.

The WHO can't make long-term plans or recruit long-term health inspectors from voluntary contributions. Now that China is emerging as a great power, it will be good for China to bring back mandatory funding for the WHO to its previous levels. If China does that, it will find a lot of support for its campaign. China has made a good start by pledging an additional \$30 million (€27.5 million) as a voluntary contribution to the WHO. But I think Beijing can do more to strengthen the long-term capabilities of the WHO.

There are several conspiracy theories on the origin of the novel coronavirus. Why do you think there's more focus on this than on handling the outbreak, particularly in Western societies?

When Covid-19 broke out, China and the US could have left their differences aside and fought a common enemy together, which was a rational and sensible thing to do. Sadly, the pandemic has enhanced the geopolitical contest between the US and China. This geopolitical contest was enhanced by US President Donald Trump's trade war against China.

The US and some Western countries are using Covid-19 as a means to embarrass China. They are making some allegations that this virus was secretly manufactured in a Chinese laboratory. However, in the West, the good thing is that you have both sets of voices—voices condemning China and voices praising China.

Respectable, credible Western journals like *The Lancet* and *Nature* have studied these allegations and come to the conclusion that the information provided by China is correct, and that the virus arose from natural causes. As soon as China decoded the genome of the virus, it was shared with the world.

Will the coronavirus pandemic make the West more wary of China and Chinese businesses?

The American wariness of China isn't just due to Covid-19. It's a result of the geopolitical contest between the US and China. The only issue on which President Trump gets bipartisan support is when he beats up China. This type of anti-China sentiment is due to a long-term structural geopolitical contest between the US and China, not because of Covid-19.

Even if President Trump doesn't win in November, I can sadly and confidently predict that the US-China geopolitical contest will continue. The US will definitely make use of the mistakes China made in Covid-19 to enhance its criticism of China.

In your book, *Has China Won?*, you praised Xi Jinping's governance and said that, "There is a very strong potential that Xi Jinping could provide to China the beneficent kind of rule provided by a philosopher king." Does that statement stand true after the way China has handled the coronavirus pandemic?

When you run a country of 1.4 billion people—it's one of the toughest jobs in the world. Every day that China hangs together as a country is a miracle. If you want to judge any leader of China, you should not judge them by their statements, but by the results of their rule.

In the last three to four decades, the Chinese have experienced the greatest improvement in their standard of living. Clearly, the Chinese people have benefited a lot from this rule. If this record continues, and my guess is that it will, it will show that China has achieved a certain level of competence in leadership and government administration.

China has been criticized by many countries in the West for capitalizing on the pandemic, by sending masks and kits. How much truth is there in this statement?

It's very difficult to find out what is true and not true. I would listen to the governments of countries like Italy, Greece, Serbia. They still seem to be relatively happy with the help they have received from China.

Whereas, if you look at the governments of France and Germany—they seem to be upset with what China has said or done. China is not perfect. It can make mistakes. Maybe when China sent masks, it sent them too quickly without checking them for quality.

At the end of the day, we have to wait and see what the outcome of this entire situation will be. I predict that more and more countries will reach out to China for assistance as Covid-19 hits harder.

A significant portion of Singapore's coronavirus cases are from dormitories housing foreign workers. How did the Singaporean government tackle the outbreak in these dormitories?

Singapore's management of Covid-19 has been greatly admired by the rest of the world. However, we were slow to spot what was happening in the foreign worker

dormitories. We could have acted faster to stop it from growing. Once Singapore recognized the problem, I think Singapore did a very effective job in managing it.

Singapore was remarkably generous in trying to help the foreign workers. The prime minister of Singapore sent a message to the families of these foreign workers in countries like India and Bangladesh, telling them to not worry as Singapore is taking care of their family members. Foreign workers in Singapore also have the same access to world class health facilities that citizens do.

If you look at the overall number of deaths in Singapore from the virus — it's just 14. It's a remarkable track record, as compared to countries like the US, where the death toll is over 55,000.

How did Asian countries like Singapore, China, and South Korea handle misinformation related to Covid-19, as compared to countries like the US?

East Asian countries learned the validity of good science from the West. Even today, East Asia relies on the West for major breakthroughs in areas like medicine. All of us in East Asia are genuinely puzzled that the Trump administration has walked away from science and prescriptions during this pandemic. This is not completely true of the West as New Zealand and Germany are paying attention to science as carefully as East Asia.

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