

DEFENDING AGAINST BIOTHRREATS: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC TO ENHANCE U.S. DEFENSES AGAINST PANDEMICS AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY PRESS, JULY 2020

CHAPTER 4.

A CHINESE COMMUNIST VIRUS AT THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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On the last day of 2019, the World Health Organization learned through indirect channels of an outbreak of pneumonia of “unknown cause” that had been spreading for weeks in the Chinese city of Wuhan. It took another three days and two rounds of WHO requests before China’s national authorities finally confirmed the outbreak, though the WHO, in its zeal to make China look good, implied in its public statements that China itself had promptly notified them and fully cooperated from the start.

So began the WHO’s involvement in one of the most lethal deceptions of modern times. As it turned out, the main service the United Nations health agency provided to China during the critical early stages of the outbreak was not to help China contain the disease, but to help China cover it up. For almost three weeks, while China’s Communist Party enforcers silenced Chinese doctors, ordered laboratories to destroy specimens, underreported the rapidly rising case numbers, and insisted there was no serious danger of contagion, the role that Beijing assigned to the WHO was to nod along with whatever the regime said and reassure the world that the Communist Party’s lies were true.

And lying for China is exactly what the WHO did, dutifully carrying on for months. Top WHO officials, especially Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, praised Xi Jinping’s laggard actions as swift, his regime’s dummied data as accurate, and his censorship as transparent. Assuming the WHO top brass have any ability to distinguish fact from fiction—which they surely do—their priorities appeared to have less to do with disease control than with legitimizing the actions of China’s ruling Communist Party, the CCP, whatever those might be.



Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

Director-General
World Health
Organization

AIDING AND ABETTING CHINA'S CORONAVIRUS COVERUP

Mendacity and malfeasance are not new within the United Nations system. But rarely, if ever, have these failings converged to such globally devastating effect as they did in the WHO's handling of China's coronavirus outbreak. Operating since 1948 as a specialized UN agency, the WHO is tasked with promoting and safeguarding world health. One of the WHO's most vital missions is to monitor potentially deadly outbreaks, alert the world swiftly to any danger, provide useful information, and coordinate a response. Quite likely, lives depend on it.

Thus, during the critical early phase of the Wuhan outbreak, when the virus might still have been contained inside China, the world looked to the WHO for information and guidance. The WHO delivered dangerously misleading CCP reassurances, repackaged under a UN label. The most notorious example is a message it released on January 14, on Twitter: "Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission."

This statement is both artfully hedged (attributing the information to Chinese authorities) and profoundly misleading (the main message still comes down to "don't be too worried, this bug really isn't very contagious"). In the main, the WHO's lies did not reside in China's propaganda per se, but in appearing to endorse it, thereby legitimizing the lies. Had China's state propaganda mills simply tweeted directly that the virus was not very contagious, they might have drawn more skepticism. But channeled via the WHO, China's mortally dangerous malarkey carried a whiff of due diligence. As it turns out, that was wrong.

While the WHO was putting its imprimatur on Beijing's fictions, the disease was spreading from China around the globe, seeding what quickly became the most destructive pandemic in a century. Given what we now know about the infection rates of this virus, it's clear that China's authorities—even as they reported no new cases to the WHO for almost 2 weeks in the first half of January—had to know they had a nasty problem on their hands. We can only guess whether they allowed the virus to spread through sheer bungling, as Beijing tried to signal by blaming provincial officials, or whether Beijing unleashed the virus by malicious design, as Gordon Chang suggests earlier in this monograph, on the theory that if China was going to take a big hit from this plague, Beijing would level the playing field by ensuring the rest of the world shared the misery.

Whatever the inner workings, China's dictator, President Xi Jinping, eventually let it be known that in secret proceedings on January 7, a week after the WHO learned of the coronavirus, Xi himself had personally taken direct charge of dealing with the outbreak. Evidently, he then decided to let the festival of infection carry on for almost 2 more weeks, including a communal potluck dinner for some 40,000 families in Wuhan on January 18 and the travel of huge numbers of people out of Wuhan in advance of the Chinese lunar new year holiday.

Some of those travelers from Wuhan were heading abroad, but if their destination countries had any worries about such visitors bringing the virus, they could take comfort in the main sound bite of the WHO's January 14 tweet: no clear evidence of person-to-person transmission.

On January 20, by which time cases had appeared in Thailand, Japan, and South Korea as well as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangdong Province, China's authorities suddenly reversed course and announced that the new coronavirus was, after all, passing from human to human. Three days later, on January 23, China's government imposed what was at that stage the largest quarantine in history, slamming a lockdown on all of Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, which then expanded to quarantines affecting hundreds of millions more.

TEDROS PRAISES XI'S HANDLING OF VIRUS AND BASHES TRUMP

The Wuhan lockdown looked like the moment for the WHO to finally sound a world alarm, by declaring what is known as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). But, no, the WHO delayed while Tedros flew to Beijing for tea and a chat with Xi Jinping. Upon his return to the WHO headquarters in Geneva, Tedros held a press conference at which he made no mention of how badly Xi had misled the WHO and the world. Instead, he rolled out a new role for Xi (no longer the douanier of a merely domestic virus), casting him as a champion of global disease control. Tedros praised Xi for his “very rare leadership” and suggested it was only due to the Chinese government’s “extraordinary steps” that the spread abroad had been limited to what was by then “only” 68 cases in 15 countries. Tedros suggested that China, for its efforts, “deserves our gratitude and respect.”

The next day, January 30—having waited a full 10 days after China’s admission that the virus could indeed spread from person to person, and almost a month after learning of the outbreak —Tedros finally declared a global health emergency, the much-delayed PHEIC. By then, the number of confirmed cases in China had soared to 7,726, and the number abroad had jumped to 98 cases in 18 countries. On this occasion, Tedros told the media that the speed with which China had detected the outbreak and sequenced and shared the genome was “very impressive and beyond words.”

Toward President Trump, and America generally, the WHO was less accommodating. While Tedros was praising Beijing for its abrupt, draconian lockdowns, he was simultaneously urging the rest of the world to keep travel open with China. On February 3, in response to President Trump’s ban on flights from China to the United States, Tedros said there was no need for measures that “unnecessarily interfere with international trade” to prevent the spread of the virus. In Europe, which followed the WHO’s advice, the open travel policy fueled the next massive outbreak. Not until March 11 did Tedros raise the level of international alarm by declaring the outbreak a pandemic. By that time, Northern Italy had succeeded Wuhan as the world’s worst hot spot.

In America, where President Trump had imposed restrictions on air traffic with China over the objections of both the WHO and Beijing, the WHO’s criticism of this move stirred up enormous controversy. In the meantime, the outbreak in Europe spilled into the United States and left America grappling on a bruising scale with the coronavirus.

TEDROS INVENTS NAME FOR VIRUS TO DEFLECT BLAME FROM CHINA

Prior to that, on February 11, Tedros had already done Xi another favor, bestowing on the coronavirus a name the WHO had specifically invented to avoid imputing any blame to China for the pestilence. Tedros announced that the virus had been officially dubbed SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it produced would go by the deliberately bland and easy-to-remember name of COVID-19 (shorthand for “coronavirus disease” and year “2019,” when the outbreak emerged in Wuhan).

On February 26, Tedros made a further point of divorcing China from COVID-19, announcing at a WHO press conference: “Yesterday, the number of new cases reported outside China exceeded the number of new cases in China for the first time.” That might sound like a casual observation, but it was right about that same juncture that Chinese state media and officials began insinuating that the virus originated not in China, but in the United States. This led, by late March, to Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian posting a series of questions on Twitter, clearly aimed at stoking rumors and implying that the U.S. military had brought the virus to China in late 2019 while attending the Military World Games in Wuhan. An example of one of Zhao’s tweets is below.



THE WHO'S POTEMKIN VIRUS INSPECTION OF CHINA

The WHO's accommodating ways with China's despotic regime also went on display when it sent a mission to China in mid-February to learn more about COVID-19. It was not actually an independent mission, but a "WHO-China Joint Mission," staffed by 13 international experts and 12 health professionals from China. To judge by the itinerary and resulting report, it had perhaps a bit too much in common with the Potemkin tours once offered by the USSR's Intourist to gullible foreigners who wished to believe they were seeing authentic Soviet life. The team, or various subsets thereof, raced through at least seven locations in 9 days, during which they met with hundreds of people presenting information—but all effectively under escort (in China's massively controlled surveillance state). Two experts dispatched by the United States were included on the WHO team, but only three members of the WHO contingent were permitted to visit Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak, and only for 2 days. The Americans were not among them. There was no discernible effort to investigate the origin of the virus, no visit to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and certainly no mention of the underground videos that Wuhan bloggers had been smuggling out past China's Great Firewall, showing people collapsing in the street, being welded into their homes, or dragged out screaming from their apartments to be forced into group quarantines. China's payola for choreographing this tour came in the form of gushing praise from the WHO team leader, Bruce Aylward, a Canadian, who told an interviewer, "If I had COVID-19, I'd want to be treated in China."

TEDROS FOLLOWS BEIJING'S ORDERS TO SHUN TAIWAN

As models of COVID-19-control go, the standout example is not China, but Taiwan, a Chinese democracy of almost 24 million people who have managed to suppress COVID-19 without trading away their freedom. As of this writing, Taiwan went through the many months of the China-spawned coronavirus pandemic with fewer than 450 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and seven deaths, an

extraordinarily low number. Taiwan's people remember the lessons they learned from the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak that began in China—another killer coronavirus. In that case, China hid the outbreak for months, until the virus finally spread to Hong Kong and more than two dozen other places around the globe, including Taiwan. SARS infected more than 8,000 people and killed 774 before fading away.

SARS was less contagious than COVID-19, but caused severe pneumonia with a much higher mortality rate. Wherever it struck, it left people scared. When Taiwan's health authorities saw items circulating online in December 2019 about pneumonia in Wuhan of unknown cause, they took steps immediately to prepare for a return of SARS, or something like it. They began screening air passengers arriving from mainland China and readying further measures. On December 31, the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control effectively sent to the WHO the alert that China itself had failed to provide. In an email that included explosive details, Taiwan asked the WHO for more information:

News resources today indicate that at least seven atypical pneumonia cases were reported in Wuhan, CHINA. Their health authorities replied to the media that the cases were believed not SARS; however, the samples are still under examination, and cases have been isolated for treatment. I would greatly appreciate it if you have relevant information to share with us.¹

For anyone versed in SARS, which the WHO certainly should be, Taiwan's mention of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan being put in isolation should have sent up a warning flare that this was potentially a highly dangerous outbreak, not to be covered up or shrugged off. This kind of forthright dealing and foresight is a testament that Taiwan, which held observer status at the WHO from 2009–2016, would be a valuable member of the WHO, more so in many ways than mainland China with its cover-ups, propaganda, predatory ambitions, and disquieting record of engendering killer coronaviruses. But China doesn't want an unsubjugated Taiwan at the WHO, so, to please Beijing, the WHO rejects democratic Taiwan—even as it makes room for the likes of North Korea, Iran, and China. The WHO's Bruce Aylward, the Canadian who said if he had COVID-19 he would want to be treated in China, gave an interview in April to Hong Kong's RTHK TV station, in which the reporter asked him several times if the WHO might reconsider Taiwan's status. Aylward refused to answer, first hanging up, and when the reporter called back, simply brushing aside the question.

On April 8, Tedros took an even nastier attitude toward Taiwan. At a press briefing in which he lauded the WHO for various accomplishments during the coronavirus pandemic and called for “countries and partners to bring the world together,” Tedros then singled out Taiwan for insult and attack. His remarks implied that people from Taiwan had been sending him racist slurs because he is from Africa. He presented no evidence of any kind, so there was nothing concrete for Taiwan to refute. Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen responded with a Facebook Post inviting Tedros to come visit Taiwan. She wrote to Tedros, “Taiwan has always opposed all forms of discrimination,” and added, “For years we have been excluded from international organizations and we know better than anyone else what it feels like to be discriminated against and isolated.”

XI TRIES TO CHANGE THE NARRATIVE ABOUT THE PANDEMIC AT MAY 2020 WHO ANNUAL MEETING

By May 2020, China had been subjected to growing international criticism for its mishandling of the coronavirus. U.S. officials, especially President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, were claiming that Beijing's deceptions about the virus and withholding of information were responsible for its spread in the United States. By that time, Australia was calling for an independent investigation of the origin of the virus in Wuhan. There were calls from the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom for China to pay billions of dollars in compensation for its negligent handling of the pandemic.

Chinese officials attempted to change the global narrative about the coronavirus pandemic at the WHO's annual World Health Assembly on May 18, 2020 (held online, in the era of COVID-19), to portray China in a positive light and prevent any independent and intrusive investigation of the virus origins in China.

Chinese President Xi Jinping appeared as the star speaker at the WHO meeting and made news when he said China would provide \$2 billion over two years "to help with COVID-19 response." But Xi did not say these funds would be given to the WHO. Rather, China plans to spend those funds on "economic and social development in affected countries, especially developing countries." The way Xi's CCP works, it would be no great surprise if those funds are spent not on impoverished and sick human beings, but on more debt trap diplomacy for China to acquire, say, another port. Xi's offer sounded more like a bid to advance China's dreams of moving toward world domination than help for the WHO's mission of promoting health.

President Xi also made news at the WHO meeting by appearing to reverse himself, agreeing to an "objective and impartial" investigation into the origins of the virus and the global response, including by the WHO. But Xi did not actually concede anything because World Health Assembly members voted for a resolution approving an investigation by the WHO—which is beholden to Beijing—and not an independent investigation as demanded by Australia and other countries. Neither China nor any other nation was mentioned in this resolution. Xi agreed to cooperate with this investigation "once the health emergency ends," which could be years in the future.

Xi also proposed that China work with the UN "to set up a global humanitarian and response depot and hub in China." This might be handy for Xi if he's planning to let loose more pandemics, but it's not clear why the UN should be involved—unless he's hoping that America, via its contributions to the UN system, will help pay for it.

Xi used the May 2020 World Health Assembly meeting to generate positive press for China with deceptive offers of aid to fight the virus and agreement to a significantly watered-down proposal to investigate its origins. Xi's efforts were at least partially successful because he played off widespread opposition by WHO members to President Trump's threats to cut off funding to the WHO and withdraw from the organization.

TRUMP CALLS OUT WHO FOR BEING BEIJING'S PUPPET

By April, after more than three months of watching the WHO perform as a shill for China's Communist Party, President Trump developed doubts about the benefits of supporting this organization. On April 14, Trump announced he was suspending U.S. funding to the WHO, pending a 30-day review of what had gone wrong. On May 18 he sent an open letter to Tedros, noting among other things that Tedros had delayed declaring a pandemic until the virus "had killed more than 4,000 people and infected more than 100,000 in at least 114 countries around globe." Trump wrote, reasonably enough, that "The only way forward for the World Health Organization is if it can actually demonstrate independence from China." Trump warned that if the WHO did not "commit to substantive improvements within 30 days," he would make the U.S. funding freeze permanent and reconsider U.S. membership in the organization.

During the mid-May WHO World Health Assembly, President Trump said about the WHO: "They're a puppet of China, they're China-centric."

On May 29, with no sign from the WHO of any plans to downsize China's dominant role, Trump announced he was terminating the U.S. relationship with the WHO. He detailed that "China has total control over the World Health Organization, despite paying only \$40 million per year compared to what

the United States has been paying, which is approximately \$450 million a year.” He said the United States will be “redirecting those funds to other worldwide and deserving, urgent, global public health needs.”

There’s been a lot of hand-wringing over this by people who regard the WHO as a permanent world fixture, deserving of support if only because global health sounds awfully good—especially during a pandemic. But perhaps today’s WHO is not the ideal vehicle for such goals. It’s highly unlikely that in any short or medium term the WHO can be reformed. Tedros’s current five-year term won’t expire until 2022. In view of his performance during the current pandemic, China might be quite happy to help him win another. China’s grip on the WHO has clearly reached the stage at which it will only loosen up if there is regime change in Beijing.

CHINA HAS COLONIZED THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

China had been busy colonizing the WHO for years, well before Tedros took charge. This is part of a broad bid by Beijing to control ever more terrain within the UN and other international organizations. This campaign under Xi Jinping has now led to China running four of the UN’s 15 specialized agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

In the case of the WHO, China was effectively in charge from 2007–2017, for 10 years before Tedros became director-general. The WHO’s previous top boss was Margaret Chan of Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous region of China (or it was until Beijing broke its treaty promises and rolled right over Hong Kong’s legal system with a new national security law). Chan served as Hong Kong’s less than entirely successful director of health during the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak that spread from China to Hong Kong. In 2004, Hong Kong’s legislature voted to censure her for failing to respond quickly enough to “soft intelligence” about the SARS crisis brewing just north of Hong Kong’s border.

As WHO director-general, Chan oversaw the appointment of Xi Jinping’s wife, Peng Liyuan, as a WHO Goodwill Ambassador. She presided over the WHO’s disastrously botched response to a major Ebola outbreak from 2013–2014 in West Africa. The WHO’s failings on that occasion included—as with COVID-19 today—a damaging delay in declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The head of that WHO Ebola Response Team was the same Bruce Aylward who doesn’t like to answer questions about Taiwan and regards China as a world leader in disease management. In 2015, a WHO panel investigating the agency’s performance in the West African Ebola outbreak reported, “The Panel considers that WHO does not currently possess the capacity or organizational culture to deliver a full emergency public health response.”

During Chan’s final months at the helm of the WHO, in 2017, she hosted a first visit to the organization’s Geneva headquarters by Xi Jinping and his wife. Tedros, a former health minister and foreign minister of Ethiopia, was then running his successful campaign, as China’s favored candidate, to succeed Chan. Tedros was also backed by a bloc of African and Asian countries.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was a controversial choice to head the WHO. He likes to be called “Dr. Tedros” but is not a medical doctor—he holds a PhD in Community Health. Tedros is the first WHO director-general in the organization’s 72-year history who is not a medical doctor. His 2017 election as WHO director-general was described as “nasty” and he was accused by another candidate of covering up three cholera epidemics in Ethiopia when he was health minister. Tedros denied this charge.^{2,3}

In 2017, Tedros attempted to name then Zimbabwe President-for-Life Robert Mugabe a WHO Goodwill Ambassador in recognition of his supposed commitment to public health. Tedros praised Zimbabwe at the time as a country that “places universal health coverage and health promotion at the

center of its policies to provide health care to all.” Tedros was forced to withdraw this offer due to international outrage against the Zimbabwean dictator’s abysmal human rights record and years of mismanagement of the country that caused the health care system to collapse. Commenting on this decision, “Several former and current WHO staff said privately they were appalled at the poor judgement and miscalculation by Tedros,” according to *The Guardian*.⁴

There’s at least one thing Chan and Tedros have in common, beyond Beijing’s apparent appreciation for their style of running the WHO, with its 7,000 staffers and annual budget of more than \$2 billion. Both Chan and Tedros appear prone to management styles that have inspired news coverage of the WHO’s extravagant travel habits.

According to the Associated Press (AP), during the final days of Chan’s tenure in 2017, the WHO “routinely spends about \$200 million a year on travel—far more than what it does out to fight some of the biggest problems in public health, including AIDS, tuberculosis or malaria.” The AP article recounted that WHO staff were openly ignoring rules meant to limit travel costs. Chan herself stayed at a suite in Guinea costing \$1,008 per night on a trip to congratulate health workers for beating Ebola.⁵

Apparently things are slightly leaner under Tedros, but not by much. Many WHO staffers still find ways to fly business class and bill it to the WHO, even when they not authorized for such travel. In 2019, the AP reported, “The World Health Organization spent nearly \$192 million on travel expenses last year, with staffers sometimes breaking the agency’s own rules by traveling in business class, booking expensive last-minute tickets and traveling without the required approvals.” Noting that this represented a 4% decrease from the Chan era, the AP also quoted Sophie Harman, a global health professor at Queen Mary University in London, who said “The agency’s inability to curb its expenses could undermine its credibility and make it more difficult to raise money to fight health crises.”⁶

CONCLUSION

Fed up with the WHO’s gross mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, behavior as a Chinese puppet, and corruption, President Trump sent the world a powerful message when he cut off U.S. funding and withdrew the United States from the organization. It is unclear at this time whether Trump officials believe there is any real prospect that the WHO will implement reforms to address Trump’s concerns or if they have concluded the WHO is irredeemable and should be replaced by a new international health organization.

For a variety of reasons, America’s withdrawal from the WHO will not cripple the organization and is unlikely to lead to an alternative health organization. America’s \$450 million annual WHO contribution is only about 16% of the organization’s budget. Other large, corrupt UN organizations like UNESCO have survived U.S. withdrawals. Moreover, the U.S. withdrawals were widely unpopular with WHO members, few of which are likely to follow the United States out the door. President Trump’s withdrawal also fell under strong criticism from his political opponents, some of whom pledged to reverse his decision.

Nevertheless, the absence of the United States, the global leader in medical research, will be a sore spot for the WHO and will likely lead to pressure from many of its members for reforms. It remains to be seen whether the WHO will implement serious reforms and cease collaboration with the Chinese Communist government to convince the Trump administration to rejoin the organization.

NOTES

- ¹ Reuters. (2020, April 11). Taiwan, WHO spar again over coronavirus information sharing. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-taiwan/taiwan-who-spar-again-over-coronavirus-information-sharing-idUSKCN21T0BA>
- ² McNeil, D. G., Jr. (2017, May 13). Candidate to lead the W.H.O. accused of covering up epidemics. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/health/candidate-who-director-general-ethiopia-cholera-outbreaks.html>
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- ⁵ Cheng, M. (2017, May 22). *AP Exclusive: Strapped UN health agency spends big on travel*. Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/3d8569ea7bd140e4ba02bc1712cd12ab/AP-Exclusive:-Strapped-UN-health-agency-spends-big-on-travel>
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