

Covid-19 and The Future of Our Relationship with China

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Donald Trump faces a critical test for re-election in November. He has disastrously mismanaged the Covid-19 pandemic and is in danger of losing the election, because of more than 130,000 viral deaths and manifest failure to act to effectively control spread of the virus. He now seeks to blame all the deaths around the world on President Xi Jinping, for not stamping it out or making the facts known when it first arose. He calls for an urgent international review to confirm his judgement. What are the facts?

On January 1, WHO bulletin [1] announced the outbreak of a small cluster of severe acute pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan on 29 December and 3 January. In immediate response, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore moved to set up processes to safeguard their borders from this date. WHO was announcing a new acute respiratory disease cluster of which half the cases were linked with the Wuhan Wet Market. It raised memories of the SARS outbreak in 2002 due to a corona virus, which had claimed 774 deaths in many countries by 2004. A second corona virus outbreak was The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), first seen in Saudi Arabia in 2012, initially associated with camels, became a serious international epidemic with 850 deaths with respiratory failure in 27 countries by 2019. ‘Zoonoses’, with spread of viruses to humans from other species, are never easy to handle. They are readily spread by bats and possibly also small crustaceans in wet-markets.

In reality China moved quickly to identify the genetic structure of the virus through its group of fine research

institutes, including that at Wuhan, on 12 January [2, 3]. It was all done with astonishing speed. Part of the viral genome matched that which caused SARS. Their report meant other nations could rapidly develop tests to detect cases. Chinese authorities monitored the characteristics of the disease through January, keeping other countries informed through the WHO and international journals. Wuhan Seafood Market was closed on 1 January.

On 14 January, WHO released a statement attributed to its Emergency Team in Geneva that ‘there was no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission in Wuhan [5]. This was China’s view. However, on the same day, also in Geneva, a distinguished US epidemiologist, Dr Maria van Kerkhove, described by WHO’s Executive Director as the principal technical advisor and leader of the WHO Emergency Response Team, released a directly opposed view in a Geneva Press Conference, warning of the likelihood of rapid international spread. The facts pointed clearly in this direction and thus became available internationally.

By 22 January, the WHO had set up an expert International Emergency Committee, Nominated by WHO members [4, 5]. WHO now agreed to declare a ‘public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)’ as a formal ‘red alert’ for the world. The WHO Emergency Committee was, at that time, seriously divided on whether or not to declare a ‘pandemic’, with at least one major member, presumably China, strongly opposed, not willing to declare person to person spread.

China was preoccupied with the disease spreading within China and presumably opposed any distractions via WHO statements.

Australia, through its Chief Medical Officer Brendon Murphy watched the flow of information about the disease through WHO. Before the end of January cases had been identified in Thailand and Japan. France had its first case identified on 24 January [6] the US on 15 January [7] and Australia on January 26 [8].

President Xi had been personally involved in closing down the whole industrial city of Wuhan. Residents could not leave by public transport. Epidemic preventive safeguards were instituted forcefully across China, with WHO advice at every stage.

On 1 February Professor Brendon Murphy, Australia's Chief Medical Officer, consulted with our Minister for Health Greg Hunt, and then a meeting of the Cabinet Emergency Committee to activate the emergency powers set out in our Biosecurity Act of 2015, dating from SARS. Government immediately barred flights from China to Australia, leading to criticism from China, and the WHO (not wishing to upset China). Taiwan, Japan and Singapore, and then the US, joined us in this, being well aware of what was likely to happen with spread of virus.

Donald Trump, after initially labelling the new disease in February as 'just another flu' which would go away', took no action to prepare America to handle it, despite even the delayed March 11th declaration by WHO of a *pandemic*.

Thereafter, the pandemic spread rapidly internationally with now the greatest number of deaths in the US. Trump's failure to act appropriately is now judged by many in the US as threatening his re-election in November. He seized on a rumor spread in China by research competitors of the Wuhan Institute for Virology, that as it had over several months been doing research on corona viruses in bats, the whole pandemic might have been due to accidental escape of the virus from its laboratory. Wuhan is the key virus laboratory of The Chinese National Institute for Medical Research and is equipped with security facilities of the highest international standard. A review in China found no evidence to support the rumor. Despite this, Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo now claims to have proof that the rumor is true, but will not release it! Trump now

demands an international review, accusing President Xi of causing the pandemic by obscuring the facts and not killing the virus before it spread to the world. Scott Morrison immediately supported this friend Trump's call, but for casting doubt on blaming the Wuhan Institute. Chinese diplomats will have informed the President that the call is linked with Trump's many social media outbursts blaming Xi with every death internationally.

The European members of WHO jointly proposed a more moderate process to review the handling of the pandemic, not linked with Trump's call. China has agreed to participate in due course.

Since these events, Australia has done a remarkable job with coordinated actions through a newly constituted National Cabinet, with Premiers of every state and territory and a matching committee of Chief Medical Officers under Murphy, curbing the growth of the pandemic in Australia.

Australia is now seen by China as a partner to Trump's crusade! His campaign leading to the election, will be an ugly crusade against China. Already China has imposed costly trade sanctions on Australia. In reality, we must work with China, no matter how difficult it is becoming, whilst safeguarding our own interests. China will remain powerful in the Asia-Pacific region. Being tied to Trump's electoral outbursts makes this far harder. The channels of diplomacy must be free to be used in seeking to moderate any aggressive actions by China. We can be seen as a middle power seeking collaboration with China, whilst still watching our own interests.

References

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