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COVID-19 and Xi Jinping's Fight and Win Strategy: Implications for China

Amrita Jash

What we [China] fought was a people's war against the outbreak. We have put up a strenuous struggle and made tremendous sacrifices. Now the situation in China is moving steadily in a positive direction. Life and work are quickly returning to normal. Yet, there is no way we will lower our guard or relax control.

—Chinese President Xi Jinping, March 26, 2020¹

On January 28, 2020, in a meeting with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on the spread of novel coronavirus epidemic in Wuhan (the capital of central China's Hubei province), Chinese President Xi Jinping remarked, saying, "The epidemic is a devil. We will not let it hide."² Furthermore, Xi affirmed that China has full confidence and capability to win the battle against the virus outbreak. As noted, on March 10 at Wuhan, Xi declared: "Victory for Wuhan, victory for Hubei, and victory for China!"³ What is striking to note, as China declared its win over the epidemic, WHO on March 11, declared COVID-19 as a global "pandemic."⁴

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Table 1: Trajectory of the Development of Coronavirus from nCov to COVID-19 (December 2019-March 2020)

Date	Response
December 29, 2019	Chinese authorities identified a cluster of similar pneumonia cases of unknown aetiology in Wuhan
December 31, 2019	China first reported to the WHO Country Office about the pneumonia of an unknown cause
January 30, 2020	WHO declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern
February 11, 2020	WHO named the new coronavirus disease as COVID-19
March 11, 2020	WHO announced COVID-19 as a “global pandemic”
March 17, 2020	WHO Reported: Globally Confirmed cases: 179,111; Total Deaths: 7,426
March 25, 2020	WHO Reported: Globally Confirmed Cases: 414,179; Total Deaths: 18,440
March 27, 2020	WHO Reported: Globally Confirmed Cases: 512,701; Total Deaths: 23,495
March 29, 2020	WHO Reported: Globally Confirmed Cases: 575,444; Total Deaths: 26,654; Total affected countries, areas or territories: 201
March 30, 2020	WHO Reported: Globally Confirmed Cases: 638,146; Total Deaths: 30,105; Total affected countries, areas or territories: 202
	WHO Reported: Globally Confirmed Cases: 697,244; Total Deaths: 33,257; Total affected countries, areas or territories: 203

Source: Compiled by the Author in consultation with data available at WHO Website.⁵

However, what called for this change in perception is the transition of the epicentre from Wuhan-China to that of Italy in Europe. This was followed by rapid outbreaks in Iran, Spain and United States (US)—the new epicentres of the pandemic, as outlined in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Major Epicentres of COVID-19 Worldwide
(as of March 31, 2020)**

Country	Total Confirmed Cases	Total Deaths
China	82,455	3,313
Italy	97,689	10,781
United States of America	122,653	2,112
Spain	78,787	6,528
Iran	41,495	2,757

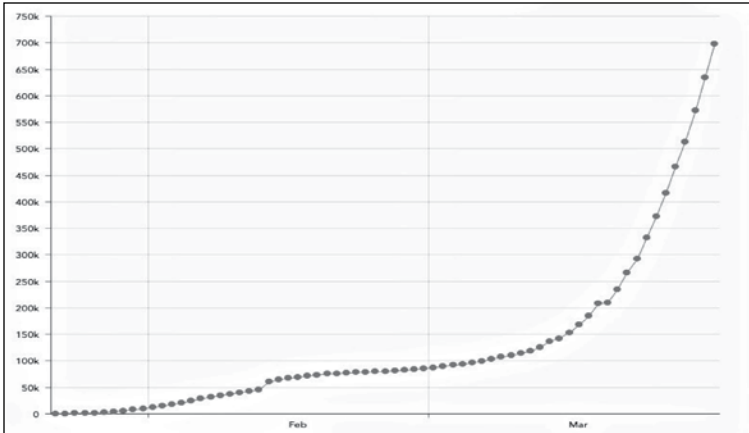
Source: Compiled by the Author in consultation with data available at WHO Website.⁶

What is noteworthy is the trend of duality over impressions of COVID-19 figures between China and the rest of the world. That is, on one end, the number of new cases in China witnesses a downturn despite its significant population size of 1.4 billion; on the other end, the sum of cases of all other countries badly affected exhibit an exponential growth that exceeded China. As noted, China's share of new cases has dropped from being more than 90 per cent to that of becoming one per cent.⁷ What explains this sharp fall of COVID-19 cases in China?

Such a discrepancy demands significant attention and calls for speculations over China's transparency in releasing its COVID-19 figures. To suggest, with such voids at play, the pertinent query remains: Did Xi succeed in winning the battle against COVID-19? The answer remains "No," as China has been able to slow the spread of the virus, but has failed to contain it. To argue so, as the outbreak that started in Wuhan in December 2019 rapidly emerged into a global pandemic by March 2020 resulting in greater damage beyond China, as noted in Figure 1.

The graph denotes the rapid outbreak of the pandemic—suggesting the increasing uncertainty over prevention and control of COVID-19. However, China with its "Wuhan win" thinks otherwise, as highlighted in its promotion of the idea that "COVID-19 can and will be contained."⁹

**Figure 1: Cumulative Growth of COVID-19 Cases Globally
(January 22-March 29, 2020)**



Source: WHO.⁸

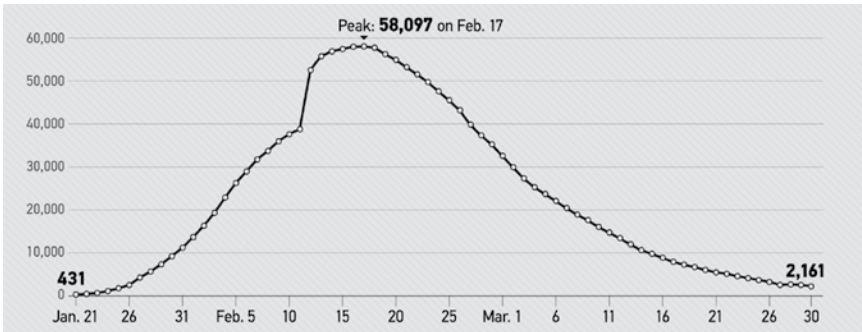
In doing so, China fails to address the key factor “by when” it will and “how” it will be contained. In this context, Xi’s “victory call” can be argued to be more “symbolic than significant”—upholding the image of a “strong, confident and responsible” China.

In view of this, the paper seeks to address two key aspects: What explains the Chinese understanding of “win” over COVID-19? Second, what are the implications of the pandemic on China at large and Xi Jinping, in particular?

Ground Zero at Wuhan: *How China Fought the COVID-19 Battle?*

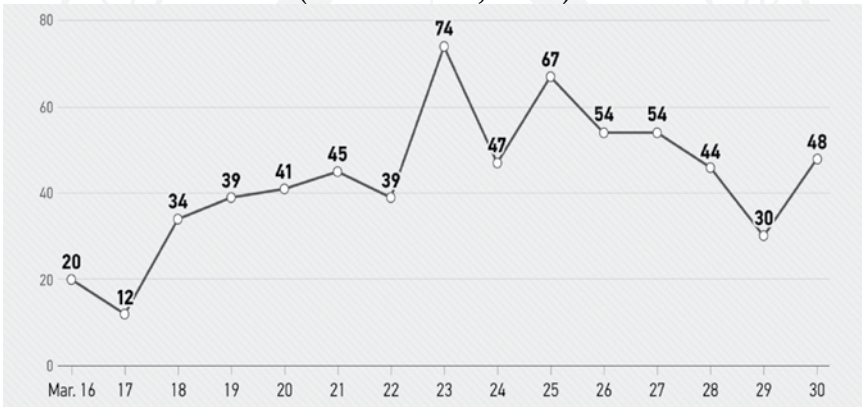
On March 19, China for the first time reported “zero domestically-transmitted COVID-19 cases” in Wuhan,¹⁰ and as of March 31, China has reported 771 imported cases (mostly Chinese nationals returning from abroad),¹¹ as per the data of China’s National Health Commission shown in Figures 2, 3 and 4 respectively.

Figure 2: Downward Trend of COVID-19 Cases in Mainland China (January 21-March 30, 2020)



Source: CGTN.¹²

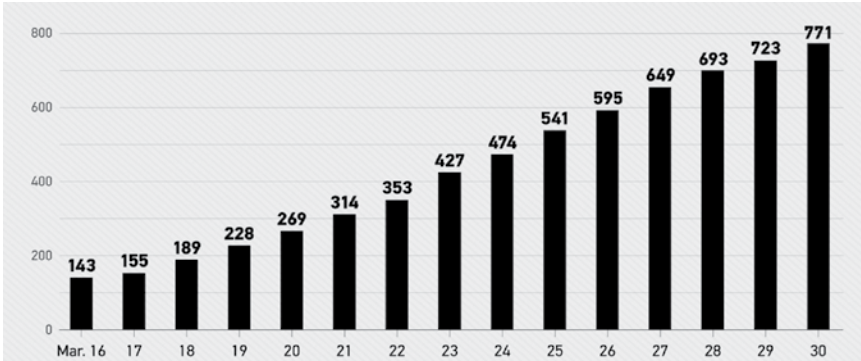
Figure 3: Trend of Imported Cases in Mainland China (March 16-30, 2020)



Source: CGTN.¹³

Given its progression, Chinese government declared to lift the lockdown of Wuhan, as imposed since January 23—removing the restrictions on outbound travel.¹⁵ Does this signify that China is set free of the COVID-19 challenge? To some extent; however, the current challenge lies in controlling the infections imported from overseas as well as that of a relapse of recovered cases—which call for red alarms for the future.¹⁶ To quell the risk, on March

Figure 4: Cumulative Growth in Number of Imported Cases in Mainland China (March 16-30, 2020)



Source: CGTN.¹⁴

28, Chinese Foreign Ministry temporarily suspended the entry of foreigners with valid Chinese visas or residence permits.¹⁷

In this context, it becomes imperative to understand the Chinese perception of COVID-19 and the ways China dealt with the epidemic. In Chinese view, COVID-19 epidemic has been:

“a major public health emergency” considered to have spread fastest, caused the most extensive infection and have been the hardest to contain since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.¹⁸

Owing to this perception, Xi Jinping called for a “people’s war” in fighting the epidemic, with Wuhan and Hubei as the main battlefield. China claims to have “turned the tide,” by its fighting strategy under the acronym “PROTECT”—Party leadership, “Renmin” for the people, Openness and transparency, Technology and science, Early treatment, Cooperation with the international community, and Targeted and agile approach.¹⁹ With these measures, China perceives that COVID-19 epidemic situation has been “stabilised” in a “short period of time.”²⁰ What contributes to this

Chinese perception? China traces its success story to the “seven things China has done right to battle coronavirus”—taking full responsibility, mass mobilisation, political determination, timely policy adjustment, easing economic pain while fighting the disease, transparency with coordinated action and power of science and technology.²¹ To explain:

First, the political determination of the CPC leadership under the command of Xi Jinping. As noted, on January 25, the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee chaired by Xi Jinping formed the Central Leading Group for Epidemic Response.²² Furthermore, the Party also dispatched a central guiding team as well as demanded a State Council inter-agency task force to play its full role in coordination.²³ While Premier Li Keqiang headed the Central Leading Group, Vice Premier Sun Chunlan oversaw the work on the ground in Hubei province.²⁴ These measures highlight the supremacy of the Party in China’s decision-making, which Chinese leadership seek to uphold at all circumstances.

Second, draconian measures were adopted to prevent and control the spread of the virus. In doing so, on January 23, China locked down Wuhan—the epicentre, where 10 million people live—and also imposed full and strict control over the outbound population flow across Hubei, which has 60 million people. This called for minimised outdoor exposure, cancelled public gatherings and travel restrictions. Such a quarantine measure was equated with a nationwide prevention campaign, calling on people to wear masks, wash hands, self-isolate, and refrain from gathering. To keep checks, heavy surveillance was adopted.

Third, action-oriented approach with large mass mobilisation, as witnessed in terms of: (a) 42,600 medical staff (both civilian and military) were dispatched to Hubei from across China.²⁵ Under a “pairing-up support” system, 19 provincial-level regions sent medics to Hubei and one in 10 Intensive Care Unit (ICU) specialists in China

were dispatched to Hubei to treat critically-ill patients.²⁶ (b) In Wuhan, 86 hospitals were designated to treat COVID-19 patients. While two field hospitals—Huoshenshan and Leishenshan—were built in two-weeks, equipped with 2,600 bed facility. In addition, with 16 public-facility-turned hospitals, 60,000 beds were set up.²⁷ (c) Factories were mobilised to produce medical supplies. Such that China’s output of protective clothing surged to 500,000 pieces per day; the daily output of N95-rated medical masks rose to 1.6 million and regular masks production reached 100 million.²⁸

Fourth, China capitalised on the use of science and technology for preparedness, readiness and response. That is, big data, AI and robotics were widely used as measures to fight COVID-19. Wherein, telecom enterprises used big data to analyse the flow of people and tracing the spread of the epidemic by mapping close contacts and also ensured timely supply and distribution of medical utilities.²⁹ While AI technology has been utilised for no-contact delivery and drug selection as well as vaccine development, 5G-empowered robots have been used for medical services such as remote care, body temperature tests, spraying disinfectants, cleaning and drug delivery.³⁰ Additionally, drones have been utilised for temperature monitoring and health codes initiated as other ways of “no-contact” measures to reduce the risk of transmission.

In its fight against COVID-19, China did set new precedents by undertaking strong measures to minimise the risks of infections. Wherein, such stringent steps did provide dividends in absence of other alternatives, but failed to address the speculation over China’s “hide and bide” at the initial stages of the virus outbreak. That is, if China had taken precautionary measures on time, the virus outbreak would not have evolved in such a large scale and form.

Implications of COVID-19: *For Xi, It Is a Call for Turmoil both Home and Abroad*

Given the scale and magnitude of the damage caused by the coronavirus outbreak, Xi had posited that “[t]his is a crisis for us [China] and it is a big test.”³¹ This very statement exemplifies the severity of the implications attached with China’s COVID-19 crisis, which can be assessed under two perspectives—domestic and international.

At the domestic level, such a crisis in China has affected Beijing’s political tradition and mainly has posed a threat to Xi’s “infinite” leadership. To argue so: First, changes in China’s political tradition. The epidemic disrupted the “Two Sessions”³² or “*Lianghui*”—the gathering of the National People’s Congress (NPC) Plenary Sessions and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee—the biggest political calendar event of China. As in late February, Chinese government officially postponed the “Two Sessions” to “an appropriate time,”³³ as argued to be a “timely policy adjustment” to fight the COVID-19 epidemic.³⁴ What makes the delay in the Two Sessions significant is that as the Communist Party prepares for top leadership changes at its next party congress in 2022, the 2020 *lianghui* will definitely shape the political agenda around “Wuhan and COVID-19.” This then automatically will act as a pressure point for Xi to defend his leadership, and mostly, his handling of the epidemic.

Second, rise of public discontent against the Party leadership. To note, Party chiefs of Hubei and Wuhan, Jiang Chaoliang and Ma Guoqiang were replaced by Ying Yong and Wang Zhonglin respectively in light of the serious problems exposed in the initial response.³⁵ The reshuffle came amidst growing Chinese public criticism of the incompetent handling of the coronavirus outbreak. This stringent measure by Xi’s leadership reflects the reality of the brimming political instability in China, which poses a risk to CPC’s legitimacy. To add further, Dr. Li Wenliang, the

whistle-blower of the COVID-19 epidemic parted with saying: “There Should Be More Than One Voice in a Healthy Society.”³⁶ The criticality to which lies in the fact that being “red” still takes precedence over being “an expert,” even in times of crisis.

In the process, the Chinese government silenced and anyone who exposed the failings of the leadership in handling the crisis mysteriously disappeared—as Dr. Li faced a severe clampdown by the Party officials for “making false comments” alerting of danger. Dr. Li’s death on February 7 due to the viral infection was the trigger resulting in widespread criticism of the government and the call for freedom of speech in China. Sensing the increasing public resentment, a team of National Supervisory Commission was dispatched to Wuhan to step up measures of surveillance and censorship in social media—exemplifying the need for unquestioned loyalty to the Party and its leader. This Chinese attitude reflects the tendency of putting politics at the helm of affairs, despite the situation. Hence, these faultlines in China’s existing monolithic and censored political system do call for a paradigmatic change under China’s Wuhan experience. Arguably, COVID-19 does push China for a change in its old thinking; however, it is hard to assess how the change will unfold. But as Minxin Pei argued, the most consequential political implication may be the “erosion of support” for the CPC among China’s urban middle class.³⁷

Third, the rise of factionalism—a grave threat to Xi’s political legacy. China’s political landscape remains divided between two cliques: first, the “*elitist coalition*”—the “*princelings*” who come from families of either veteran revolutionaries or high-ranking officials. And second, the “*populist coalition*”—mainly the “*tuanpai*,” that is, associated with the Communist Youth League (CYL). However, COVID-19 has brought to surface the increasing divide amongst the princelings. As evident from Ren Zhiqiang, a Chinese realty tycoon and mainly a member of the princeling clique, outrightly criticised Xi’s handling of the virus outbreak.

Ren called Xi a “clown” in his article titled “An official call to arms against Xi: The clown who insists on wearing the emperor’s new clothes.”³⁸ Such polemics shared by China’s top leaders reflect the brimming reality of Chinese politics, wherein Xi’s political clout is in danger. Adding truth to fact, since his criticism of Xi, Ren as noted seems to have mysteriously disappeared from the public eye,³⁹ another testament to the Party’s crackdown on dissent over the epidemic, as already noted in case of Dr. Li. This also brings to light Xi’s increasing paranoia over safeguarding his political authority. The increasing opposition to Xi’s legacy is also evident in the form of an open letter in circulation, that has been suggesting the convening of an extraordinary plenum of the Politburo to reflect on “Xi’s wrongs,”⁴⁰ taking stock of not just handling of the virus outbreak but also on his policy decisions since he took charge in 2012; and demanding a crucial decision on whether Xi should step down as president, party chief and commander of the Chinese military.⁴¹

Finally, a dent in Xi Jinping’s image as “Chairman of All Things”—the biggest setback has been inflicted on Xi’s image, as caused by his long absence from China’s political scene during the peak of the virus epidemic. Such a political void resulted into Chinese public calling for “experts” to take the lead in fighting the epidemic. As noted, Wang Qishan, the Vice President who was called upon to take the leading role in Wuhan crisis, earned his name as “chief firefighter” in the fight against the SARS epidemic in 2003.⁴² Furthermore, even at the forefront, unlike Xi, it was Premier Li Keqiang belonging to the CYL, who was seen steering the frontline battle against the virus outbreak, who also holds a record of dealing with the SARS epidemic. Also, Vice Premier Sun Chunlan, also from the CYL clique was seen overseeing the work in Hubei since January. The hands-on approach of other CPC leaders has somewhat cast a shadow on Xi’s active role. To which, CPC propagandists in restoring Xi’s image have called him the “man of the hour,” “commander-in-chief of China’s war against COVID-19.”⁴³ However, it remains indisputable

that Xi's accountability will factor in largely at the leadership change during the 20th Party Congress in 2022.

At the global level, China's biggest challenge is to repaint its tainted global image as a "responsible" actor. On March 26, at the virtual G20 Leaders' Summit, Xi delivered a speech titled "Working Together to Defeat the COVID-19 Outbreak," wherein Xi provided a four-point proposal to fight the pandemic.⁴⁴ The proposal called for: (a) resolutely fighting an all-out global war; (b) a collective response for control and treatment at the international level; (c) support international organisations in playing their active roles—a call to support WHO; (d) enhancing international macroeconomic policy coordination.⁴⁵ However, Xi's such an action-oriented approach comes only after the global damage has been done. Here, the big-picture question is: Will China take responsibility for this damage? What makes this query pertinent are the ramifications witnessed with the spread of the pandemic. That is:

First, at the foremost is the human cost attached to the pandemic. Countries such as Italy, despite having the best of medical facilities, have witnessed the highest mortality rate. The causal factor being the overburdening of health systems in the countries due to rapid increase in infection rate, as witnessed in the most powerful countries like the US. Such a situation has been a result of four factors:⁴⁶ (a) lack of initial awareness; (b) no adequate timely preparedness to control the spread; (c) sudden spike in infections after a stalemate; and (d) shortage of medical equipment and resources (such as masks and ventilators) as well as adequate medical force—calling for the spike. Hence, with sustainability becoming a prime concern, the inability to combat the virus spread has proved that there is no quick fix to the problem.

Second, COVID-19 has caused significant distress to the global economy raising alarms of an approaching financial crisis. The rate of spread of the contagion has become proportional to the stretch of the

impact on the globalised economy. The key disruption has been caused to the global demand and supply chain. Assessing the economic risks, OECD Report has suggested that the annual global GDP is projected to drop to 2.4 per cent in 2020 as a whole, from that of 2.9 per cent in 2019, with an added negative growth in the first quarter of 2020.⁴⁷ While the global growth is expected to drop to 1.5 per cent in 2020—almost declining to half the rate as projected prior to the virus outbreak.⁴⁸ Not just trade, but investments have also been badly hit, as UNCTAD suggested that foreign direct investment (FDI) will witness a shrink of 5 to 15 per cent, as compared to the earlier forecasted marginal growth for 2020-2021.⁴⁹ The sectors that have been greatly hit are: the automotive industry (−44 per cent), airlines (−42 per cent) and energy and basic materials industries (−13 per cent).⁵⁰ Furthermore, travel and tourism sector is also faced with a downturn given travel bans, both inbound and outbound. The repercussions of this disrupted economic value chain has also affected the energy supply chain. Fuelled by an ongoing price war, COVID-19 has hit the global demand for oil and gas resulting in oil prices trickling to an unprecedented rate. As Rystad Energy's report suggested, the global oil demand will contract by 16 million bpd in April and 2 billion barrels over the year.⁵¹ With COVID-19 causing a global economic slowdown, it has significantly tarnished China's global image as a "responsible actor."

With these dynamics at play, Xi's "test" logic fits well. As at the national level, with the COVID-19 crisis, the political stakes for Xi are higher than ever, especially, to his "infinite rule" under the new constitution that allows Xi to remain President beyond his two terms. Undeniably, the Wuhan epidemic crisis has shaken China's domestic stability and most importantly, Xi's absolute power as "Chairman of All Things." While at the global level, the already questioned "responsible" image of China has come under severe scrutiny. Hence, only time will decide the fate of China and most importantly, Xi Jinping.

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