ASIA 21.04.2020 | Branko Milanović

China's political system and the coronavirus

China's political system failed to respond effectively to a threat that then affected the world. How to prevent that in the future?

When the American political philosopher John Rawls published *The Law of Peoples* in 1999, it was supposed to serve as a 'manual' on how to organise global political life — coexistence between different types of governments, whose sources of legitimacy were not the same. Rawls divided governments into four types: those that were liberal, consultative hierarchies, 'burdened' and 'outlaw' states. (A fifth category, 'benevolent absolutism', played no role in the book.)

Liberal governments were the usual liberal democracies. Consultative hierarchies were countries, such as Morocco or Jordan, which are non-democratic but where parliaments are elected and there are no egregious violations of civil rights. 'Burdened' societies were poor countries prevented by their poverty from becoming liberal societies (say, Somalia). And 'outlaw' states were not part of the Rawlsian international order.

Rawls' book very much reflected the unipolar moment of the 1990s — no less so than the famous 'end of history' proposition from Francis Fukuyama. But Rawls' scheme tried to provide a more realistic representation of coexistence of various political systems than the so-called 'democratic peace theory', which argues that peace is possible only among like-minded democratic nations. Rawls recognised that the world is unlikely to be composed only of such nations, and yet that some kind of *modus vivendi* has to be found between different polities.

Thus he deemed both liberal societies and consultative hierarchies to be 'well-behaved', accepting of each other's different internal arrangements and not trying to impose their own institutions. 'Outlaw states' were however left unexplored. It is one of the chief weaknesses of Rawls' classification: these societies are not even societies but just states. Yet their internal institutions do represent, according to Rawls, a threat to the rest of the world.

This point is worth exploring in the context of Covid-19. When do the domestic political institutions of a country constitute such a threat?

Negative effects

Let us presume one is against interference in other people's political affairs — and thus against such disastrous adventures as those in pursuit of 'regime change'. In an abstract sense, one still has to allow that a country's *internal* institutions can become an 'externality', namely, that they can have negative impacts on other countries.

During World War I, many people thought that the power of the military and landed aristocracy in Germany made the country's policies systematically aggressive. Some thought that the Soviet Union and its power over the Comintern did the same. And most thought National Socialism was not bad only for Germany but for the world. But these are perhaps extreme examples: luckily, we do not live in a world where similar 'externalities' are present.

Yet, does the Chinese political system have to bear responsibility for the pandemic? In several ways it does.

Amply evident

The most significant failure was to have allowed the infection ever to occur. After the 2003 SARS coronavirus episode, it was amply evident the transmission of dangerous viruses from animals to humans represented a serious risk. The Chinese wet markets, with their mixture of wildlife species, were singled out by many specialists as particularly likely to generate such animal-to-human 'jumps'.

A country which commands vast political and institutional resources, as does China, should have used these to stop any trade in wild or endangered animals. We cannot, for example, criticise the Democratic Republic of Congo for the same type of negligence in the case of the Ebola pandemic, which emerged in the troubled eastern DRC in 2018, because the enforcement capacity of the Congolese state is minimal. But the enforcement capacity of the Chinese state is enormous — and it failed to use it.

Ideally, an international commission composed of

The second failure was the concealment of the epidemic, in the beginning, by the Hubei provincial authorities. Here, we are dealing with

non-partisan experts from several areas should study the run-up to the crisis and the reactions of all concerned.

both an old and a new feature of the Chinese political system. It was called 'regionally decentralised authoritarianism' by the University of Hong Kong professor Chenggang Xu: provincial and lower-level governments have substantial autonomy and its leaders are judged on how well they use that autonomy to further certain national objectives, such as economic growth and reduced pollution. Consequently, provincial figures have an interest in *not* reporting unfavourable developments, so as not to anger the centre and jeopardise their own political careers.

This is not a novel feature of Chinese governance. Jacques Gernet writes in *Daily life in China on the eve of the Mongol invasion*, a book on Southern Song China in the 13th century:

'The principle underlying the whole administrative system in China was that, above all, peace must reign. There was to be no stirring of trouble: a sub-prefect who allowed disturbances to arise in his areas [...] was a bad administrator, and it was he who was blamed, whatever the origin of the disturbance might have been [...]'

The current system is not different — and this also contributed to the originally-unchecked spread of the epidemic.

The question then becomes: if China's political system failed to respond effectively to a threat which ultimately affected not only China but the entire world, what should be the best approach to ensure that this does not happen again?

International review

Ideally, there would be a joint review of things that went wrong. The error is not only China's: the United States suspended its joint virus research with China only months before the outbreak. A permanent policy of stop-go western funding of the World Health Organization weakened it and made it more susceptible to supporting unquestioningly the Chinese view at the beginning of the crisis — even when that turned out to have been wrong or misleading.

Ideally, an international commission composed of non-partisan experts from several areas should study the run-up to the crisis and the reactions of all concerned. It should not put China in a position of defendant

because she is not solely responsible for the mortal effects of the crisis — many, if not most, governments have reacted very poorly. But it should focus on China's handlings of the origin of the crisis, with an explicit objective not to shame or punish anyone but to ensure that, as far as possible, repetition never occurs.

One can of course be sceptical that anything like this will happen, given the unwillingness of the other superpower to have any of its military or other actions subjected to international scrutiny. This is very unfortunate because international rules seem to apply only to the weak actors, never to the strong.

Perhaps however China would see some benefit in such an inquiry: it may use it to show that even big and powerful actors can follow international rules — which perhaps, by shaming others, might help make the United States, Russia or the European Union, in some similar future instance, accept foreign oversight of some of their activities.

This article is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal.



Branko Milanović
New York City

Branko Milanović is a visiting professor at the City University of New York. Prior to that, he was, among other things, senior economist of the research department at the World Bank. For his book *Global Inequality. A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* he won the Hans-Matthöfer-Prize awarded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Most recently he published *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System That Rules the World*.