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The continent has close links to China, where the infection mushroomed in late December 2019, but the cases in Africa have all so far been linked to Europe and the USA— Getty Images

# AFRICA CAUGHT IN THE GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS OF CORONAVIRUS

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*China's rise from the ashes of Coronavirus, like the proverbial Sphinx, is giving hope to humanity. But the Covid-19 is testing the limits populism, isolationism, unilateralism, parochial nationalisms, xenophobia and anti-globalization; with the world turning the calamity into a US-China diplomatic clash in a geopolitical jostling for global influence. In Africa, the Coronavirus is feeding the anti-migration narratives and programmes, powerfully pushing the world back to "fortress Europe.*

"When America sneezes, the world catches a cold." This held true for the decades before China became a rival superpower and the "world's factory". With the outbreak of the deadly Coronavirus, when China sneezes, we all catch the flu.

Coronavirus, that broke out in Wuhan in China's Hubei Province in December 2019, has morphed into the largest global crisis since the 2008–2009 financial crisis. Pundits are warning that if the gloomier projections of COVID-19 unfold, the

world will face one of its worst peacetime crises of modern times.

Between December 31, 2019 and March 13, 2020, no less than 133 860 people worldwide have contracted the deadly virus, including over 67,000 of them having recovered and 4 967 dead.

Not surprisingly, the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus a global pandemic on March 11. Kenya becomes the latest African country to confirm its first-ever case of Coronavirus on March 13, raising Africa's tally to more than a 100 cases.

Sadly, even as the Coronavirus spreads, devastating the earth's poorer nations in Africa, the world's largest powers are dithering as Rome burns.

Distrust and beggar-thy-neighbour policies are impeding a collective response to the pandemic and feeding its spread. Coronavirus is testing the limits populism, isolationism, unilateralism, parochial nationalisms, xenophobia and anti-globalization.

Indeed, instead of presenting a unified response to Coronavirus, the world's major powers are behaving badly, turning the calamity into a US-China diplomatic clash in a geopolitical jostling for global influence.

On March 19, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the City of Wuhan in Hubei Province where the outbreak began, and declared success in fight against coronavirus. As of March 13, China had 80 954 confirmed cases. Beijing has announced that it has fundamentally contained the spread of coronavirus in its hardest-hit areas. "The spread of the epidemic has been basically contained in Hubei and Wuhan," China's U.N. ambassador Zhang Jun declared in a widely circulated letter to representatives of the U.N.'s 193 member states.

China rise from the ashes of Coronavirus, like the proverbial Sphinx, is giving hope to humanity.

Beijing is using its spectacular success in rolling back the Coronavirus as powerful tool to project its soft power capacity globally and to boost its reputation as a global leader in the war against the disease.

China's focus on international cooperation reflects its bridge-building approach to global issues. Post-Beijing Coronavirus has to include the epidemic as a key plank of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the premier symbol of globalization in the 21st century.

Laudably, Xi has pledged $20 million to help the World Health Organization to help improve public health systems in poor countries. "We are ready to strengthen solidarity with the rest of the international community to jointly fight the epidemic," said ambassador Jun.

On its part, critics depict President Donald Trump's Washington as mocking the virus as a flu equivalent. "It's not even clear he believes the scientific facts", adds CNN's Fareed Zakaria, alluding to Trump's global warming denial.

Certainly, the pandemic is a campaign issue in the November 2020 presidential election. Shockingly, when the virus struck, Trump saw the outbreak as good for America! "We're going to have Americans staying home instead of going and spending the money in other countries", he said mordantly. "Maybe that's one of the reasons the job numbers are so good," he added.

But with 1, 663 confirmed cases by March 13, the game has changed. America has declared Coronavirus a national emergency, and imposed a lockdown.

Globally, White House has trained its guns on China, typically using the crisis to point blame at Beijing. It criticized China for the handling of the outbreak that allowed the disease to spread so rapidly. Washington invoked human rights, with its

wonks accusing China of not using best practices, but orchestrating a covered up of the outbreak in Wuhan.  All this was calibrated to buttress the narrative that Beijing was too sluggish and secretive in its early response to the outbreak to be trusted as a global leader.

Blissfully, this criticism galvanized Beijing to quickly take charge of the operations from the ineffectual Hubei Provincial leadership, and turned the tide against the disease.

But Washington has stuck to its "America First" isolationist approach, directing all its energy to domestic measures to protect its citizens against the virus.

America has significantly rolled back its contribution to global preparedness to combat pandemics. In 2018, America's pandemic preparedness office proposed a slash on U.S. financial contributions to WHO.  In February this year, the office authorized $2.5 billion—including $1.25 billion in new money—to fight coronavirus. No money was either included in this budget for WHO in Geneva or for any other program aimed at supporting international responses to pandemics.

Coronavirus is rolling back decades of globalization. In response to the virus, the United Nations, its member states and organizations are scaling back key conferences and meetings around the world. China has shut down factories and cities to contain the virus, thus rolling back economic globalization in a world where Apple gets its parts from China.

As the main casualty of the virus, China has a heavy lifting to do to revitalize globalization. It has to counter a new bout of xenophobia. Senior officials in Washington labelled it the "Wuhan virus." Even African media carried such xenophobic headlines as "China Virus".

Africa is also facing a new raft of xenophobia. Coronavirus is feeding into anti-migration narratives and programs, powerfully pushing the world back to "fortress Europe". Former Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini of Italy, now in lockdown as Europe's nation most devastated by the virus (with 15,113 as of March 13), has called for the closing of borders with Africa.

What matters most is cooperation and a coordinated response to the disease, not blame-games.

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