



Fighting the Battle for the Pandemic Narrative: The PRC White Paper on Its COVID-19 Response

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OE Watch Commentary: On 7 June, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) State Council Information Office released an official White Paper outlining China’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. The document, titled “Fighting COVID-19 – China in Action” is a clear articulation of how the authorities of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hope to control and shape the narratives surrounding their role in the state response to the virus. Several inter-related key themes emerge from the White Paper, including China’s timely sharing of information with international organizations; narratives of “battle” against the virus; China’s positive international engagement; and the need for economic stabilization. The purpose of the White Paper is for the PRC to “clarify its ideas on the global battle,” which cannot be “won” without international engagement. This is a version of events that emphasizes the “open, transparent, and responsible manner” that China claims to have undertaken amid the crisis.

Timely Notification or Curious Timelines?

According to the White Paper, the official response began on 27 December 2019, when the “Wuhan city government arranged for experts to look into” the cases of viral pneumonia occurring in the city. However, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission had earlier indicated that initial cases of “an unidentified pneumonia outbreak” were identified by 12 December 2019. The official timeline from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission “reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan” on 31 December 2019, and that “a novel coronavirus was eventually identified.”

The timeline articulated in China’s COVID-19 White Paper leaves at least two weeks entirely unaccounted for, which raises questions about the interaction between local, national, and international officials. Action at the local level was critical for the identification of this new illness, and several doctors working on the front lines in Wuhan died from the disease. A draft resolution introduced at the World Health Assembly in May—spearheaded by Australia, and now supported by over 110 countries—calls for an “impartial, independent, and comprehensive evaluation” of the events associated with the pandemic. The PRC has resisted all such calls, and the White Paper reveals a continuing determination to deflect criticism of its early handling of the outbreak. The document calls for the international community to “resist scapegoating or other such self-serving artifices, and [to] stand against stigmatization and politicization of the virus.”

The White Paper is one attempt by the PRC to show that it is “open and transparent” and that “China gave timely notification to the international community.” However, in its present form the White Paper raises questions about the initial phase of the outbreak: its timeline begins too late to fully answer these questions, which could hamper efforts to assess the origin of the virus and how it spread initially.

Narratives of Battle

The White Paper makes clear that one of its key goals is to address the “global battle” against COVID-19. The narrative of battle explains both how the PRC “fought” the virus and how it must continue to maintain its story internationally. According to the White Paper the “all-out battle” against COVID-19 was fought with “confidence and solidarity, [and] a science-based approach and targeted measures.” As a result, after “approximately three months, a decisive victory was secured in the battle to defend Hubei Province and its capital city of Wuhan.”

The “battleground” narrative makes the central government look strong in its fight against the pandemic, and shifts focus to the virus as an enemy. Shifting blame is important, because if there is a perception that the central government knew there was an “enemy” lurking in early or mid-December and did not take action, then there would be questions about the government’s decisiveness. Consistent with the “battle” narrative, the White Paper highlights the role of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), stating that 4,000 military medical personnel were dispatched to respond to the crisis, with the PLA Air Force performing important logistical support. The PRC government has also maintained the narrative that no PLA personnel contracted the virus, despite the heavy concentration of PLA forces located in the vicinity of Wuhan.

International Engagement

While the “battle” on the ground may have been declared “won” in Wuhan, the battle for the international narrative continues. The White Paper argues that “international solidarity” and “multilateralism” are critical in dealing with the crisis, and highlights these efforts in Section IV, titled “Building a Global Community of Health For All.” Consistent with Xi Jinping’s narrative of a “community of common destiny for mankind,” it describes how “China has fought shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the world” given “the world is a global community of shared future.”

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Like many other PRC reports in the last decade, the measure of success for international engagement has become a numbers game: what can be counted up and measured to show “results”? At the top level of government, “President Xi has personally promoted international cooperation” via “phone calls or meetings with nearly 50 foreign leaders and heads of international organizations.” At other levels of government, the PRC has “conducted over 70 exchanges with international and regional organizations including ASEAN, the EU, the African Union (AU), APEC, the Caribbean Community, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.”

In addition to top-level meetings, the White Paper promises “\$2 billion of international aid over two years” for a “global humanitarian response depot” in China. It also calls for sharing scientific information via multilateral meetings and promises assistance to “developing countries with weaker public health systems in Asia, Africa and Latin America – especially Africa.”

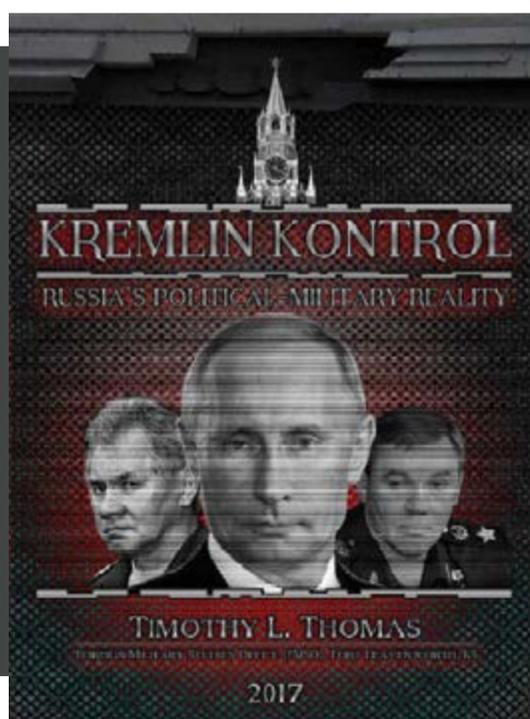
Economic Stabilization

International engagement and solidarity are major themes of the White Paper, but Beijing acknowledges that global economic cooperation could be heavily impacted by the crisis. The White Paper argues that economic cooperation must continue, while also noting that “the global spread of the pandemic” is “making a severe global economic recession unavoidable.”

At the international level, the White Paper makes clear that the PRC remains committed to the global economic system. In particular, “China believes that the international community should proceed with globalization, safeguard the multilateral trading system based on the WTO, cut tariffs, remove barriers, facilitate the flow of trade, and keep international industrial and supply chains secure and smooth.” The PRC argues that “COVID-19 is changing the form but not the general trend of economic globalization.” Despite this seemingly optimistic tone, the economic and political challenges of US-China relations over the past several years are acknowledged, on which the White Paper writes, “Decoupling, erecting walls, and deglobalization may divide the world, but will not do any good to those who themselves are engaged in these acts.”

On the domestic front, the State Council argues that economic stabilization must occur in “employment, finance, foreign trade, inbound investment, domestic investment, and market expectations.” In addition to these “six fronts” for stabilization, the White Paper assigns “six priorities” for social and economic order: “jobs, daily living needs, food and energy, industrial and supply chains, the interests of market players, and the smooth functioning of grassroots government.” Stabilization in trade will be difficult given the drop in exports, but China still hopes to attract foreign investment, as evidenced in the changes adopted to its Foreign Investment Law, entailing a package of laws on “construction, fire protection, digital signatures, urban and rural planning, vehicle and vessel taxes, trademarks, unfair competition, and administrative approval.” The full economic toll of the crisis for China or the global economy is not yet known, but so far, China is staying the course. The White Paper noted that “supply-side structural reform and high-quality economic development” remain on the agenda for 2020.

China’s White Paper shows Beijing’s imperative to control the COVID-19 narrative. International engagement is highlighted throughout, but the “battle” is also about the timeline. By focusing on the events that transpired in 2020—rather than the events early in the crisis—Beijing has emphasized the measures to stop the spread of the virus, rather than discussing its origins. Yet, the timeline is critical to future examination of the virus and how it spread. China’s unwillingness to articulate the timing of events in December 2019 undermines the narrative of its “open and transparent” reporting in a timely manner. **End OE Watch Commentary (Herlevi)**



In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov instituted sweeping changes that have reorganized the country’s security forces and reestablished the nation’s military prowess. This study, *Kremlin Kontrol*, aims to describe how control over the security services and the military have hastened those changes.

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