

COVID-19 - implications for China's national security

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020 and China has since been under public scrutiny for neglecting the first signs of this global health challenge and for its lockdown strategy. Although lockdowns have not lasted for long, China needs to confront the political, social, and economic implications for its national security. The paper aims to fill a gap in the knowledge and investigate aspects of China's national security in light of the pandemic. The study is based on desk research using secondary data and statistical and comparative analysis. It also employs an inductive method to build general theorems. The Chinese government can be seen as successful in dealing with the pandemic because of a low death toll and minimal economic losses. By early February 2022, only 106,863 Chinese had been diagnosed, and 4,636 had died from the virus. China also achieved enviable economic success and, its output grew by 18.3% year on year in the first quarter of 2021, the fastest rate since the 1990s, and it was the first major economy to withdraw its pandemic stimulus. China consolidated its position in low-income countries and improved its image as a global leader in trade by supplying vaccines, masks and ventilators, and strengthened its geopolitical standing. It will face threats from other countries working on a joint approach to the challenges posed by Beijing and while the aftereffects of the crisis can be seen, it also fears that they might further affect China's national security.

Keywords:

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Introduction

As several waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have already passed and countries have survived the first shock, China needs to confront the political, social, and economic implications of the pandemic for national security. The article attempts to assess the direct and indirect implications of the pandemic on China's national security in three areas: politics, society, and economics. It tries to answer whether the pandemic threatens and has implications for China's national security in the short and long term.

China has been under public scrutiny since the pandemic began on March 11, 2020, initially for neglecting the first signs of a global health challenge, then for ruthless crisis management. However, when discussing the pandemic implications, the specificities of the case must be considered. China was the first country to be hit by the pandemic in late 2019 when there was no ready-made code of conduct besides the experience gained from the SARS epidemic in 2003. In such circumstances, China managed to work out a precise and effective set of rules. This modus operandi suppressed the spread of the disease in only a few months, with a surprisingly low death toll. By late March 2020, China was already restoring everyday social life to stimulate economic recovery. The success was determined by the measures taken, some challenging (e.g. lockdowns, bans on travel, frequent testing) and others innovative (e.g. travel health codes), all compulsory for society.

This paper analyses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and how it uses its experience of pandemic management in domestic and international fields and how it has influenced China's international position and security. The following research questions guided the study: is the pandemic a threat to China's national security? What are the political, social, and economic implications of the pandemic for China's national security? Can China use the experience of pandemic management in the domestic and international field? Has the pandemic strengthened or weakened China's international position and security? The study is based on desk research using secondary data and statistical and comparative analysis. It also employs an inductive method to build general theorems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged China's national security in all fields: economic, political, and social, forcing enormous efforts to maintain internal stability ([Malden and Stephens, 2020](#)). While mismanagement of the initial phase of the pandemic caused almost worldwide resentment, the low number of fatalities has aroused suspicion and mistrust. In addition, how China dealt with the threat also aroused curiosity and criticism as Beijing has actively used the pandemic to confirm its position as a global leader and export a new model of technological authoritarianism with Chinese characteristics.

Nevertheless, China managed to work out a precise and effective set of rules and measures (e.g. lockdowns, travel health codes, frequent testing) to suppress the spread of the disease in just a few months, with a surprisingly low death toll. As a result, China has become a reference for other countries, particularly developing ones, thus increasing its soft power ([Freymann and Stebbing, 2021; Huang, 2021](#)). However, due to global interdependence, China's security in all dimensions has become crucial to its partners ([Osterholm and Olshaker, 2022](#)). Moreover, since the pandemic is a new phenomenon, its consequences have not been sufficiently researched and described, especially with regard to the world's most populated country, second economy and a rising power. The paper aims to fill the knowledge gap and introduce aspects of China's national security in the light of a new, global threat.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a quite new research phenomenon. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of research that looks at this phenomenon from the perspective of state

security, pandemic control and management, as well as its effects on international relations. Existing research also recognises the crucial role played by China's diplomacy during the pandemic, creating an image and perception of China for the international environment.

Many examples of research into the influence of Covid-19 on China's economy and security, as well as the issue of management of the pandemic, can be found in the issues of journals published during the pandemic ([Chena et al., 2021](#); [Corbet et al., 2022](#); [Fan et al., 2022](#); [Hu, Li and Dong, 2022](#); [Jing, 2021](#); [Li et al., 2021](#); [Liu, 2021](#); [Pu and Zhong, 2020](#); [Si et al., 2021](#); [Sier, 2021](#); [Wang et al., 2020](#); [Xu, Li and Wei, 2022](#); [Yang and Yang, 2021](#)). Studies on the perception of China after Covid-19 and its vaccine diplomacy show that even in difficult times, it is possible to build a positive image of the state and to influence other states with soft power ([Lu and Atadil, 2021](#); [Verma, 2020](#)). Another popular area of research concerns international relations during the pandemic, including the role of China at the time ([Alhammadi, 2021](#); [Cooray, 2022](#); [Kavalski, 2021](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020](#); [Pattanaik, 2021](#); [Smith, 2020](#); [Wallis and McNeill, 2021](#)).

National Security in China

The area of national security in China has never been narrowed down to the physical security of the population and territory. On the contrary, it ensured the political security of the leading Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ([Goldstein, 2020](#), p. 168) and the protection and advancement of China's society and economy. Since the end of the Cold War, due to increased economic power, China's national security has also encompassed other areas: economic security, energy security, and food security ([Romm, 1993](#), p. 1), as reflected in a 2011 White Paper on peaceful development, where China declared new thinking on security. Comprehensive security was then described as a complex issue answering traditional and non-traditional security threats that demand the international community's cooperation ([The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011](#)). Therefore, traditional security areas such as energy, food or military security were soon joined by new ones: cybersecurity, climate change and migration. Furthermore, consecutive national defence strategies further broadened the concept's scope to adopt a "holistic approach to national security" in the latest White Paper on national defence ([The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019](#)).

As an essential member of the international system, regarded by the Western partners as a "strategic competitor" ([Sevastopulo, 2017](#)) or "systemic rival" ([European Commission, 2019](#)), China's security strategy has far-reaching implications. Of particular concern are the political and economic goals behind China's decisions as they might have implications for regional and global safety. As Beijing's core national interest is in providing the best possible conditions for economic growth, security (safety) of the international environment has always been at the core of China's development strategy as the two issues are deeply interconnected. Those concerns are even more vivid because of the growing assertiveness of China, which is seen as a threat to international security and order ([Mastro, 2018](#); [Pillsbury, 2016](#)).

Since 2013, President Xi Jinping has made China more assertive, self-confident, and eager to impose the narratives and respond with coercive measures to the threats to comprehensive national security or core interests ([Drinhausen et al., 2021](#)). A broader concept of comprehensive national security was developed along with an increased presence abroad, covering all policy fields with an international context. According to Helena Legarda, China's current *comprehensive national security* is based on two interconnected pillars:

security and development, as “development is the basis for security and security is the condition for development”. Therefore, economic growth remains a crucial target for Beijing, and its policy will be based on economic gains. National security policy is no longer passive or reactive as China wants to manage and shape its international environment, not only to defend its territory. Therefore, pre-emptive actions against possible threats should be expected, and China intends to export its laws and regulations and extend the application of these Chinese laws abroad. Hence, all attacks on Chinese citizens or businesses abroad may be taken as attacks on national security (Legarda, 2021). This new security policy has been practiced in a challenging pandemic reality, with deep and lasting political, social and economic consequences.

What's more, China has never conceived its security to be based on international, legal mechanisms, which rely on values prioritising a community of sovereign states cooperating to ensure mutual security and peace. China focused on the ability to understand and strive within the matters in flux and chaos, unlike any legal international documents, which aim to institutionalise international rules of behaviour (Markiewicz, 2019).

Political Implications

The results of the pandemic will change over time; therefore, they should be analysed depending on the period discussed. Some lasted for a short time and eventually disappeared. Others have changed, revealing new facets and challenges and forcing countries to take relevant measures.

Since the pandemic outbreak in early 2020, China faced the threat of its geopolitical status being weakened as it confronted blame and hostility for mismanaging the initial phase of the pandemic. Beijing was blamed for withholding information about the new illness, data concealment, and influencing the WHO to exclude Taiwan from international cooperation to fight the threat. Amid the accusations, some countries, organisations and individuals have filed lawsuits against China, seeking compensation for the losses they made due to China's negligence and lack of transparency (Anderson and Mirski, 2021; Shaw and Laco, 2021) and the United States withdrew from the WHO over concerns about its interactions with China in the early months of the pandemic (Lawrence and Sutter, 2021, p. 2).

In defence, China waged disinformation campaigns on social media to discredit the accusations (Murphy and Yang, 2020). All negative foreign comments meet a quick response from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. China's strong reactions included threats of restrictions on trade when Australia called for an international enquiry on the source of the pandemic. To improve its image China engaged in the so-called “mask diplomacy” by supplying personal protection equipment (PPE) to destinations chosen according to political calculations (Sutter, Schwarzenberg and Sutherland, 2021, p. 46). Unfortunately, the poor quality of some products and high export prices undermined the significance of the Chinese gesture as a growing number of countries returned the PPE on the grounds of poor quality (The Indian Express, 2020). Instead of winning hearts, there was resentment and anger, while criticism was dismissed indignantly by the Chinese media (Global Times, 2020; Thacker and Mankotia, 2020). To push back against “deliberate insults”, China uses “wolf warrior” diplomacy, direct reactions to insulting criticism in social media (Westcott and Jiang, 2020).

Foreign criticism was finally offset by a successful strategy of handling the pandemic with world-beating technology (McCormick, 2020). China adopted measures to contain the spread of the virus: social activities were suspended, harsh restrictions on travel,

lockdowns, and mass testing were introduced, leading to an economic slowdown. In the meantime, scientists were working on vaccines. As a result, China has become a global leader in the number of COVID-19 vaccinations, with 1.67 billion doses administered at the end of July 2021 ([Our World in Data, 2021](#)). It is also a leader in vaccine exports: Beijing has donated more than 26 million doses of vaccines and provided over 252 million (42% of its production) to more than 100 countries and international organisations. At the same time, the U.S. has exported 3 million vaccine doses, equal to around 1% of its production ([Statista, 2021](#)). In addition, in March 2020, China announced that it would donate 300,000 vaccines to U.N. peacekeepers, particularly in Africa ([Tharakan and Salaam-Blyther, 2021, p. 2](#)). As a proof of goodwill, China has also proposed building “a Community of Common Health for Mankind” and making vaccines a global public good once the R&D is completed ([Boao Forum for Asia Launches “Report on the Global Use of Covid-19 Vaccines”, 2021](#)). All these activities are even more valuable as they are undertaken by a developing country, when the suppliers of medical equipment and vaccines from Europe and America have somewhat limited interest in the global issues. The strategy of using exports of vaccines as levers to gain advantages in relations with recipient countries has been called “vaccine nationalism” or “vaccine diplomacy” ([O’Rourke and McInnis, 2021, p. 6](#)) and this has improved China’s image abroad.

With such positive results, the handling of the pandemic was praised according to the Pew surveys conducted in early-2021, although a negative perception of China and President Xi Jinping was common in developed countries ([Silver, 2021](#)). Meanwhile, the image of China in developing countries remained positive. Improvement is expected as China sends medical professionals with PPE to fight the pandemic, and its image abroad is less aggressive and more benevolent than other partners ([Shullman, 2019](#)). China is also benefiting from the incompetence of developed countries ([Kassam, 2020](#)) and support of friendly states and their representatives in global organisations: the WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (Ethiopian) praised China’s “speed, scale and efficiency as the advantages of China’s system” ([Pilling, 2020](#)). Finally, as many low-income countries prefer cheaper Chinese vaccines due to financial constraints or manufacturing problems, vaccine diplomacy has been used to bolster China’s international standing. Eventually, the government in Beijing has managed to strengthen China’s position as a regional – if not global - leader, a trendsetter with a critical role to play.

Social Implications

China’s technological advances enforced its political strength. For years, China has pursued technological dominance by investing in its tech sector, importing innovations or enforcing technology transfers. For the government, technology is a source of national power, a useful instrument to uphold national security and economic growth and suppress discontent in ethnic minority areas ([Freedom House, 2021](#)). As a result, China has progressed in developing facial recognition systems, 5G technology, artificial intelligence or surveillance, to mention a few.

In China, the COVID-19 crisis was an excellent opportunity to rationalise human rights violations and validate new forms of control and surveillance on the protection of public health and safety. As the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres has warned, the COVID-19 outbreak can be used as a “pretext to adopt repressive measures for purposes unrelated to the pandemic” ([Guterres, 2020](#)). Through its surveillance system (e.g. geolocation data, digital contact tracing applications) and travel health codes, China has been harvesting an incredible amount of data, including sensitive information on citizens, such as medical treatment records, pharmaceuticals purchases or shops and restaurants

visited (Yu, Li and Dong, 2021, p. 2014). The data gathered will allow new applications such as behaviour management or control of gatherings, not to mention possible issues of social management such as checking health data to determine job suitability (Khalil, 2020, p. 19). In fact, COVID-related restrictions are a good test of the Chinese facial recognition system. The government in Beijing has blocked and censored websites and online commentaries about the outbreak and the course of the pandemic, punished journalists and whistleblowers, even among its medical staff (BBC News, 2020), used propaganda and censorship, even detention, to suppress independent sources of information and posts in social media criticising its decisions about the restrictions introduced (Beach, 2020).

The experience gained in fighting the pandemic, namely the quick suppression of new cases due to controversial measures undertaken, has been depicted by China as a commendable model of governance. This tech-enabled digital authoritarianism (Khalil, 2020) is being promoted abroad, as China continuously exports its governance model and necessary technology to developing countries. Therefore, just as China manipulates its citizens, other regimes might use the same methods and instruments to enforce power. Unfortunately, Beijing has been exporting Chinese standards in digital rights and data collection, even though Chinese technology and elements create risks for safety (Arcesati, 2021) due to possible infiltration (Dahir, 2018). In fact, many developing countries in Africa have already adopted Chinese surveillance and security technology platforms for political suppression (Parkinson, Bariyo and Chin, 2019), and Chinese “smart helmets” detecting people with fever are used in Italy and Dubai (Ghosh, 2020). Apparently, even Western democratic countries are open to limited cooperation for safety, despite possible human rights violations. China’s domestic experience in the fight against Covid has therefore helped increase its power abroad.

Economic Implications

China’s economic position has strengthened due to the pandemic, though its long-term exposure remains unknown. China is Europe’s and America’s largest goods trading partner with a surplus in bilateral trade worth over US\$180 billion and US\$310 billion, respectively (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Due to a relatively short period of lockdowns in China and a prolonged freeze on economic activity in Europe and the U.S., China has outpaced the competition on the global market. The subsequent global recovery of demand and shift to consuming goods benefitted China as a manufacturing hub: its exports soared as China supplied medical equipment and products needed for the extended home office. Beijing can build on this confidence as businesses appreciate stability and predictability, and with its vast domestic market, China may also be the source of demand needed for global economic recovery.

Moreover, overseas investments undertaken by Chinese entities under the “Go Global” strategy in the last two decades have given China strategic foreign assets and capabilities worldwide. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, Beijing’s global investment has reached US\$1.266 trillion since 2005 (The American Enterprise Institute, 2021). China owns significant stakes at technology hubs (e.g. KUKA, Ingram Micro, Linxens), telecoms (e.g. Global Switch, Alcatel), energy companies (e.g. Repsol, Nexen), ports (e.g. Piraeus, Hambantota), and oil and gas extraction fields on different continents. Recently it increased investment in financial services, health and biotech, automotive, and consumer products and services (Hanemann, Huotari and Kratz, 2019, p. 7). China has also become the largest creditor to low-income countries, raising concerns about Beijing’s economic and security impacts as these countries have become even more dependent on China.

China's economic expansion strategy challenges the competitiveness of the Western partners and raises security concerns over investment in national grids and transportation hubs. In addition, the Western partners share concerns about the expansive role of the state in China's economy, with the excessive use of industrial policies, subsidies, and regulatory authorities (e.g. antitrust, procurement) in order to create competitive advantages in strategic industries ([Sutter, 2021, p. 1](#)). Other problems include forced technology transfers, joint venture requirements, technology and intellectual property thefts, and limited access to China's domestic market, where restrictions still protect the sectors in which China is expanding overseas.

Considering the incomparable financial reserves held ([Reuters, 2021](#)) and the investment policy pursued with the help of state-owned companies, it can be assumed that China is likely to strengthen its position in global value chains (GVCs). The pandemic has exposed supply chain risks ([Lawrence and Sutter, 2021, p. 1](#)) as countries became dependent on Chinese intermediate and finished goods. Disrupted supplies of critical livelihoods uncovered dangerous dependence on suppliers from geographically distant locations. This reliance has caused anxiety in Europe and America that led to the diversification of supply networks and reduced vital supply chains ([Huaying, 2020; Pandit, 2020](#)). Nevertheless, we can presume that China will continue to play a significant role in GVCs, even at the cost of investing in regional value chains closer to consumer markets ([Pandit, 2020](#)).

Nevertheless, the economic effects of lockdowns will linger. First, declined factory output in China resulted in delayed shipments of components and consumer electronics worldwide ([Hille, Gray and McGee, 2020](#)), which only gradually became visible ([Lynch, 2021](#)). The disturbed logistics then caused delays to supplies from manufacturing hubs in East Asia as intermodal shipping containers were left in Europe and North America at the beginning of the pandemic. Container shortages raised the price of shipment from China/East Asia to North Europe from US\$1,705 to US\$14,057 year on year (August 2021) and North America West coast from US\$3,335 to US\$17,507 YoY ([Freightos Baltic Container Freight Index, 2021](#)). Finally, Covid closed important container terminals in summer 2021, such as Ningbo-Zhoushan – the world 3rd largest container port in China, causing further delays. We presume that both supply risks and high prices of containers will lead to a new phenomenon: nearshoring – relocation of business operations to countries and companies geographically closer to the target markets. Even if nearshoring may seem harmful to Chinese producers, Beijing will most likely make efforts to stay within the new value chains to preserve its position as a global exporter. Hence, China's economic standing will not suffer, but it may improve.

Conclusions

As challenging as it was, the COVID-19 pandemic should be seen as a Chinese government success. Determined actions to fight the pandemic have resulted in a low death toll compared to other countries and minimal economic losses. On the contrary, China has enjoyed a growth dividend from good pandemic management and consolidated its position as a global leader in international trade. In addition, its attempts to improve its image by supplying vaccines, masks and ventilators were leverages that let China further strengthen its geopolitical standing.

The results of China's activity during the COVID-19 pandemic were astounding. By early February 2022, only 106,863 Chinese had been diagnosed, and 4,636 had died from the virus. At the same time, the U.S. had over 79.2 million cases and 942,006 fatalities ([Worldometer, 2021](#)). The economic success was also enviable: in the first quarter of 2021, China's output grew by 18.3% year on year (YoY), the fastest rate since the early

1990s ([Hale, Yu and Arnold, 2021](#)), while the American economy reached 6.4% YoY growth. China has been the first major economy to withdraw its pandemic stimulus since March 2021 ([Xie, 2021](#)). While the aftereffects of the crisis can be seen, the government in Beijing fears that they might further affect China's national security.

Since the effects of the pandemic were felt in every economic sector, this was a threat to China's national security. However, the positive and negative effects of the pandemic were managed on an ongoing basis by the Chinese government, whose crisis management was designed to strengthen China in the face of a global threat. China's success is all the more remarkable as other countries are still struggling with waves of the pandemic, while China has moved forward and will be hard to catch up.

The motives of China's global engagement in fighting the pandemic are neither altruistic nor unconditional. China's rising influence in low-income countries of Africa and Asia increases its soft power. Thus, it can be helpful for future strategic purposes comprising the protection of its trade markets and strategic investments, important as critical elements of a national safety strategy.

However, in the long term, China will have to face Western countries working on a joint approach to the strategic and economic concerns posed by Beijing. Despite shared suspicion, all partners are interdependent in a globalised world in economic and security issues. Therefore, China will somehow need to address such aspects as reciprocity, mainly concerning economic issues, security challenges, and the problems of climate change and also sensitive subjects such as the protection of human rights and adherence to international law. The future will be challenging as Beijing may also have to deal with unfavourable economic processes such as nearshoring, challenging its hitherto unwavering advantage. To overcome the processes, China's leaders will most probably further complement the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America to ensure support for their foreign policy objectives both in economic and political fields.

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