



FIVE REASONS WHY XI'S 'PEKING MODEL' WILL STRUGGLE POST-COVID-19

BY JAGANNATH PANDA

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Xi Jinping's model of governance—from an economically prosperous "[Chinese dream](#)" for its people to a "[Community of Shared Future for Humanity](#)" with China leading the way—has provided the reference points for Beijing's diplomacy. That the Chinese political system can help build an equitable order favoring the developing world has been central to Xi's international outreach.

The objective of such an order is to position China at the helm of a "Sino-centric" global order—a "Peking model." The model not only promotes Xi as "[globalizer in chief](#)," but also creates a wall of regulations between China and the world by controlling the flow of capital, ideas, and culture, ensuring regime sustainability for the Communist Party of China domestically. In the post Covid-19 order this will not be easy for China, and Xi's Peking model will come under serious challenges.

If Chairman Mao Zedong is credited with the establishment of the contemporary Chinese party-state, and Deng Xiaoping with bringing China onto the global map with economic reforms and an open-door foreign policy, then Xi has sought a "[new era](#)" foreign policy focused on promoting the "China brand" internationally. The Xi model of governance, known as the "[modernisation of national governance](#)," was the fifth modernisation program, following Deng's

[four-modernization](#) policy introduced in 1979. While Deng's program focused on agriculture, industry, technology, and the military, with the aim of building a stronger China "nationally," Xi's "modernization of national governance" was more internationally oriented, exemplifying the Communist Party's global image as a new political model—a "Peking model" to be promoted abroad.

This model is now facing adversity, ironically, of Chinese origin: the Covid-19. As a global pandemic, the novel coronavirus has shaken the world, with tens of thousands of deaths and more than a million positive cases, prompting the question: is this the "Community of Shared Future for Humanity" Xi promised? Donald Trump calling the Covid-19 the "[Chinese virus](#)" will dent China's image internationally. China will find it hard to dismiss the notion that the Covid-19 has revealed a poor governance structure that puts the entire world in danger, especially given the suppression of Dr. Li Wenliang's [early warning](#) in Wuhan.

In a way, the Covid-19 has shown the international community how the trade, people-to-people contact, and connectivity China's Belt and Road Initiative boasted of can export not only goods, but the dangers of a communist and authoritarian model based on suppression of news, information, and speech. The Wuhan episode exhibits how Xi's model of centralized power slowed the decision-making process in the Chinese political system, leading to the paralysis of local governance. If anything, the pandemic reinforced the demand that China must promote freedom of speech and transparency, creating the following challenges.

First is a loss of confidence in the Chinese-sponsored schemes. An anti-Chinese crusade may emerge in Europe and the US in which the Communist Party's model of governance and its approach toward the international community will face severe scrutiny. Italy, Spain, France, and Germany—Europe's four most severely affected countries—might lead this anti-Chinese crusade in Europe. More importantly, the Covid-19 outbreak has brought into focus many developing economies' growing dependence on China. Even though the spread of the virus appears to have slowed in China, other parts of the world still

struggle, and will fear any outward engagement with China for some time—this will mean a setback for Xi’s model.

Second, the Communist Party has long fought a defensive ideological battle against democratic norms, liberal ideas, human rights, and the principles of democracy. Though the party never directly spread its autocratic functioning beyond China, the People’s Liberation Army has expanded its strategic wings across the Indo-Pacific by building ports, stationing points, and overseas bases. The assertive Chinese posture in Xi’s model has been noticed, from the South China Sea to the East China Sea to the boundary dispute with India. Post-pandemic, such assertiveness will not go unquestioned, with the democratic world doubting China’s approach and its “Shared Future.”

Third, China has exhibited a leadership role in global affairs, but without a corresponding sense of responsibility and accountability. The Chinese government reprimanding Li for his early warnings about the Covid-19 in Wuhan is just one example. In retrospect, the Chinese president has tried to promote a model of governance through the “new type of political party system” represented by the Communist Party as an alternative to the Western model of democracy and liberalism. This might not be easy for China now. The comity of nations may build pressure on China to display signs of solidarity and empathy on critical global governance issues.

Fourth, the post Covid-19 order will promote a contest of power where “[China Inc](#)” must face “[America first](#),” along with a coalition of voices emerging with the lead of Indo-Pacific powers, pushing Xi’s leadership into defensive mode. The post-Covid-19 order would not only witness heightened power competition, but also experience a strengthened tiff between US and China, beyond trade and the cyber domain. The Chinese aspiration for supremacy across Asia and beyond might also be questioned more vigorously by India, Japan, and other countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. Australia can be expected to pursue a similar stance too.

Lastly, and above all, the key to China’s economic and diplomatic clout comes from the fact that it is key to the global supply chain. China’s foreign policy gains

its strength from the economic power it has built over the years by emerging as a manufacturing powerhouse. Whether it is an exporter or an importer, China’s role is critical in preventing the global economy from going into a slump—signs of which are already evident. Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis has forced many corporates to think about relocating their manufacturing bases and factory outlets out of China. Beijing will face a great challenge in convincing companies and investors to stay engaged with its industries and market.

Politically, too, restoring normality is paramount in China. The economic growth benefitting the majority of the population has been the one overriding factor propping its confidence and enabling it to ignore demands for political reforms. Beating the coronavirus and putting the country back on the track economically remains critical to China’s future. The earlier it happens, the better it will be for the Chinese leadership including Xi Jinping.

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