



Covid-19 and Two Determinisms in the PRC

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Chair: Dr. Hemant Adlakha, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi; Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

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The seminar was centred around the ongoing global crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Speaker began the seminar by elaborating on how the global health crisis had evolved into a simultaneous political crisis caused by a national mobilisation that mimicked a state of war. The panic it has caused and the media coverage it has received has exceeded even those of partial, small-scale wars. As a result, this war against COVID-19, in his opinion, has manifested into a competition between countries, with the various 'rankings' (of confirmed cases, recoveries and deaths) being updated daily, similar to medals won during the Olympics.

From this, he then discussed how at the start of the virus in Europe in March, cultural determinism was being used to compare responses to the pandemic, and how the difference in attitudes of the West and the East (such as wearing masks, accepting government mandated quarantine and so on) were the most compared themes. He quoted scholars as saying that East Asian states had seemed better at fighting the pandemic due to their cultural values and highly organised daily lives, and the higher degree of trust that they had in their governments, as opposed to the West. By the time the virus had reached the West, it had started to become highly politicised, with China blaming US soldiers for bringing the virus to Wuhan, and Trump in return referring to it as the 'China virus' – pushing the diplomatic war further, with the WHO caught in the middle.

With this political crisis, the Speaker then explained that gradually, institutional determinism is replacing cultural determinism as one of the ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC), with the focus of the discourse becoming whether democratic or authoritarian regimes were more effective at dealing with such extreme crises. He mentioned how in terms of propaganda, the CPC utilised both of these determinisms very effectively. The examples given related to the promotion of traditional Chinese medicine by the CPC and the effectiveness and scale of their response in Wuhan, portraying itself as a 'saviour' of the people. This was touted as China's institutional advantage - a centralised and unified leadership under the CPC, in sharp contrast to the sluggish manner in which democratic Western states had responded. In the Speaker's opinion, the CPC's doctrine of institutional determinism affirms that autocracy is superior to democracy, allowing states to create economic miracles as well as save lives more effectively.

The Speaker further went on to say that for him, the abolition of presidential term limits in 2018 paved the way for Xi Jinping's one-man rule, who had in effect been 'crowned' by the pandemic as the successor to Mao's campaigns. After Xi's rise to power, cultural conservatives who viewed themselves as Confucian have rarely spoken, with the party and its leader having received renewed invigoration,

and hence not needing their support as much anymore. The Deng era foreign policy of ‘hiding your capability and biding your time’ had been on the verge of collapse, and the pandemic gave Chinese diplomats an opportunity to be more aggressive than before. He elaborated that this was further aided by the irreparable mistakes made by the West due to the pandemic, but also because the CPC had long been aware of the weaknesses and hypocrisies within democratic countries and capitalism markets.

The Speaker also mentioned that the term ‘China virus’ had previously been used to describe the threat the international system faced from the actions of the CPC. He mentioned that the CPC had taken advantage of the West’s own tactics, taking advantage of its money, and the various soft power activities it undertook, combined with bribery of short-sighted politicians and control of greedy entrepreneurs, thereby undermining much of the progress that mankind obtained on the side of human rights. He elaborated that over the past few decades, the CPC has made use of its ‘low human rights advantage’; that is, the competitive advantage brought by reduction of transaction costs at the expense of justice and social rights. In pace with rapid development and economic globalisation, this had a profound impact on the world, with welfare states being forced into austerity, liberal countries being forced to reduce freedoms and developing countries losing the possibilities of attracting firms and newer technologies.

The original reasoning, according to the Speaker, behind renaming COVID-19 as the ‘China virus’ had been to stigmatise based on the virus’ origins, which remains unacceptable. However, the Speaker stressed on the fact that this low human rights advantage was indeed a virus from the PRC, one which exists as a ‘parasite’ on a level above globalisation, but yet remains its largest destroyer as well. For the Speaker, this kind of ‘China virus’ has no cultural attributes and any country may be affected in this regard, with the COVID-19 virus acting as a metaphorical beacon of warning of a kind of inevitable danger from the PRC to the whole world. In the eventual aftermath of the pandemic, the Speaker believes that institutional confidence will become more aggressive, giving examples of actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong as symptoms of this larger problem, although he also stressed that these ‘mutations’ also provided new opportunities for both prevention and mitigation.

The discussion that followed focused, firstly, on the reasoning behind the PRC’s push for increasing institutional determinism, and the effects of state propaganda on the Chinese people, during which the Speaker admitted a slight pessimistic outlook due to the rising nationalism within Chinese youth, who would like to support the regime at the head of a unified China. Another question raised was who this propaganda was aimed at, and whether it was meant to influence Chinese citizens or the world at large. Carrying on into the discussion, the question was raised whether both these kinds of determinisms helped the CPC maintain stability, or whether it was independent of that. The Speaker then clarified that since 1989, national consensus has changed, and many Chinese people share similar values of nationalism, which is often used by the CPC as one of its sources of legitimacy. Finally, the Speaker also stated that in his opinion, while cultural determinism remains an important part of foreign and domestic policy, Xi Jinping cares more about the establishment of institutional determinism. In many important discourses today, cultural terminology has been overshadowed by use of generic ideological terms such as Marxism and Leninism, and the cultural side of affairs has become just another strategy used by the CPC. This he believes is due to the fact that while previous Chinese leaders had a different worldview than Mao, Xi Jinping today is repeating Mao’s terms, to try and identify himself as a worthy successor to Mao himself.

This report was prepared by Aadil Sud, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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