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*Opinion*

## With China and the US on the warpath, the world is heading for a fate worse than the coronavirus crisis, and that's madness



- Pointing the finger at China or anyone else misses the point: a pandemic takes widespread ineptitude across all ideologies to scale up to a murderous leviathan
- Both Xi Jinping and Donald Trump could have dealt better with the crisis

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

This is no time to be polite: the [US relationship with China](#) is deteriorating in a most disgraceful and unnecessary manner amid the global health and economic crisis. As relations continue to sour, the world could be heading for a catastrophe worse than Covid-19: nuclear war.

The cold front in Washington towards China began surfacing under president Barack Obama, who felt his predecessors George W. Bush and Bill Clinton had been too tolerant of Beijing's insincerities,

evasions and perceived lies. Beijing didn't help its cause (if it cared) by plunging forward arrogantly – as if it wanted the whole world to notice what a big shot it had become.

After China's formal induction into the global economic order via the World Trade Organisation in 2001, Beijing went on a big-time ego trip which was anything but unusual for a rising, muscle-flexing power, and which culminated in the [showy 2008 Olympics](#).

But not all the games Beijing played were such fun for the West to watch, especially when viewed (wrongly or rightly) as [intellectual theft](#), currency gamesmanship, espionage and empty sloganeering.

This rise in ambition and stretch of reach gave restless elements in the US good reason to raise red flags that lure Americans into a new Cold War. This was sad.

For a time – during the second Clinton administration especially – it seemed to me that the US had worked out a good-enough formula: live with the reality of China (pluses and minuses), just as China has to live with the US, and; not be diverted by some ideological dream about changing China.

Realistically, change can only come from the strong will and wishes of the Chinese people; in trying to engineer change from Washington, the US is likely to wind up changing itself first, in undesirable ways.

In this pluralistic world, compromise is not in itself unethical but is a practical option for stability. There is so much the two countries need to do together. They could lead the world to lower levels of nuclear arsenals, heightened [climate cooperation](#) and a tightened global health warning system.

And they could do so in a businesslike, real-world manner: the notion of planned zero growth might warm some hearts, but it is a non-starter. Many of the toughest problems – income disparity, health system improvements and so on – will not improve on their own, cost-free.

At the same time, they will only get worse if reckless growth is tyrannically insisted on. A better world order – which means bilateral peacemaking, not blustery warmongering – will require citizen buy-in on both sides of the Pacific. Both governments should lower the bitter pitch of their propaganda bands.

The blame game, whether regarding Covid-19 or anything else, is a loser's strategy: when all the bodies are counted, and the causes of the crisis found, there will be plenty of blame to go around.

### Coronavirus cases

<b>3,533,886</b> Confirmed Covid-19 cases	
<b>248,353</b>	<b>1,131,394</b>
total deaths	total recovered

Pointing the finger now at China or anyone else misses the point: a [pandemic](#) takes widespread ineptitude across all ideologies to scale up to a murderous leviathan. Some nations were slow to

respond even after they had been adequately warned by the Chinese authorities that a nightmare was coming their way. A whole book could be written on *Why America Slept*.

Thomas Hobbes, that philosophical master of disaster, insisted that the purpose of government was to protect citizens from harm and to maintain order. In today's world, it looks as if threats to personal security come less from sword-brandishing barbarians at the gate than newer unknowns, such as [microscopic invaders](#) and sleepy national leaders.

If this is the case, why blow billions on yet another aircraft carrier when your national health care system is filled with holes? "Whether democratic or authoritarian," wrote historian John Gray in a recent issue of *New Statesman* magazine, "states that do not meet this Hobbesian test will fail."

Life doesn't gift individuals infinite time to get everything in order, and in its infinite jest it will stop the clock when you least expect it. President Donald Trump, his administration brought to its knees not by Chinese intelligence agents but by microscopic infectious agents, is all but finished, I believe.

Thankfully, the US political system spurns lifetime rule. China does not, of course. Yet President Xi Jinping's notion of the "[Chinese dream](#)" is too narrow a vision for this epoch – as is Trump's juvenile "Make America Great Again" bromide. Why not broaden the vision to make the world peaceful and healthy once and for all?

After all, they both could have done better with the Covid-19 crisis. One was conspicuous by his relative absence: it took Xi two months to [visit Wuhan](#). The other has been conspicuous by his fumbling presence: Trump took two months to come to his senses about the Covid-19 threat – and it's not certain he has completed the intellectual journey.

Still, there is nothing inherently wrong with China or the US, despite political systems that are both mutually incomparable and incompatible. Yes, China's [neo-Maoist](#) leftists scare the daylights out of me; so do America's neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic rightists – not to mention other cretinous products of post-liberal politics. Instead of patronising his deplorables, at least Xi is pushing back at them.

So what is the problem? It's that the relationship between the two states, less so the [individuals leading those states](#), is totally misconceived, and bilateral policies are wrong. They don't fit the times. Instead of a peace agreement, the world's two largest economies and militaries appear to be working towards a suicide pact.

"Madness is something rare in individuals," warned German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "but in groups, parties, peoples, epochs, it is the rule." Yes, madness – that's it. Pure madness.

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