

Covid-19 Crisis, the New Battleground for the Geopolitics of China and Russia

The present health crisis is showing the vulnerability of a system that has in China the main world manufacturer. At the same time, it is showing how China and Russia are repositioning on the geopolitical chessboard in the aftermath of the crisis. The strength of their positions will mostly depend on the resilience of the economic and socio-political systems of the most affected countries.

The Covid-19 crisis has the potential to reshape the geopolitical system in the short and mid-term. All main world economies are struggling. The democratic system of the Western bloc is being hardly hit by the inability to find a solution and give answers to their citizens quick enough to reset life back to normal.

While the present US administration is constantly under scrutiny for the delay of drastic decisions to control the spreading of the disease, the European diplomatic order is hit by a new wave of nationalist and populist requests that are highlighting the interests of individual countries at the damage of the European Union's dream.

This health crisis has led to a harsh debate within the EU on how to deal with the costs and consequences of this crisis. Its member states are disputing vehemently on the financial packages and systems to put in place to counter the effects of this pandemic. At the same time though, China and Russia have taken advantage of this controversy to step deeper into European affairs by sending medical supplies and personnel to assist Italy (as the hardest hit so far within the Union) and its authorities in their efforts to counter the spreading of the virus.

China's and Russia's help have been defined and portrayed in their home countries as humanitarian missions. However, the motives of these missions are being questioned as the guiding principles are less humanitarian and more strategic.

Throughout the centuries, both countries have based their strength through the geopolitics of fear, marked by a hard and deep control of their territory and strategic lines of defense, while at the same time showing an invasive control of their respective external areas of influence.

The crisis has made Italy particularly vulnerable. Because of its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea, the Peninsula has always been a territory of conquest for foreign powers. During WWII, Sir Winston Churchill defined it as the soft underbelly through which to defeat the Nazis. During the Cold War, Italy has been a territory of spies and intrigues for all major powers involved. Today, although through different shapes and forms, the situation has not changed. Therefore, both China and Russia have their own strategic reasons to rush to the help of Italy. Important for them, controversial and dangerous for Italy itself, the EU, and the US.

China has the need to clear its reputation of being the country that has spread the virus. What better opportunity than rushing to the dying bed of the first G7 country that joined China in its Belt and Road Initiative in March 2019? The special relationship that the leaders of the 5 Star Movement –one of the main parties in the current Italian Parliament and also the main party in the government coalition– have with Chinese authorities has often been pointed out negatively, both in Italy and abroad. The decision of the Italian government to join China's project has been harshly criticized within EU and NATO environments. This is an opportunity for China to strengthen this relationship by: 1) pointing out the perceived lack of help and support Italy is receiving from Western countries; and 2) selling medical equipment to Italy through a preferential lane. It is important to remark that China is not giving medical equipment for free.

The closed and repressive system managed by Chinese governments have often been the target of Western criticism. In the months prior to this health crisis, the way protests in Hong Kong and in the Xinjiang region have been managed have often brought Western countries to be very outspoken against China's system and lack of respect for human rights. With Europe and the US being hit by the Covid-19 crisis –more than China has been and regardless of the methods used to control it–, China is in the position of gaining strategic advantages in the post-crisis geopolitical order.

The pattern that China is following in Italy is the same path it followed in other regions of the world, such as Africa or Indo-China: politics through commerce.

Russia is in a similar position. From its perspective, it has important strategic reasons as well to step into EU territory and set new lines of influence. Through the years that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Western world has publicly shown mistrust in Russia's implementation of democratic values. It has often been under the scrutiny of Western democracies and institutions. However, in the past ten years, the attitude has changed. The more

Russia played a major role in the energy sector and supplied Europe with gas, the more European countries were placed in the “without option position.” Made exceptions for some statements here and there to mark some sort of distance and criticism, they have become less outspoken and more complacent with Russia’s internal and external policies. They have turned a blind eye to human rights violations and the management of political and media dissent. The constitutional changes that allow Mr. Vladimir Putin to be in the position of president for many years to come have been taken as a regular unfolding of events.

One clear proof is the major role that Russia plays in the Syrian crisis. As the US was gradually disengaging from the Middle East, Russia turned on the political offensive and openly set a foot on a ground they were used to stepping on very cautiously before. The lack of real response to the 2014’s Russian annexation of Crimea was the icing on the cake. That move was not really opposed by any Western democracies. There were circumstantial statements, but no real steps to sanction Russia have been taken. Russia’s intelligence operations on British soil in recent years have shown Mr. Putin’s resoluteness in taking difficult decisions. His actions follow the steps of his predecessors, starting with Catherine the Great and continued through the centuries by the czars and the Soviet Union leaders that followed.

Currently, Russia is probably at its utmost geopolitical role. The health crisis that is hitting the Western world is giving an opportunity that will hardly happen again in the near future. Russia is aware of this and is using its political power and influence to strengthen old ties and create new ones.

Just like China is exploiting the special channel it has with the leaders of the Italian 5 Star Movement, Russia is exploiting the feeling of detachment from the EU that a good percentage of the Italian right-wing voters and politicians have shown in the past few years. Russia’s understanding of the political opportunities given by the crisis is proved also by military and intelligence personnel that have been sent to Italy to help control the pandemic. Since WWII, never before had Russia set its foot on Western soil. What is currently happening might mark the beginning of a new geopolitical era.

In an attempt to counter China’s and Russia’s mission on Italian soil, Mr. Donald Trump ordered the US government to help Italy with medical supplies and hospitals on April, 10th. It has also remarked the importance of the role that the US-Italy alliance has played through the decades that followed WWII. Mr. Trump’s move was not unexpected. However, the question

is whether it is still on time to regain a strategic influence. It is still too early to say as both Italy and the US are still in the full wave of the health crisis.

Through the years that followed WWII, both China, Russia, and the US have followed the same pattern: gaining strategic positions by building facts on the ground. The three countries share also the vision of geopolitical greatness they have of themselves.

However, the difference between these three superpowers is to be found in the scrutiny system present in their respective institutions. While the US is an accomplished democracy, with a political minority and media system protected in their rights, a check and balance system that limits the powers of the president, and investigating commissions to ascertain facts and events, China and Russia are way far from having transparent institutions and systems. Political minorities and media are not fully protected in their rights to dissent and question their governments' policies. A system based on check and balance and investigating commissions are not fully present in their institutions. The principle of accountability is virtually absent in their systems. These peculiarities place China's and Russia's decision-makers on a fast-track lane when strategic and resolute decisions have to be taken.

The Covid-19 health crisis has strengthened the role of the "Healthcare Silk Road." As the main manufacturer and supplier of healthcare-related items and equipment, China has a new gold mine to dig, a new oil well to extract from. It can set the timeline and price as it finds more appropriate. Italy has probably become the first importer of the products of this new version of the silk road. The US, being now the country with the highest number of deaths due to Covid-19, is finding it hard to meet its own needs at the same speed as they arise. The American healthcare system is struggling. Despite the order of Mr. Trump to convert manufacturing processes to meet the desperate need of ventilators and respirators, the US is not in the position of defining themselves self-reliant on this issue.

The Covid-19 crisis has shown the strategic role that medical supplies play nowadays. It has also shown the vulnerability of a geopolitical and economic system that has made China its main manufacturer. The US, the EU bloc, Japan, and the UK might decide to launch plans to bring back to their countries the production and manufacture of strategic supplies, including healthcare ones. However, similar plans will take years to be implemented effectively and turn these regions self-reliant.

Currently, from a political perspective, the research for a cure or the discovery of a vaccine against this type of coronavirus is the main “weapon” the affected countries have to contain China’s role in the management of the supplies needed for this type of crisis. Although several promising paths are being walked on, the road ahead might still be long. In the meantime, China’s manufacturers and political system will benefit from this crisis.

When the pandemic will be managed effectively and life and production will be back to normal again, the Chinese government will have to answer many questions on how they managed the health crisis in Wuhan and how they tried to prevent the virus from spreading globally. They will have to explain also how they collected information about the disease, what information they collected, how their reports have been written, and what information and how they have shared them. In several health- and political environments, lots of doubts are being cast on the transparency and effectiveness of the Chinese management system. One of the main charges against them could be healthcare-related criminal negligence. However, the strength of the questions will mostly depend on how the Western countries, and particularly the US and the EU bloc, will recover in all of their aspects from the pandemic. It will depend on how strong and effective the resilience of their political and socio-economic system will prove to be.

Russia, although not involved in the spreading of the virus and the exportation of the health crisis, might be questioned for its misinformation and disinformation operations during the crisis.

However, from a geopolitical perspective, these charges and questions do not really count. Through the decades, the two countries have proved to be waterproof against international criticism. They might have to pay a small price in terms of reputation and commerce, but it will hardly affect them greatly in the mid and long term.

When the Covid-19 crisis will be over, the world will most likely find itself in a new geopolitical phase, where the balance and shift of power will be on the side of China and Russia. With their new footholds around the globe.

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