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EUROPE REINVENTED

*How COVID-19 Is Changing the European Union*

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# Going Viral

- Why China was happy with the name COVID-19
- How the World Health Organization reacted to the outbreak
- How the novel coronavirus affected US-Chinese relations

## ‘A MORE PROSPEROUS AND GREENER YEAR’

Airports are fascinating. They are living organisms. Gateways for people, goods, lifestyles and ideas from and to all corners of the world. I love them, and I usually don't mind having to spend just a bit more time in the departures hall when my flight is delayed. There is never a dull moment in an airport.

When the words ‘delayed/retrasado’ flashed up on the screen, I knew I would be spending my final hours of 2019 at Barajas-Madrid International Airport. That night, it was hard to imagine that this was the fifth busiest airport in Europe, serving almost 58 million passengers a year. By the early evening, the departures hall in Terminal 1 was almost empty. It was New Year's Eve; shops, bars and restaurants were closing earlier than usual. It was a strange feeling. Nobody could have predicted that just a couple of months later, such emptiness would for several

weeks become the new norm in many European airports. With time to kill, I went through the tweets of the day. ‘I wish you all the best for 2020, a more prosperous and greener year built on even greater trust #Europe’, president of the European Council Charles Michel had posted earlier in the day. Greater trust was indeed something to wish for. Despite all the optimism that seems to be a moral duty for politicians, many observers expected (another) difficult year ahead for the European Union.

I had spent the past few days going through a wide range of foresight reports. Foresight means scanning the horizon for emerging trends in international politics. For a brief moment, it puts aside the issues of the day and looks to the future. My interest in this was triggered during a meeting I had, just before the Christmas break, with European Commission vice-president Maroš Šefčovič, in charge of – amongst other things – ‘Strategic Foresight’. It was the first time that foresight was included in the job description of a commissioner. If we manage to understand the megatrends that will determine international relations in the coming decades, we will be in a position to better shape them, or so the reasoning goes.

The headlines of that final day of 2019 lived up surprisingly well to some of the trends predicted in the foresight reports of major private consultancy firms and international organisations alike. After pro-Iranian protesters had stormed the US embassy in Iraq, president Trump sent strong warnings to Iran: ‘If it comes to a conflict’, he said, ‘Iran wouldn’t last long.’ In Afghanistan, the Taliban continued its attacks against security forces, killing more than twenty troops. In Libya, the Associated Press reported, huge sums of European money had been diverted to intertwined networks of militiamen, traffickers and coast guard members who exploited migrants, apparently with full knowledge of some UN officials.

Further East, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un announced that he would continue to build up its nuclear arsenal, while devastating floods in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, a deadly typhoon in the Philippines and horrific bushfires in Australia illustrated why climate change and natural disasters would continue to top the list of megatrends. An op-ed in the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* argued that 2020 would be ‘the year of climate justice’, while in *Le Monde*, an opinion-maker focused on how algorithms and new technologies would impact our way of life. In neighbouring Italy, the leader of the right-wing Lega party promised his comeback in 2020, reminding Europeans – on the off-chance they had forgotten – that populism was a political force to be reckoned with. And just before boarding, I noticed on the site of a German newspaper that chancellor Merkel intended to use the German 2020 EU presidency ‘to ensure a stronger role of Europe in the world.’ Geopolitics, migration, climate change, the fight against populism... European leaders certainly had a busy year ahead.

## MEANWHILE IN CHINA...

That evening, Chinese president Xi Jinping gave his annual New Year’s speech to the nation. His message was one of self-confidence. ‘Everything is flourishing across our motherland’, he said. Evidence to support that claim was easy to find. At the start of this year, and for the first time in history – not just in Chinese history but in human history – Planet Earth had visited the far side of the moon, thanks to a Chinese lunar probe. China was close to finishing its own navigation satellite system, an alternative to the American GPS and the European Galileo systems, and would soon have its first self-developed aircraft carrier. On top of that, in the autumn, China’s women’s national volleyball team had won the World Cup.

Whether it was in technological power, military power or in public relations, China was doing just fine. All thanks to the many people who had worked tirelessly right until the very last moments of the year. ‘Your hard work is greatly appreciated’, were the president’s final words.

Amongst those people still at work that day were health department officials in the Chinese city of Wuhan. On 31 December, they informed the World Health Organization that 27 cases of pneumonia had been detected in their city. According to the People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, there were some similarities with the SARS virus, the ‘Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome’ that had killed hundreds of people worldwide some fifteen years earlier. The international media were not paying too much attention to this news. When they did, it usually amounted to an article filed away under ‘medical news’, rehashing the information published by the Chinese party paper.

At that point, very little was known about this viral pneumonia, at least publicly. But in Wuhan’s medical circles, there was concern. For some time already. In the second week of December 2019, a small number of patients had shown up in local hospitals with symptoms very similar to the flu. They were coughing, had fever, and had problems breathing. Some were sent back home or back to work. When patients began pouring in and the usual treatment did not seem to be working, doctors started to delve deeper into these cases. They soon found out that several of them – around two thirds of the first group of patients – had a link to a local wet market: the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

Wet markets are very common in China and the rest of Asia. Anyone who has visited Indonesia, Vietnam or Hong Kong has probably been to one. The aroma – some would call it smell – of freshness is simply unforgettable.

Wet markets are popular places where you can buy a wide variety of affordable food, from meat and fish to vegetables and fruits, all laid out on display in the open air. As a traditional, short-chain form of food retail, they face increasing competition from supermarkets and convenience stores. These larger businesses are plugged into the global food chain, offering processed food to Asia's expanding middle class. For millions of local farmers, who keep their products fresh by regularly pouring water on them (hence 'wet' market), these places are their main source of income and often their main way of keeping afloat. In most wet markets selling live animals is a thing of the past. An exception is fish-on-ice, very much like a fish market in many European countries. Live poultry is generally forbidden since the outbreak of avian flu in the late 1990s.

The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, however, was different. At this huge 50,000 square metre market, several of the more than 1000 traders sold more than apples and chicken meat. Laid out on wooden tables along the narrow, over-crowded lanes in the western part of the market, wild animals were being sold. Even exotic ones like bats, snakes, lizards or baby crocodiles. In all shapes and sizes. Dead or alive.

Some of the first patients who were admitted to Wuhan's hospitals had worked there or at least visited the market just before they fell ill. Two of them were treated by Dr. Ai Fen, the director of the A&E department at Wuhan Central Hospital. On 30 December, she got lab results back for one of her patients: 'SARS Coronavirus'. She knew immediately what to do: sound the alarm. She circled the word SARS, took a picture and sent it to some colleagues. From there, it ended up in the hands of a young ophthalmologist, Li Wenliang, who posted it in a WeChat group of former classmates.

The news spread like wildfire. Before long, Li himself,

just like Dr. Ai and seven other whistleblowers, would be severely reprimanded by the hospital and the city of Wuhan for ‘spreading rumours’. Online social media posts about the virus were deleted, and the journalists who posted them faced pressure from local authorities. For 34-year-old Li, there was an even more dramatic turn of events. He was infected with the virus and died in the line of duty in early February 2020.

## MEET THE CORONA FAMILY

The moment Dr. Ai got those first test results, Chinese doctors knew the enemy they were fighting. Or at least they knew the family to which that enemy belonged: the corona family, named after the ‘crown’ (‘corona’ in Latin) created by the spiky proteins that surround the actual virus particle, just like the thorns of a crown. Coronaviruses usually circulate in animals. Some species get sick. Others, like bats, have – over time – become immune, which makes them the perfect hosts. Not only to coronaviruses, but also to other viruses, such as Ebola, Nipah or Hendra.

Six of these coronaviruses have managed to expand their territory to humans. Four of them were rather harmless, albeit annoying, comparable to a common cold. Two others, however, turned out to be much more dangerous for humans. In the mid-1990s, one strain jumped from bats to camels. In the early 2010s, it then jumped to humans, initially in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, causing the so-called MERS epidemics (Middle East respiratory syndrome). A decade earlier, in China, a new coronavirus had found its way from a bat population to a group of masked palm civets that were sold in an animal market in the city of Guangdong. From this cat-like creature it jumped to humans which caused the 2002-2003 SARS-CoV epidemics. Some 800 infected people were killed globally.



This new 2019 virus was the seventh coronavirus to infect humans. It probably jumped from an animal to a human being some time between early October and early December, and then existed in a latent phase for several weeks. As soon as the newcomer was detected, the next question was: how did it fit into the corona family? Scientists soon discovered that it was a cousin of SARS-CoV, given its 79% similarity in genetic make-up. That answered a few questions, but not all. Was it as lethal as SARS, which had killed around 10% of those infected? Could it be transmitted between people or only between animals and humans? And how contagious was it exactly? These questions remained unanswered when *The New York Times* published its very first news article on the virus, on 6 January 2020, soon after the Chinese had notified the WHO and the US of their pneumonia cases. The next day, *The Wall Street Journal* revealed: ‘New Virus Discovered by Chinese Scientists.’ Meanwhile back in China, the authorities tried to reassure the world: ‘it is controllable, preventable, curable’.

## COVID-19: WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Now that the family issue was settled, the new coronavirus, as it was initially referred to, was due a proper name. Given its genetic structure, scientists of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses baptised it: ‘severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)’. Then the World Health Organization had to choose the name of the disease it caused. It settled for the neutral name ‘Corona Virus Disease 2019’ (COVID-19).

I have always been intrigued by name-giving, especially when it comes to catastrophic events. Names are never innocent. Take hurricanes. In the late 1970s the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) decided to stop giving

only female names to hurricanes after decade-long pressure from feminist groups and enlightened politicians. In 2001, the WMO was forced to withdraw the name 'Israel' from the list of names for upcoming storms, after huge protests led by the newspaper *The Jerusalem Post*. It was replaced by 'Ivo'. (Incidentally, the name Adolph was allowed to stick around). And in 2014, Malaysia asked for the name Sonamu to be taken off the list of future storms because it sounded too much like 'tsunami'. Best avoided! The World Health Organization was fully aware of such considerations when it decided on the name for the new disease: 'We had to find a name that did not refer to a geographical location, an animal, an individual or group of people, and which is also pronounceable and related to the disease', it explained in a tweet. Communication was important. That's also why in its public messaging, the WHO generally refers to the COVID-19 virus, and not to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The name SARS alone could cause panic, especially in those countries that had been severely affected by the SARS epidemic in 2002-2003. The way the World Health Organization labelled the disease and referred to the virus was without doubt welcomed in Beijing. Even though the outbreak of the virus had undeniably started in China, and even though China was – then – still the epicentre, this was not reflected in the name. Unlike previous pandemics such as the Asian flu, the Mexican flu or – much earlier – the Spanish flu. Beijing had many other reasons to welcome the WHO approach in the early weeks of the epidemic. The organisation's public messages very much echoed those of the Chinese authorities. In mid-January China still argued that there was no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the virus. The WHO repeated that information, even though at that point several medical staff working in Wuhan's hospitals had been infected by their

## FOCUS ON:

### The World Health Organization (WHO)

The WHO is one of the 15 specialised agencies of the United Nations (UN), just like UNESCO or the International Labour Organization. It was created in 1948, three years after the UN itself. It works closely with the UN on anything you can think of related to global public health, such as coordinating the global response to a health emergency, helping countries to improve their health infrastructure or raising awareness on mental health or obesity. Its biggest success is probably the eradication of smallpox and the near-eradication of polio. All the 194 countries that are members of the UN are part of the WHO. Once a year, they all come together at the WHO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, for the World Health Assembly, the WHO's highest decision-making body. Its current director general is Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (Dr. Tedros). It has a budget of \$4.2 billion a year and employs over 7000 people in 150 countries. A little tip: if you are considering a job there, make sure you are a non-smoker: the WHO has a no-recruitment policy for smokers.

patients. It also used and published the number of cases directly as the Chinese sent them, even though many experts assumed that the real numbers were much higher. The WHO did not have much choice. It wasn't until mid-February that a WHO team of experts was allowed to visit China, after a meeting between the director-general and president Xi Jinping in Beijing in late January. At least until then, the WHO depended exclusively on the official information it got from China.

China's relationship with the World Health Organization is a complex one. China's voluntary contribution to the WHO is around \$11 million a year, a fraction of the organisation's total budget, or even of the US contribution, worth \$400 million. But in the wider UN system, China's influence is rising. From my diplomatic posting to the UN in New York, some fifteen years ago, I remember

China as a very important but predominantly defensive player. China intervened, usually by hitting the brakes, when its national interest was directly at stake. Since then, Beijing has clearly developed a more offensive agenda, in line with its global, multilateral ambitions. Today, it is the second-largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget and it will soon be the second most important contributor to the regular UN budget, rising above 10%. That buys them more engagement, more visibility, and more authority throughout the UN system.

But even if you take all this into consideration, the praise the WHO leadership reserved for the way in which China handled the outbreak of the epidemic was remarkable. After his meeting with the Chinese president Xi Jinping, the Ethiopian WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus hailed ‘the commitment from the top leadership, and the transparency they had demonstrated’. When a couple of days later the WHO declared the coronavirus a global health emergency (the sixth one in ten years!), he praised the ‘extraordinary measures’ the Chinese authorities had taken. There was no reason to limit trade or travel to China, the WHO even opposed it. (Meanwhile, on the same day, the US warned Americans not to travel to China.) Declaring the epidemic a global health emergency should not be considered a vote of no confidence in China, the WHO stressed. And in their report, the WHO experts who had visited China had nothing but praise for China’s ‘bold approach to contain the rapid spread’ of the virus. ‘China had rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history’, the report continued.

## THE TOXIC US-CHINESE RELATIONSHIP

How could so much eulogy not have irritated the US, and even more so its president? Trump's reaction was easy to predict. His entire first term was dominated by a confrontation with China. Both countries engaged in a trade war, with the US imposing tariffs on Chinese goods worth more than \$360 billion, and China retaliating for more than \$110 billion. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, its projection of (military) power in its neighbourhood, its strong interest in international organisations, including the WHO, the role of companies like Huawei in the roll-out of the 5G network... all thorns in the side of the US president. Before long, the COVID-19 epidemic too got embroiled in this broader big power rivalry.

As soon as the first infected person on American soil was confirmed – a 35-year-old man who had returned to Washington State after visiting family in Wuhan – the virus was framed as a foreign threat. In an interview by CNBC on 22 January, against the backdrop of the World Economic Forum in Davos, president Trump stated: 'It's one person coming in from China, we have it under control.' In later statements, he repeatedly called it a 'Chinese virus' ('It comes from China, no?'), ignoring the WHO's advice not to link the virus to a particular region. In the last two weeks of March, Trump referred no fewer than twenty times to the 'China virus'. US secretary of state Mike Pompeo went even further. When his colleagues at the Foreign Ministers meeting of the G7 – the seven leading industrialised democracies – refused to explicitly refer to the 'Wuhan virus' in the final agreement, he simply stopped the text going out.

Throughout the crisis, accusations about who was responsible for the outbreak and where it started went back and forth between the two rival nations. In mid-March,

a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry perpetuated a theory that American soldiers who had visited the Military World Games in Wuhan the previous October had introduced the virus in China. His tweets got 160 million views, and were retweeted by official media as well as by many – though not all – Chinese ambassadors. Shortly before, Republican senator Tom Cotton had suggested, on Fox News, that the virus actually had its origins in a biochemical lab in Wuhan and was accidentally released. Exactly the scenario depicted by the 1981 fictional novel *The Eyes of Darkness*, in which the author, Dean Koontz, wrote about the virus Wuhan-400 that was developed in a Chinese military laboratory in the Wuhan region.

Fiction or not, this scenario was at one point or another also raised by the US secretary of defense, the secretary of state and the president himself. In that case, the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, which according to foreign secretary Pompeo was ‘just a handful of miles away’ from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was not the place where the virus originated from, but where it spread from. Scientists and US top defence officials are sceptical. But the story nevertheless dominated a large part of the news.

In this (dis)information war it was the journalists who were caught in the crossfire. In mid-March Beijing expelled thirteen journalists from three major US newspapers in retaliation to Chinese journalists being put under closer scrutiny in the US. Spokesperson for the foreign ministry, Geng Shuang, asked the US to stop its ‘cold war mentality’. *The New York Times* also called China’s crackdown against journalists ‘an unfortunate echo of the Cold War’. The stakes for both China and the US were high. China wanted to downplay its role in the global outbreak and shift the focus away from the missteps

made by withholding information, often at a local level, in the very first weeks.

But China also had an offensive agenda. Once the worst was over and the economy even began to bounce back, China was keen to show that the Chinese model for handling such a crisis was far superior to the western, democratic model. Even some of my most progressive and liberal friends admired the fact that the Chinese were able to build a brand-new hospital in Wuhan in about a week. The desire to be recognised as a country that dealt with the crisis in an ‘effective, unprecedented and transparent’, even heroic, way was obvious in most of the public messaging of the Chinese authorities, both inside and outside China.

At the same time, they wanted to turn the crisis into a geopolitical opportunity, and promote the image of China as a responsible major power, perhaps even the new ‘essential power’, post-corona. A power that was willing to cooperate with others to safeguard international public health. Xi Jinping’s speech at the Extraordinary G20 Leaders’ Summit in late March served exactly that purpose. It was a eulogy of the international community, the ‘community of nations’, that should ‘strengthen confidence, act with unity and work together in a collective response’. ‘Guided by the vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind’, China was ready to share its good practices, conduct joint research on drugs and vaccines and provide assistance where it could to countries hit by the growing outbreak. According to the Chinese president, all international organisations that could play a role in that should be supported, starting with the WHO. He also called for more international macro-economic policy coordination. In that area too, China was willing to play its part. It would ‘continue to advance reform and opening-up, widen market access,

improve the business environment, and expand imports and outbound investment to contribute to a stable world economy.’ The speech made me think of Xi’s interventions at the World Economic Forum in Davos, in 2017 and 2019. There he positioned himself as the protector of globalisation and the champion of multilateralism. Under Chinese leadership, of course. China’s position as the medical manufacturing shop of the world gave it the tools to underscore this leading position through a carefully planned programme of donating or selling medical supplies to countries that desperately needed them.

The US, on the other hand, went to great lengths to counter China’s global ambitions. In multiple messages it portrayed China as a regime that had misled the US and the world. It could and should not be trusted. The US administration attacked China’s overall lack of transparency. The fact that president Trump had praised China and its president at least fifteen times in January and February for its transparency and hard work had been quickly forgotten. Had China shared information sooner, ‘it could have been stopped right where it came from, China,’ Trump said at a White House news conference in March. ‘The world is paying a very big price for what they did.’ The World Health Organization took its fair share of the blows. The ‘very China-centric’ WHO was an accomplice, according to the US, which decided to first suspend its funding to the organisation and then withdraw from it. In the midst of a global health crisis of unparalleled proportions.

A direct phone call between both presidents (‘a very good conversation,’ according to Trump) only led to a temporary truce. In mid-April the American president confirmed that the US was doing a very thorough examination into ‘multiple sources,’ saying that COVID-19 may have escaped from a Wuhan laboratory with weak safety protocols. Later



that day, a new US government report was released, claiming that China may have secretly conducted underground nuclear test explosions. There was clearly a lack of transparency on the Chinese side, the report found. Different topic, same narrative. A narrative that easily found its way into Trump's presidential election campaign, which painted the rival candidate Joe Biden as being soft on China, and his son Hunter Biden as excessively involved in several business deals with the Chinese.

The US also reached out to the rest of the world. When several African diplomats in Beijing collectively condemned the fact that African nationals living in China were systematically treated as potential carriers of the coronavirus, and were severely harassed, they got immediate support from the US. In a message, the US embassy in Guangzhou warned that 'police ordered bars and restaurants not to serve clients who appear to be of African origin.' Local officials launched mandatory testing and self-quarantine for 'anyone with African contacts,' the statement said. The US also had a message for Europe. In a call with European reporters, secretary of state Pompeo stated: 'There is no country in the world that will provide as much aid assistance as the US will.'

In conflicts such as this, truth is always the first victim. I will go deeper into that in chapter 14. Time will no doubt provide more answers as to which claims are closest to reality. At the request of the EU, the World Health Organization committed in mid-May to an impartial, independent and thorough investigation into the outbreak of the virus and the reaction of the WHO to it. China agreed to participate in such an investigation, once the crisis was over. In the meantime, scientists will continue their work, including looking into where the virus originated and how it was first transmitted to human beings. But while watching the epic battle of words between two

powers with global ambitions unfold, two thoughts were constantly on my mind. The first one goes back to a plea of the WHO chief: ‘Please do not politicise this virus,’ he said. ‘If you don’t want many more body bags, then you refrain from politicising it.’ Throughout the crisis, this would not only turn out to be a challenge in international politics but also in national politics. The second thought goes back to an old African proverb: ‘If two elephants fight, it’s the grass that suffers.’ The grass is Europe, keen to occupy the middle ground between the two. In other words: where does Europe stand in all this?

Before we get there, there is one other question that has puzzled me right from the very beginning: ‘Could we have seen this coming?’