FORUM

Three reasons why China can overcome virus

Editor's Note:

The coronavirus is posing an increasingly tough challenge to the entire world. What can China's successful experience offer? What role does it play in the global anti-virus fight? What's behind some Western politicians' slandering of China's efforts? Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of The Kuhn Foundation and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018), shared his insights on these issues and more with Global Times (**GT**) reporter Yan Yunming.

GT: The coronavirus outbreak within China has almost been brought under control. How do you evaluate China's efforts in curbing the epidemic?

Kuhn: To me, one of the probative insights of why and how China has contained, and will continue to contain, the epidemic is the remarkable parallelism between China's war on the novel coronavirus and China's war on poverty. Consider the parallel factors:

First, the operational leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), not just giving directives and pronouncements but actually implementing programs and projects through the CPC organizational structure – central and five levels of local government (provincial, municipal, county, township, village). Second, the leadership of President Xi Jinping, who sets an example for other government officials. President Xi makes the remarkable statement – "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." I know no other national leader who has made such an assertion.

Third, the mobilization leadership of the CPC, able to command the country's resources in personnel and materials. For example, assigning "sister" relationships between 16 strong provinces and specific cities in Hubei. An important factor is that since the CPC controls the PLA, through the Central Military Commission, the military can be mobilized instantly to help in domestic crises, like earthquakes, floods and now epidemics.

I take it seriously when the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee calls the novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic "a major test of China's system and capacity for governance" – a phrase of such significance that in my 30-plus years of watching China, I do not recall the like.

Let me explain why I was, from the beginning, confident that China would overcome the epidemic. I had three reasons: China's commitment, competence, and readiness to change and improve.

China's commitment to fight COVID-19 is exemplified by the country's astonishing mobilization to stop its spread. The government issued strict and resolute directives with instant and draconian punishment for non-compliance.

The whole country marched to this music. This was China's monumental "whole of society" commitment. China's mobilization was unprecedented

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Robert Lawrence Kuhn Photo: Courtesy of Kuhn

in global health history. Nowhere could it work like it works in China. And the reason it works relates to how the party system works.

As noted above, it is the same kind of commitment and mobilization that the party has been using to win the battle against poverty since around 2012, with its targeted or precision poverty alleviation campaign, coordinating party leadership and organizations at central government and the five levels of local government. The structural similarities between China's war on the coronavirus and its war on poverty are indeed striking.

China's competence to fight the virus is exemplified by the country's unremitting implementation of its commitment: locking down Wuhan; house-to-house temperature checks; the party's grid management system of social control; postponing the return to work after the Lunar New Year break of hundreds of millions of travelers.

When I discuss the five or so primary reasons for China's remarkable development over the past four decades, I always include the party's willingness to admit and correct errors. Hence, in tracking this virus epic, I focus on the leadership's forthright acknowledgement of "shortcomings and deficiencies" in the country's response.

As with any contagion early action is always essential in stopping the spread of virulent diseases. But how to develop an early warning system? The challenge is handling an avalanche of information, from diverse public and private sources and of variegated and uncertain quality.

On the one hand, who can deny that false rumors can increase anxiety, trigger panic, and even destabilize society? On the other hand, it has become evident that suppressing information in the name of social stability can foment disaster. Early local efforts to play down the risks of the coronavirus delayed the response as the contagion mushroomed.

A strong, top-down system is effective at stopping rumors, especially with advanced IT technologies, but it is challenged to enable diverse voices to surface and expose vital truths about frontline problems early in the process.

Chinese top leadership has pledged to rid the party of "formalism and bureaucratism."

Transparency is the key. The government states that it will learn lessons from the outbreak, which will enhance its capacity for governance. Self-correction, the party says, is its hallmark.

If so, future historians may well look upon China's fight against the coronavirus as a turning point in worldwide efforts to contain outbreaks of novel diseases and stop their spread, which globalization and ubiquitous air travel have made vital. History may well thank China for pioneering how to deal with virulent contagions in a globalized world.

GT: Some politicians have politicized the epidemic and used it to attack China's political system and the CPC. What's your comment?

Kuhn: Those who use the pandemic to score political points have their priorities mixed up. They nourish the virus with US-China competition, when they should starve the virus through US-China cooperation.

Never has such cooperation been more urgently needed – to battle and contain the pandemic and to sustain and bolster the world economy. Containing the global pandemic, like bolstering the global economy, depends on US-China collaboration. If climate change is the world's most intractable chronic problem, then COVID-19 is the world's most severe acute problem.

My two favorite countries have a choice: either work together to fight the pandemic by developing drugs and vaccines to kill and stop COVID-19, or suffer an out-of-control global pandemic and a chain-reaction cratering the global economy. Nations can fight the virus and collectively win, or fight each other and collectively lose.

GT: Some observers view the epidemic containment work as an assessment of different political systems. Europe has become the new epicenter of the global pandemic, and the number of infections in the US is also rising rapidly. How do you evaluate the measures taken by these democracies?

Kuhn: There are no perfect political systems; all political systems have tradeoffs. No doubt, China's system of party-led, strong government can deal more effectively, more efficiently and more rapidly with the stringent demands of a lockdown, quarantine and containment, and mobilization of national resources and healthcare professionals. Democratic countries, such as those in Europe, are used to policy decisions being hotly debated by opposing political parties, and in the media, and thus are not as suited in dealing with emergency situations. Given the emergency situation in Europe, especially in Italy and Spain, they are now seeking to learn from China's containment success. Conversely, there are other areas of contemporary societies where China may learn from Europe.

In this time of global shifts, the global community must understand one another, especially with respect to China. Simply put, China's path is socialism with Chinese characteristics, which stresses the leadership of the CPC, and the CPC's commitment to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the broad-based fulfillment of the Chinese people. China's path maintains a strong government in all sectors, promotes economic development with the market playing a "decisive role," enforces social stability and regulates social discourse, and prioritizes the welfare of all citizens, including the poorest.

The unique feature distinguishing the China model from Western models, of course, is that the CPC, the party, maintains perpetual leadership and utilizes a meritocratic system rooted in Chinese civilization. Developmental policies that must have long-term commitments, such as infrastructure, science and technology, and poverty alleviation, can have long-term commitment.

As for the trade-offs, the sustained anti-corruption campaign addresses one such trade-off. Comprehensively improving the rule of law addresses another. Continuing challenges also include how to provide diverse opinions in policymaking.

GT: How do you see China's role in the global fight against the pandemic?

Kuhn: President Xi's four proposals at the G20 on Thursday to enable humanity as a whole to win the battle against this major infectious disease, and the virtual proximity of world leaders in this extraordinary G20 meeting, give enriched and real-world meaning to the vision of an international community with a shared future and a common destiny.

"A community with a shared future for all humanity" is a grand vision with multiple applications. For years, it has driven foreign policy, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, helping to rectify global imbalances.

Few ever imagined that a pandemic could become so grave so fast. But as the pandemic has burst into planetary consciousness, it demonstrates viscerally the global criticality of "shared future" thinking.

The challenge for China is to elevate this vision above what appears to some as competitive positioning or even as a sprint to assert China's leadership. China's experience in containing the contagion, which many countries now desperately need, provides just such an opportunity.

By sending "battle-tested" medical teams to countries suffering under the siege of contagion, China brings to bear experts with contemporary, frontline, epidemic experience. China's evolved know-how in fighting and containing the novel coronavirus, especially the selfless work of dedicated Chinese healthcare and logistics professionals, can enable other countries, where outbreaks occurred after China's, to benefit from China's experience.