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Covid-19:

The new US-China battlefield

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The US and China have one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. In the past 10 years, their relationship has changed a great deal due to the parallel realities of China's 'peaceful rise' and an 'American decline'. An accelerating trade war between the two countries, particularly since 2019, was already presenting daunting challenges both nationally and internationally. However, Covid-19, and each countries' contrasting responses to managing the crisis, has further exposed, and added to, existing tensions in US-China relations.



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At a time when the world needs strong and collective leadership to fight Covid-19, both countries have been locked in a battle of words characterised by escalating hostility, polarising narratives, blame and mis-information. While China uses the pandemic to boost its reputation for global cooperation and international

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leadership the US is busy playing the '[blame-Beijing game](#)' and waging a propaganda war. [Indeed, US President Donald Trump has repeatedly described coronavirus as the 'Chinese virus'](#).

The US has both questioned whether China initially tried to cover up the coronavirus outbreak and if the officially reported death toll is accurate. [The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed there was 'enormous evidence' that the coronavirus originated in a 'Chinese lab'](#). Several other western countries supported the US by publicising the claims about a 'Chinese virus', referring to it as a leaked 'biological weapon' and suggesting it is [China's 'Chernobyl moment'](#). Countering Pompeo's claim [the Chinese embassy in France suggested the outbreak actually started in the US](#). Zhao Lijian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, has repeatedly promoted the idea that [Covid-19 might have escaped from the US Fort Detrick Biological Weapons Laboratory](#).

At the same time as actively countering US claims as to the origin of the coronavirus, the Chinese government has also invested in English-language propaganda to highlight its [high-tech approach](#), such as the 'epidemic map' using big data analytics, which was updated in real time to display figures on infections and deaths alongside its health QR coded system infection with different colours: green code means little chance of having been infected, while holders of yellow and red codes must be put under quarantine for a few days and report their

health information daily before they are cleared for travel again. For China, the US strategy, and other Western allies, of naming and shaming Beijing appeared to be simply a ploy to divert attention from the government's own lack of preparedness to deal with the health pandemic domestically.

The US was supported by its allies the UK and Australia calling for China to be held 'accountable' for its initial response and even demands for [compensation for the impact of Covid-19](#). However, when President Trump announced that the US would be suspending its funding to the WHO, citing the organisations' bias towards China as its' reason, [the US allies lined up with China to condemn the move](#), indicting their commitment to support existing international cooperation to address the pandemic.



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Questions will be asked about the effectiveness of both the US and China's strategies

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has put US-China relations under an unprecedented strain. At the same time, the crisis is also accelerating geopolitical tensions that, in part, have arisen from associated US-China hostilities. The Covid-19 pandemic will clearly have a transformative impact on the already strained relationship between the two global superpowers in the future, and on international geopolitics more broadly. Questions will be asked about the effectiveness of both the US and China's strategies to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic; how each political system managed the crisis; the role that societal values played; the changes that have resulted in the world order and its governance; the rise of polarisation and populist nationalism; and the prospects for the 'my country first' approach vs. international cooperation in a reconfigured global order.

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