

## Global crisis in the post-truth age

*Dr Dennis Sammut*

Practically every European leader who has addressed his or her nation on the coronavirus crisis over the last few days has made a reference to war. “We are at War” said Macron, Johnson, Merkel and many others. As if to prove the point, armies have been mobilised across Europe. In many ways they are right, although in that case this will be the first war in history fought with all the world on the same side – fighting not human beings, but a virus. A few weeks ago, this scenario would have sounded to many like science fiction. It is unfortunately the reality we live in today.

There is a well known and very true maxim that the first victim of war is truth. If you are at war you don't want your enemy to discover your true situation. Deception as early as possible is an important weapon. How will this play out in the current scenario? Will truth be an early victim in this war too?

Prior to coronavirus, we had already entered the post truth age. Fake news was widespread, extensive enough to be considered as possibly having impacted the election of the president of the United States, the Brexit referendum in Britain in 2016 and the French presidential election, at least to a degree if not decisively. Whilst the Russians may have taken the lead in instrumentalising fake news, it seems many others followed suit.

The Chinese have been criticised for their early response to coronavirus. First they thought it was fake news, and they tried to suppress it rather than the virus, even arresting the doctor who tried to raise the alarm. Then the local authorities in Wuhan tried to keep the information away from their suffering citizens, let alone the world. By the time the world got to know of the epidemic, the cat was out of the bag, and the virus out of control. Since then the Chinese authorities have been more forthright, and have even gained the respect of the international community in how they have dealt with the efforts to contain the epidemic. China moved decisively, and to a large extent transparently, essentially locking up Wuhan province and other heavily affected areas, and critically, co-operating with the international community in the global effort to defeat COVID-19.

China is an authoritarian society, a disciplined one-party state with a very strong and large military-security apparatus. It was indeed the Communist Party with its ninety million cadres, and the Chinese People's Army, with its two million men and women under arms that were mobilised to deal with crisis once its magnitude was understood. Figures of the spread of the virus in China so far indicate that the process worked.

In Europe, some governments: Italy, Spain, others – are trying to emulate the Chinese examples. They are not one-party states; their armies are much smaller and geared for dealing with other tasks, but most importantly, Europeans have since WWII become used to open societies, where to question and criticise is not a crime but a virtue. Can these nations and others like them deal with the crisis as efficiently as the Chinese?

The answer is yes, but they need to learn to do it not by cohesion or lying but by securing the support of their populations by being honest and truthful; by persuasion and education. This is possible, and it is what the leaders in Europe are betting on.

Yet this approach, even more than in an authoritarian system, requires wise and strong leadership. If we keep the war analogy, the reputation of many leaders is made or broken in war. And even the

ones who are ultra-successful in war can find that once the war is over people look for someone else to lead them. Churchill led Britain to victory in WWII, and was a very popular wartime leader, only to lose the election 1945. The political career of many politicians in Europe and North America will be forged during the coronavirus crisis, and that of others destroyed.

But most countries in the world are neither as authoritarian as China, nor as open societies as Europe and North America. Their leaders will have hard choices too. Some fear the chaos that the crisis is about to unleash in the world's economic system; others see in this crisis some opportunity. Regardless of their system of governance, in this crisis, states need to embrace openness and transparency, because at the heart of the battle against the virus is trust. If people trust what their governments and leaders are telling them, they will co-operate and obey; if not defiance, or even sheer disinterest, can be deadly.

The second dimension of this war is economic. The question here is whether the community of nations, already seriously fragmented before the pandemic broke out, can act in unison, or whether each will go on its own. The role of the G20 over the coming weeks and months is going to be more than crucial. By chance Saudi Arabia holds the Chairmanship of the G20 in this critical moment. It is important that the Saudi leadership communicates well with the world public about how the G20 proposes to act in the current crisis.

Once more some are looking at China to see if its model of governance is going to help it overcome its economic crisis resulting from the measures it took to overcome the pandemic, but this approach is too narrow. China can only succeed economically if there are markets for its products.

On both the medical and the economic dimensions of the coronavirus crisis each country must make decisions on how best to act. But these decisions should also fit into a global strategy on both dimensions. There has never been a need for multilateralism as now. The lies and fake news that characterised the period immediately before coronavirus, and to some extent since, are the enemies in this war, as much as the virus itself is.

Thus, whilst in most wars, truth is the first victim, in this war against coronavirus truth should be the tool through which victory can be secured.

*Dr Dennis Sammut is the Director of LINKS (Dialogue, Analysis and Research), [dennis@links-dar.org](mailto:dennis@links-dar.org)*