

China's Chernobyl: Where the argument stands

The charge that the Covid-19 outbreak will turn out to be China's Chernobyl has been doing the rounds in recent weeks. Whether the charge ends up sticking will come down to a number of factors: how reliably the international scientific community is able to trace the origins of the virus, how open the Chinese authorities are to admitting their mistakes, and what the final tally of damage to lives and livelihoods across the world turns out to be.

In this article, we offer our own take on whether the parallels with Chernobyl hold good.

The case for saying they do *not* hold good appears strong initially.

First, the Soviet Union in 1986 was a paper tiger: nominally a superpower, but in fact a state in decline with a weak economy and losing technological ground to its rivals at an alarming rate. In many ways, Chernobyl confirmed to internal and external audiences alike their worst suspicions about incompetence and dishonesty of the Soviet system. Chernobyl may have helped push the Soviet Union over the edge, but only because it was so close to the edge already. The contrasts with China are profound. China is a power on the rise, not in decline. China's economic performance and technological proficiency have caught its geopolitical rivals by surprise and spooked them. There is none of the sense of a world-power in its twilight that swirled around the USSR before, during, and after Chernobyl.

Second, while the Soviet Union was able to take little or no credit for its response to the Chernobyl crisis, the Chinese authorities have mounted an aggressive public relations campaign to present themselves as the masters of crisis-management – indeed to present their crisis-management as a vindication of the entire Chinese system of government. Respectable commentators across the world have, in turn, bought into this campaign, with some arguing that China's global standing has actually risen during the crisis. No-one said that of the Soviet Union in 1986.

Third, Chernobyl was unambiguously a man-made disaster. The power plant was poorly constructed and designed and those operating it appeared not to be in command of its workings and thereby of the terrible risks they were taking with its destructive power. As if these failings were not enough, it was left to authorities outside the Soviet Union (in Sweden) to alert the world to the catastrophic failure that had occurred at Chernobyl and to the threat of mass death that now faced not just Soviet citizens but those in neighbouring countries. Again, the contrasts with China and its reaction to Covid-19 appear profound. The argument of the Chinese authorities has been that the pandemic is an accident of nature rather than a failing of man: it has more in common with a tsunami than with a nuclear mishap. On this argument, the stain of blame that attached to the Soviet authorities should not attach to the Chinese government. There-but-for-the-grace-of-God is the sympathetic response the Chinese deserve: the Chinese were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time when nature turned against them.

Bringing these three lines of thinking together suggests that Covid-19 is very definitely not China's Chernobyl.

Against this, there are two respects in which we believe the parallels between Chernobyl and Covid-19 hold good.

First, we do not believe that China's crisis management will end up being held in the high regard, internationally and perhaps domestically, that the authorities there would like it to be. The totalitarianism of the Chinese response is neither one that can be replicated in a non-totalitarian state nor one that has shown itself obviously better at solving the crisis than the liberal-democratic approaches adopted by Germany, Australia, and South Korea. Totalitarianism and one-party rule have not been vindicated. If anything, their tendency to suppress truth has been exposed for all to see: an institutionalised unwillingness or inability (or both) to come clean at the outbreak of a crisis is something the communist parties of China (in 2019-20) and the USSR (in 1986) have been found to share. The pushing-back at China to reveal its true death toll is no longer the stuff of Trumpian nationalism: President Macron has joined the fray, with others, we anticipate, to follow. Say what you like about Chernobyl, but no-one disputed that great bravery and self-sacrifice sat alongside bureaucratic incompetence and dishonesty. There was certainly something in the Soviet response – if not the response of the Soviet *authorities* – to admire. People may well end up delivering the same mixed verdict in respect of China's own crisis management.

Second, the claim that Chernobyl was caused by man and Covid-19 by nature – with all this distinction means for attributions of blame to the authorities involved – is not, we believe, going to stick. We do not agree with the conspiracy theories being irresponsibly circulated of the virus being bioengineered. Multiple western laboratories and experts have examined the full genetic code of the virus and can find no evidence of genetic manipulation. Nonetheless, public health regimes and food safety systems are man-made no less than buildings and nuclear reactors. Either those regimes and systems are good enough to safeguard human well-being or they are not. If they are not, it is the human beings responsible for them who must answer for the failings. If, as looks increasingly likely, it turns out that Covid-19 was caused by the ecological trauma brought about by China's rush to urbanise and/or inadequate controls on public health and food safety, there will be no hiding place for the Chinese authorities from international scrutiny and reproach. The analogy with a tsunami will not stand up and the there-but-for-the-grace-of-God sentiment will be lost.

There is a further respect in which we believe the damage to China's standing of Covid-19 goes far *beyond* the damage to the USSR's standing of Chernobyl. When it comes to harm caused to lives and livelihoods *outside* the country of origin, there is simply no contest between the two crises.

What we know now about Chernobyl is that, at the time of the crisis, the Soviets believed the loss of life could potentially run into many millions, with large tracts of land becoming uninhabitable. Those of us who lived through that time had a sense (much as our parents would have had during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962) that humankind was on the brink and that mass destruction of human life was a real possibility. It would be disrespectful to the many thousands of people whose lives were lost (and continue to be lost) as a result of Chernobyl to speak of relief at the scale of the death toll and we are conscious that the shadow of death cast by Chernobyl may extend a greater deal further than has yet been

accounted for. Those who have lost their lives within China as a result of Covid-19 should be honoured with this same spirit of deference.

Allowing for this, Chernobyl is remembered more for how bad it *could have been* than for how bad it *was*. It gave the rest of the world a scare but, in the event, its destructive effects were felt by those nearby but to no great extent by those beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. Covid-19, in contrast, has wrapped itself around the globe at a speed that has taken even the World Health Organization aback. The (relatively speaking) good news stories currently coming out of Germany, Denmark, and South Korea must be set against a developing sense of dread about the impact of the pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of great swathes of the developing world: some estimates put the potential death toll in Africa alone at three million plus.

What, then, is the answer to the question we posed in this article? Is the pandemic China's Chernobyl?

Considered in terms of geopolitical status, we think the answer is no. Unlike the Soviet Union, China will remain a force to be reckoned with. Covid-19 is not emblematic of a great power in decline.

The parallel with Chernobyl is much stronger in terms of the fact that blame will attach to the Chinese authorities, just as it did to the authorities of the Soviet Union. The lesson in both cases is that human beings take liberties with nature – be it nuclear power or the delicate ecological balance – at their peril and, when they do, it is they, rather than nature, who must answer for the consequences. The ruling Chinese communist party will survive the pandemic, but we suspect there will be a significant upswing in the pro-democracy and anti-regime activity we were already witnessing in Hong Kong, as people see the extent to which the regime hid the truth (and the true mortality rate) from its citizens. All told, we expect the regime to come under increasing scrutiny both domestically and internationally.

In terms of destructive effect, the parallel with what *actually* happened in relation to Chernobyl (as opposed to what *could* have happened) is weak, but not in ways from which the Chinese authorities will, as the coming weeks and months reveal the scale of the humanitarian and economic disaster we are facing, take comfort. Chernobyl faded into the memory of the outside world once the immediate scare had passed: it was a nightmare from which the rest of the world woke up relatively quickly. Corona-19 and its aftermath, however, are going to be front and centre of lives across the world for a long time to come.

Who we are:

Adam Gold founded Adam Gold Consulting in 2004. He has over 30 years experience in management consulting working at Board Level with private sector clients across Europe and Africa.

Christopher Lake is the co-founder of Syllogism, the recruitment, strategy, and ethics consultancy. A former fast stream civil servant, he was Tutor and Fellow in Politics at Magdalen College, Oxford from 1995 to 2000.

We would be delighted to receive your comments on the article. Please direct these to:

- Adam Gold at adamgold94@gmail.com
- Christopher Lake at christopher.lake@syllogism.co.uk