Whither the WHO?

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The Henry Jackson Society

Next week, the World Health Assembly – the governing body of the World Health Organization – will convene in Geneva for a long-planned meeting.

With an agenda set before COVID-19 times, this meeting stands as a totemic reminder to how unprepared the WHO was for the current pandemic.

There are motions to discuss air pollution, “integrated, people-centred health services”, smallpox (the last case of which was in 1977), and — this being a UN body — a motion to discuss some or other supposed Israeli outrage in the West Bank and Gaza.

Coronavirus on the other hand does not appear on the agenda once.

Be in no doubt though, the real discussion at this meeting is not what’s on the agenda.  Nor — for that matter — is it the response to Coronavirus.

For the world’s nations appear to be largely ignoring the WHO in their actual response to the Coronavirus.  Its founders’ vision of it acting as a global hub for knowledge and research sharing on health challenges has been largely replaced by the internet.

The WHO’s proscriptions and pronouncements today go largely unnoticed. It’s worth noting of course that a country with among the best records of handling Coronavirus, Taiwan, is not even a member of the organisation owing to China’s policy of blocking any form of recognition for a democratic island neighbour who it insists is part of the mainland China.

In an interesting twist, it is not the question of how to remedy COVID-19 but the question of how it started that will be commanding the attention of the delegates.

The European Union has submitted a draft resolution to the WHA calling for an “independent evaluation … to review lessons learned” from the crisis.   In common parlance: an inquiry into how the virus started.

Behind the scenes though, the EU is not the international actor pushing hardest for an inquiry though.

That task has really fallen to Australia.

From the outset, Australia — all of 25 million people — has championed calls for an investigation into where COVID-19 came from and how, having done so, it spread to engulf the world.

Since Foreign Minister Payne fired the starting gun by calling for an international inquiry almost a month ago — Australia has been leading the charge for securing answers.

Around the world, it has quietly been both canvassing support and persuading waverers.

In response, China has sort to blackmail, bully, and railroad Australia into giving up.  It has targeted its exports, cutting off barley and beef for the Chinese market, worth some AUS$3 billion.

It has threatened and mocked its political leaders, attempted to hack its networks, and sought to isolate it around the world.

Yet, Australia has stood firm and there is every chance that come next week, the countries of the world will vote to begin the long process of holding China to account for COVID-19.  Even if it fails, China’s anger is all the evidence needed of how effective Australia’s campaign has been.

All this begs the question then of why this task fell to Australia while countries — including the UK — have felt like reluctant passengers in the battle.

It is not as if Australia is comparatively inoculated against the risks of challenging China.  In fact, as HJS’ paper this week on strategic dependency on China in ‘Five Eyes’ nations showed, their economy is more vulnerable toChinese pressure than any other member of the alliance.

No — what Australia did was not motivated or enabled by some economic, political, geographic particularity but by that ever rare quality in statecraft: courage.

Courage to stand alone.  Courage to see the plan through.  Courage to keep pushing in the face of retaliation.

Australia has stood firm when others recoiled, and for that the world will owe it a debt of gratitude. There is no easier way to start than by supporting next week’s WHA vote. It may be a simple measure, but it would go a long way to rebuilding some confidence in the WHO’s battered credibility.