

Assessing the effects of calculated inaction on national responses to the COVID-19 crisis

Nikolaos Zahariadis¹  | Stephen Ceccoli¹  |
Evangelia Petridou² 

¹Department of International Studies, Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee, USA

²Department of International Studies, Risk and Crisis Research Center, Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden

Correspondence

Evangelia Petridou, Department of International Studies, Risk and Crisis Research Center, Mid Sweden University, Kunskapens Väg 1, 831 25 Östersund, Sweden.
Email: Evangelia.petridou@miun.se

Abstract

How does calculated inaction affect subsequent responses to the COVID-19 crisis? We argue that when governments employ calculated inaction during crises, they are more likely to manipulate the technical (scientific) aspects of national responses and highlight symbolic politics, each in the name of projecting power and strengthening the regime's governing authority. Using theoretical insight from McConnell and 't Hart's policy inaction typology, we investigate sense-making and crisis response narratives in China and Greece. We conclude with implications for policymaking and the crisis management literature.

KEYWORDS

calculated inaction, COVID-19 national responses, sense- and meaning-making

INTRODUCTION

How does calculated inaction, defined as the deliberate decision to not take action or not act immediately (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019), affect national responses to the COVID-19 crisis and their rationalizing narratives? We argue that when governments employ calculated inaction during crises, they are more likely to manipulate the technical (scientific) aspects of national responses and highlight symbolic politics,

Nikolaos Zahariadis, Stephen Ceccoli, and Evangelia Petridou confirm that they jointly contributed to the authorship of this article and that they assume joint responsibility for the text.

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each in the name of projecting power and strengthening the regime's governing authority. As there is no single best policy response to infectious disease threats (Kenis et al., 2019), inaction may sometimes be a good policy. It may be foolhardy to respond to a crisis before all the facts are in. For example, analysts advise against rash responses to media frenzies (Lodge & Hood, 2002). Yet, inaction, especially when strategically deployed, is borne of power contests that not only manipulate decision agendas and eliminate alternative narratives but also construct spectacles through ideological and dramatic displays that reinforce the existing political and social power structure (Edelman, 1988). Political power shapes preferences and perceptions, effectively "securing the consent to domination of willing subjects" (Lukes, 2005, p. 109), which, in turn, influence legitimation efforts and crisis response scenarios.

We engage the crisis response literature by focusing on two important dimensions of national responses: Utilization of expert advice and symbolic politics. These two dimensions get at the heart of crisis management because they help unpack two essential tasks of public leadership: Sense-making and meaning-making (Boin et al., 2017). Insights from sense-making help analyze the effects of calculated inaction on expert knowledge utilization and insights from meaning-making connect inaction to symbolic politics. In the presence of ambiguous and incomplete information, policymakers who engage in calculated inaction are more likely to manipulate expert advice to make sense of impending crises. Moreover, calculated inaction during crises heightens the use of symbolic politics. As Rosenthal and 't Hart (2008) remind, "[c]rises are, first and foremost, political events; they are the domain of high politics" (p. 261). As perceptual categories of disruptions to public life, crises contain affective elements. Because they are opportunities for de- and re-legitimation ('t Hart, 1993), calculated inaction increases the likelihood of constructing narratives through symbolic politics that alter perceptions, raise affect, and bolster the credibility or competence of political authority.

As McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) policy inaction typology does not analyze the *impact* of inaction, our arguments about calculated inaction are exploratory and illustrative. We first analyze the Chinese government's early coronavirus response as a prime illustration of calculated inaction. As the first country faced with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese case presents a valuable opportunity to identify inaction in "a politically as well as analytically meaningful manner" (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019, p. 648). The specific instance of Chinese calculated inaction examined here involves the central government's decision to not disclose the virus's human-to-human transmission qualities to the Chinese public when such information was known at least 3 weeks earlier. In the face of incontrovertible epidemiological evidence, Chinese central leaders simply decided not to act. A key empirical aspect that sharpens our theoretical focus relies on a contrast that illustrates the absence of calculated inaction. As a country facing the same threat with a similarly centralized response, save for calculated inaction, Greece exemplifies a "typical" case, not representative but as an "opportunity to learn" (Stake, 2003, p. 152). Rather than relying solely on counterfactual reasoning to depict the inverse of calculated inaction—that is, reasoning the "what if's" had the Chinese government publicly disclosed the transmission details 3 weeks earlier—the Greek case empirically illustrates the concept's absence.

The following section furthers our conceptualization of calculated inaction. We link calculated inaction to crisis response narratives to draw out implications concerning expert knowledge utilization and symbolic politics. We then present evidence to empirically illustrate the argument. The Chinese response is examined first, followed by the Greek case. We conclude with implications for policymaking and the crisis management literature.

CALCULATED INACTION AND CRISIS RESPONSE

McConnell and 't Hart (2019, p. 648) broadly define policy inaction as an instance or pattern of a government's (and other actors') unwillingness to actively intervene in addressing a particular policy problem within its jurisdiction "where other plausible potential policy interventions did not take place." The complementary focus on both policy action and inaction remains analytically valuable as "inaction is in part a necessary pre-condition of action," and, as Barber points out, "doing one thing means not doing another" (Barber, 2016, p. 16). Because crises invite framing and, inevitably, power contests, we expect policy inaction to have an impact on crisis response plans, especially during the meaning-making phase (Boin et al., 2017). McConnell and 't Hart (2019) identify different types of inaction but we focus on one, calculated inaction. It is a product of conscious choice rather than a function of bounded rationality, reluctant or pragmatic acceptance, or ideological convictions. Given the novelty of the concept, the paucity of empirical applications, and our illustrative aims, we focus on a single, frequently encountered, and relatively easily identifiable type. Calculations involve deliberate and strategic inaction aiming at protecting or minimizing risks to policy goals. As McConnell and 't Hart (2019) put it, calculated inaction enables decision makers to "wait for an issue to 'ripen'" before addressing it (p. 650), particularly as there are potential dangers associated with "rushing in before an issue has sufficiently matured."

The argument grows out of a broader stream of political research which recognizes "two faces of power" by emphasizing the "restrictive" power exercised through limiting the scope of decision making to certain safety issues but not others (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, p. 948). Bachrach and Baratz originally used the term "non-decisions" in an agenda-setting context and as a vehicle for powerful actors to preserve their politically entrenched interests. Traditional decision making approaches fail to acknowledge policy inaction, and more specifically calculated inaction, which is a form of nondecision in the sense that power is strategically exercised to politically manipulate the policy process. Deploying restrictive power reinforces existing political institutions and processes, elements of which preserve the prevailing distribution of benefits and privileges.

Inaction has appeared in the administrative decision making and crisis response literature. In contrast to the well-known centralization thesis in which administrative decisions tend to become further centralized ('t Hart et al., 1993), inaction presents an alternative aspect of governmental response. By choosing not to decide or act, governments signal motives and manage policy priorities through agenda denial (Cobb & Ross, 1997), actively creating distance between sovereign and citizens. In the context of crisis response, 't Hart et al. (1993) acknowledge that inaction may ultimately be as influential as an immediate policy action. A similar sentiment is echoed by Weick (1988, p. 305), who contends in his examination of the Bhopal gas tragedy: "There is a delicate tradeoff between dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion." The strategic use of various forms of inaction is perhaps unsurprising given that decision makers have a tendency toward "blame avoidance" (Hood, 2011). Indeed, one may argue it is harder to blame policymakers for doing nothing than for doing something because something always reveals bias whereas doing nothing may actually mask it. Consequently, decision makers rely on a number of strategies to avoid blame, including "presentational strategies" (Hood, 2011, p. 17), which "involve various ways of trying to avoid blame by spin, stage management, and argument." Thus, as policymakers try to make sense of an impending crisis, calculated inaction and the innate tendency to avoid blame create opportunities for symbolic action.

In practical terms, what does calculated inaction look like, and how can we observe it in crisis management situations? After all, it involves strategic choices not to commit resources or not to mobilize troops. Although we acknowledge the contestability of the term calculated inaction, we view it dichotomously via its presence or absence. When a government deliberately chooses not to act against a disease even though it suspects an epidemic, we conceptualize that as an instance of calculated inaction. Policymakers weigh the costs and benefits among a universe of options and decide inaction is the appropriate response. The decision to act *under similar circumstances*, for example, issue warnings or ban social gatherings, is viewed as the absence of inaction. In both cases, (in)action is an intentional choice among a set of options.

For the purpose of examining the initial COVID-19 reaction, we analyze the effects of calculated inaction on two important elements of response narratives: Scientific advice and symbolic politics. We employ insights from sense-making to link calculated inaction to expert knowledge utilization and insights from meaning-making to connect inaction to symbolic politics. The hypotheses are temporally sequential but not causally consequential. Expert knowledge is first used to construct response narratives before narratives are later laced with heavy doses of symbolic politics. But they do not necessarily interact in that symbolic politics may exist without advice manipulation and the reverse.

H1: *When governments engage in calculated inaction during crises, they are more likely to manipulate scientific (expert) advice.*

During crises and under conditions of extreme ambiguity, governments aim to make sense of the situation by defining issues in politically expedient ways. The way a crisis is understood often delineates the (in)actions likely to be taken to address it (Weick, 1995). When facing threats by unfamiliar or unexpected diseases, such as COVID-19, government responses rely heavily on experts with highly specialized knowledge to define the problem and devise solutions (Kenis et al., 2019). At this early stage of crisis management caused by a pandemic, sense-making necessitates making judgments regarding the scope, scale, and salience of a threat, often based on vague, ambiguous, and even contradictory pieces of information (Keller et al., 2012). A crisis, though viewed as a concrete event with crisp edges in hindsight, tends to be fuzzy and subjectively defined while it is unfolding. As Boin et al. (2017, p. 30) contend, “there is no natural correspondence between objective and subjective threats” (emphasis in original). This is because crises are information-rich and meaning-poor environments. Decision makers receive a wide diversity of information from various sources, representing different points of view, but they do not know what it all means. Who they choose to listen to and how depends on political bias and sense-making frames.

As policymakers have to urgently make decisions during crises, particularly during the initial crisis phase, a cacophony of voices leads to confusion, selective attention, and even information overload (Rosenthal & 't Hart, 2008). In the early stages of ambiguous crises, experts tend to offer incomplete and occasionally contradictory perspectives. As Zaki and Wayenberg (2021, p. 17) observe, “this multiplicity creates an epistemic marketplace with varying epistemological products for policymakers to ‘buy into.’” Policymakers consequently seek out expert advice to reinforce their validity of choice. Calculated inaction biases this process, at least temporarily, by shaping frames that make expert advice manipulation more likely. Leaders tend to pay more attention to information that conforms to their preexisting biases and policy

priorities (Kahneman, 2011). Doing so increases the likelihood of suppressing information to highlight selected interpretations of events and point to politically expedient responses.

At this point, information produced by experts may be manipulated for political reasons. When crises erupt, policymakers “shop in the marketplace of ideas” to make sense of the crisis (Zaki & Wayenberg, 2021). But such idea-shopping is political in nature depending on distinct frames and their expedient political use (Rubin & de Vries, 2020). Inaction signals priorities and helps generate frames of understanding. Rationally deciding not to cancel social gatherings when there is evidence to the contrary, for instance, signals particular sense-making frames; for example, “it is not a threat” or “we have the resources to handle it.” Frames in turn elicit or suppress specific information which can be utilized to construct narratives that legitimize policy (van Nispen & Scholten, 2017). Thus, the chosen leadership posture is justified, essentially politicizing knowledge for the purpose of making sense and delineating a crisis. This is highly likely when crises occur suddenly with immediate effects. A sudden crisis with instantaneous, consequential effects will likely drive governments to manipulate scientific input in an effort to legitimize their knee-jerk reaction. In this sense, the crisis's immediate implications likely lead the government to manipulate scientific expertise. Additionally, the more ambiguous the crisis and the wider the diversity of information sources, the more likely it will be that decisions not to act create divergent frames that filter sense-making (Rubin & de Vries, 2020). Those sense-making frames in turn are supported by selective attention to information. Expert information may be produced but not disseminated unless it conforms to the prevailing frame, whose existence can be maintained by manipulating expert knowledge. When making sense of a crisis, calculated inaction, for example, not to issue warnings thereby inviting criticism or dissent, affords the regime the luxury of time to construct a narrative of its own politically expedient choosing. Inaction increases the likelihood of using select frames to fit the official narrative, which in turn raises the specter of manipulating expert advice.

H2: *When governments engage in calculated inaction during crises, they are more likely to highlight symbolic politics in their national responses.*

We also expect calculated inaction to result in responses that heighten symbolic narratives through the construction of political spectacles ('t Hart, 1993; Edelman, 1988). Calculated inaction aims to hide or suppress challenges that are not so much posed by the actual threat but by the perception of the regime's inability to respond to the threat. Acknowledging a problem in the absence of a readymade solution exposes political weakness (Zahariadis, 2003), which could be used to undermine the legitimacy of the regime. Perceptions of weakness can drive symbolism and overreaction. Crises are typically characterized by negative emotions, fear, panic, or high anxiety (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 566). In responding to crises, leaders are acutely conscious of the possible adverse effects of negative emotions accompanying the perception of weakness on their political fortunes (Brändström, 2016). Consequently, policymakers may think they need to produce an overwhelming effect to demonstrate leadership or restore confidence in the governing party's wisdom (Maor, 2018).

As crises involve extreme ambiguity, urgency, and turbulence, governments are most likely to engage in calculated inaction when constructing explanatory narratives. The narrative is part of an effort to control the “political spectacle,” assigning meaning, hope, blame, and control to a crisis (Boin et al., 2017; You & Ju, 2019).

Action and inaction become part of the narrative because leaders fear that some interpretations may undermine the current political order (Olson, 2000; 't Hart, 2014). This is especially relevant when governments wait to act "in the hope that the problem will dissipate or disappear, or more favorable conditions for addressing it will emerge" (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019, p. 655). We expect calculated inaction to substantively shape crisis narratives by reinforcing the government's authority while maintaining the appearance of control (real or illusory).

National leaders need to construct a convincing narrative and communicate it to the public, shaping a collective understanding of what the crisis entails and what the appropriate action to be taken is. A crisis framed as a state of emergency entails causes, social drama, heroes, and villains (Morgan, 2020). Localities are designated as "disaster areas" and certain segments of the public are constructed as victims worthy of aid. The narrative is part of an effort to control the "political spectacle," continuously (re)construct the crisis narrative in politically advantageous ways, and offer villains, threats, and solutions in equal measure (Edelman, 1988; Gotham & Greenberg, 2014). Calculated inaction that becomes part of the narrative is intensely scrutinized through framing contests and blame games (Brändström et al., 2008; Hood, 2011). Inaction colors crisis communication because the meaning makers manipulate the context, continuously adapt, and politically refine the information communicated to the public, leading to greater use of symbolism to portray a regime in control.

This tendency ought to be especially true in authoritarian systems, where power and control are vital governance ingredients. A regime in control is a necessary element of any narrative in that context. Calculated inaction raises the likelihood of blame avoidance by avoiding the question or shifting attention to a more positive narrative (Hood, 2011). Policymakers cannot be blamed for mishandling a crisis that does not exist, whereas attention shifts are even more subtle. The Chinese government's response to the 2003 SARS crisis of using 7000 workers to build Beijing's Xiaotangshan hospital within a week provides a valuable illustration. It showed that there was an urgent need for health care, but also demonstrated the robust responsive capacity of the regime. The key symbolic aspect was not the hospital per se, but the fact that it was built in a week. It is a feat that "created a miracle in the history of medical science" (Reuters, 2020). Attention is more likely to be paid to the element of bravado and diverted from the reason why such an expensive structure needed to be built in the first place. Thus, we expect calculated inaction to heighten the use of symbolic politics as a means of compensating for possible perceived political weakness. The greater the use and egregiousness of calculated inaction, the more contestable power becomes and the more symbolic the projection of political power is likely to be. To be sure, we do not argue that symbolic politics is heightened only in instances of calculated inaction. Rather we expect instances of calculated inaction to heighten the need for the more robust use of symbolic politics.

RESEARCH DESIGN

When attempting to evaluate inaction, one must expose the impact of action to also show the effects of inaction (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019). Consequently, this study draws empirical evidence from two types of cases (Stake, 2003)—one intrinsic (China) and the other instrumental (Greece)—to illustrate how calculated inaction may affect crisis responses. As an intrinsic case of "policy-as-inaction" and the all-important first country to deal with COVID-19, we examine China's response to the crisis to uncover

linkages between calculated inaction, the political uses of expert advice, and symbolic politics. China is an intrinsic case because in the context of calculated inaction we seek a “better understanding of this particular case” (Stake, 2003, p. 136). Yet, the very presence of calculated inaction in China precludes using it as an example to highlight the concept's absence. For this reason, we enlist Greece as an instrumental case (Stake, 2003) to deepen our understanding of the absence of calculated inaction. As is inherent in instrumental cases, the case of Greece itself in this context is “of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else” (Stake, 2003, p. 137). Thus, viewed as “policy-as-action,” the Greek Covid-19 response can be used to make divergent outcomes more apparent and highlight more vividly and explicitly the effects of calculated inaction on crisis responses. Evidence that shows similar outcomes in the presence and absence of calculated inaction undermines support for the hypotheses. Ultimately, we ask the same analytical questions in contrasting contexts to highlight divergences and make them more transparent (Skocpol & Somers, 1980).

We acknowledge that our cases are substantively important (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012), illustrative, and not fully representative of a broader sample of national COVID-19 responses. Through its limited empirical scope, our argument is the equivalent of a pilot study and may be used to refine hypotheses, offering the potential to inform subsequent research (Levy, 2008). Such potential can be critical because questions involving “policy-as-inaction,” as McConnell and 't Hart (2019) point out, “all too often remain un-asked and un-investigated” (p. 658).

Because a better understanding of early crisis responses may not only sharpen theoretical statements but also be used to understand subsequent phases of the same event, the scope of this study is partially a corollary of its timing. It was conducted while the pandemic was still unfolding. To ensure temporal cohesion, we analyze the decision making processes related to the response stage of the crisis management cycle from December 2019 to May 2020 (Pursiainen, 2018).

THE CHINESE RESPONSE

As the old saying goes, crises are in the eye of the beholder. By January 2, 2020, 41 hospital patients in Wuhan, a city of 11 million in central China, had been diagnosed with the novel coronavirus (Huang et al., 2020). Although two-thirds of them had links to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, not until more than 3 weeks later, on January 23, did the “biggest quarantine in history” commence with the lockdown of the first Wuhan and then much of surrounding Hubei province. President Xi Jinping's first public acknowledgment of the epidemic on January 20, shortly followed by the dramatic January 23 policy actions, represents a critical sense-making to meaning-making transition. Chinese decision makers initially engaged in calculated inaction that deeply affected the use of expert advice and symbolic politics.

The policy of calculated inaction highlighted here is the central government's decision to not publicly disclose the virus's human-to-human transmission qualities when such information was known weeks earlier. We offer two specific examples, delaying fundamental nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPI) and failing to immediately shutter the country's wildlife trade for human consumption, to show they collectively led to suppressing the flow of critical epidemiological information. Upon exploring their implications for the symbolic dimensions of subsequent narratives, we conclude they became ways to rationalize the action by using political power to shape citizen preferences (Lukes, 2005).

President Xi publicly acknowledged the epidemic for the first time on January 20 and offered “important instructions” on how to “make every effort to prevent and control” the outbreak (Xinhuanet, 2020). Earlier that day, renowned pulmonologist Zhong Nanshan, a national hero from battling SARS, who holds no formal government role, had finally confirmed person-to-person transmission on state television, something Wuhan doctors had been discussing for weeks. Zhong also acknowledged resulting infections among medical workers, a reliable transmission marker. Thus, President Xi's acknowledgement of the epidemic, coinciding with the human transmission announcement, came a time with at least 3000 known infections and nearly a month after the first epidemiological alert was issued by Wuhan health authorities.

In hinting at calculated inaction, President Xi acknowledged in a February 3 Politburo speech both his awareness of the virus as early as January 7 and that the epidemic served as “a big test of China's governance system and capabilities.” Perhaps to preempt criticism as part of a meaning-making narrative, Xi conceded in the Politburo speech: “We must sum up experience and learn lessons...in response to the shortcomings and deficiencies exposed in this epidemic response.” As one Chinese politics scholar told the Associated Press (2020a) shortly later: “My guess is, they wanted to let it play out a little more and see what happened.” Consistent with our argument, inaction was a deliberate attempt to buy time.

One example of calculated inaction involves delaying fundamental NPI. Responding to a virulent pathogen outbreak requires swift NPI, such as case identification and isolation, social distancing, and intercity travel prohibition. Though decisive action was taken with the Wuhan/Hubei lockdown, two insightful epidemiological modeling counterfactuals paint a vividly clear picture of the spectacle associated with delayed NPI. For instance, had the three NPI been conducted just 1 week earlier in China, estimated COVID-19 cases could have been reduced by 66% (Lai et al., 2020). Even more stark case reductions emerge with interventions 2 weeks (86% reduction) and 3 weeks (95%) earlier. Conversely, modeling indicates that additional NPI delays by 1 (projected threefold increase in cases), 2 (7x) or 3 (18x) weeks would have led to far worse case scenarios. Put in more focused terms, the Wuhan local authorities' failure to cancel the annual Baibuting district banquet on January 18 exemplifies calculated inaction, as the fete sought to break a world record for the number of dishes served in a single gathering and was attended by an estimated 40,000 families. They could and should not have done it when there was evidence of an epidemic. But they chose to do it. When viewed as an attempt to thwart challenges to the interests of decision makers, this particular inaction, made at a time when officials were privy to critical virus transmission knowledge, “now stands as a symbol of China's mishandling of the viral outbreak” (Kynge et al., 2020). The same is true with celebrations over Lunar New Year. With China's annual Spring Festival set to begin on January 25 and roughly 400 million people planning to commence the world's largest annual internal migration, the suppression of critical public health information enabled an estimated five million people to vacate Wuhan just before the widespread quarantine. Beyond averting drastic reductions in infections and resulting deaths, the delayed NPI also laid bare two fundamental tenets of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) grand bargain with citizens by undermining the party's “aura of competence” and significantly impeding the economic growth targets driving the economy.

A second specific illustration involves the delay in banning wildlife trade for human consumption, which generated more symbolic politics. On January 23, a Wuhan research team found that COVID-19 “is 96% similar to a bat virus and 79.5% consistent with SARS...the team estimated that SARS-CoV-2 had originated in bats” (Peng

et al., 2020, p. 31). Days later on January 26, the nationwide trade and transportation of all wildlife were temporarily banned; the prohibition was extended to include wildlife consumption and made permanent a month later. Yet, restrictions were limited to terrestrial animals and they exempted wildlife used for Chinese medicinal purposes, two considerable loopholes. Following the 2002–03 SARS outbreak, which is believed to have originated in bats, Chinese leaders banned wildlife hunting, trading, and consumption. Yet, the ban was lifted less than 3 months later. Such policy reversals seemingly run counter to sense-making because approximately 60% of known human infectious diseases are zoonotic (i.e., spread from animals) as are three of every four new infectious diseases (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Yet, unlike most Western societies, China's traditional wet markets (which sell both wild/exotic and domesticated animals) maintain a dominant market share (73%) of retail produce sales, compared to supermarkets (22%) and e-commerce (3%) (Jiang & Xie, 2020). Moreover, though polls indicate most Chinese oppose eating wild animals, the country's (legal) wildlife trade is a \$73-billion industry employing more than 14 million (Su, 2020).

What effects did calculated inaction have on the use of expert advice and symbolic politics? It led to suppressing the flow of critical epidemiological information in genetically mapping the novel coronavirus. Chinese leaders were faced with three evolving sense-making challenges during December 2019 and January 2020: (1) Identifying the original source of the viral outbreak; (2) assessing the extent to which human transmission of the virus was possible; and (3) cracking the DNA code in being able to genetically map the novel coronavirus. Stung by criticism over the handling of the 2002–03 SARS epidemic, policymakers have since prioritized science-driven, evidence-based public health decision making.¹ The development of the country's enhanced disease surveillance system carries great significance in recognizing a health crisis as sense-making often hinges on whether leaders previously create conditions that facilitate early recognition (Boin et al., 2013). Clearly, Chinese authorities had done so. Scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology had mapped the virus shortly following the initial epidemiological alert, but the National Health Commission on the following day “issued a confidential notice ordering labs with the virus to either destroy their samples or send them to designated institutes for safekeeping” (Associated Press, 2020b). The order prevented lab authorities from sharing warnings about such findings or publishing them without government authorization. Days later, the coronavirus genome was independently mapped by two other state labs and at least two other medical laboratories. The government's release of the genetic map occurred only after its independent release on a virologist website, a move, according to reports, that “angered Chinese CDC officials” and led health authorities to temporarily shutter the offending lab (Associated Press, 2020b).

In seeking to comprehend the nature of a crisis, as Olson (2000) reminds, government leaders remain cognizant that certain interpretations undermine established order. Such realizations can lead to problem denial and/or the discrediting of certain individuals or groups. As if on cue, the day following President Xi's January 20 announcement, the CCP's main newspaper, the *People's Daily*, ran its first virus story and the Party's main political and legal affairs organ warned, “Anyone who deliberately delays and hides the reporting of [virus] cases...will be nailed on the pillar of shame for eternity” (Zheng & Lau, 2020). As it became subsequently abundantly clear, scapegoats could be found as long as blame was directed at officials at the operational level, not the CCP itself. To wit, during the previous month several Wuhan doctors were reprimanded for “spreading rumors” and “causing social panic,” none more remarkable than Wuhan ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, whose virus-related

illness and subsequent death on February 7 triggered an outpouring of national grief, suspicion, and anger. In a similar vein, so-called Chinese netizens were also being discredited and punished for “spreading rumors.” Beyond the detention of high-profile video-bloggers Fang Bin and Chen Quishi, whose online videos rose to “internet fame” by “streaming unfiltered and often heartbreaking images” (Wang, 2020) directly from Wuhan, nearly 1000 Chinese netizens were “punished for spreading rumors” by the end of March (Chinese Human Rights Defenders, 2020).

The numerous sense-making developments outlined above presented a challenge to the construction of a legitimate narrative of success. For this reason, leaders engaged in outsized symbolism to regain legitimacy. For instance, in resembling what Boin et al. (2017, p. 53) refer to as “strategic evasion,” Xi was away from Beijing and even out of the country during the critical stages of defining the threat, even electing to send Premier Li Keqiang to Wuhan in early February rather than going himself. Yet, crafting what they hoped to be a convincing political spectacle (Edelman, 1988), Chinese leaders projected a government in absolute control through speeches and symbolic gestures. Consequently, the January 20 announcements by President Xi and Dr. Zhong triggered a well-worn page from the CCP playbook: The projection of overwhelming power and outsized symbolism, all with stunning speed. On January 23, construction began on the 1000 bed Huoshenshan “hospital,”² one of several such facilities in Hubei to be completed in a remarkable 9 days. According to one observer, the CCP’s “ability to build big things is one of its few expressions of control amid a spiraling epidemic...and when disaster strikes, it is speed that matters most” (Chia, 2020). Construction on the facility was live-streamed by Xinhua, the state news agency, which also flooded the internet with video updates. The Xinhua videos were described thus: “In dramatic fashion, the videos are set to the epic sounds of Chinese battle music. As the war drums die down and the 1000-bed hospital emerges from the dust, the message is clear: This is what authoritarian power can do” (Chia, 2020).

Thus, by the time of the January 23 lockdown, an important meaning-making turning point was underway. Just 2 weeks earlier, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported no new cases from January 5–17, a span overlapping with the annual “two sessions” municipal and provincial Party meetings taking place January 6–17 (Li et al., 2020). As the *Financial Times* reported, “the city’s bestselling commercial newspaper, the *Wuhan Evening News*, did not feature the outbreak on its front page for 2 weeks, between January 6 and January 19” (Hancock & Wong, 2020). Yet, in the absence of an independent media and following Xi’s February 3 Politburo speech, more than 300 journalists were dispatched to Wuhan by the state to cover the crisis with “positive energy” in Xi’s attempt to strengthen “publicity work” and “let the masses know more about what the party and government are doing” (Zhong, 2020). As Huang (2015) argues, though CCP “signaling propaganda” through state television, daily newspapers and other media is not empirically linked to increased regime favorability, it serves to project political power. The state is especially strong in maintaining order to the point of intimidating the masses and deterring the expression of dissent. Thus, the value of signaling propaganda extends well beyond its immediate substantive content in the longer-term shaping of attitudes and values. This pattern echoes an authoritarian, China-specific pattern where “politically sensitive data are more likely to be manipulated at politically sensitive times” (Wallace, 2016, p. 11, emphasis in original).

The Chinese case demonstrates the many tight linkages between calculated inaction, expert advice manipulation, and symbolic politics. China’s response during the early days of the virus outbreak also underscores the important effects of calculated inaction on the corresponding use of CCP power and political conflict in response to

dual threats—those immediately posed by COVID-19 as well as those posed directly to the regime in navigating its response. As one Chinese media analyst points out, “In the early days of the crisis, online vitriol had largely been directed at the local authorities. Now, more of the anger is being aimed at higher level leadership” (Zhong, 2020). Consequently, as the sense-making process folded, Chinese leaders at multiple levels have been forced to constantly manipulate expert advice and robustly project political power by constructing clear narratives to shift blame and lead the country out of the crisis.

THE GREEK CASE

The Greek leadership similarly issued directives which it expected citizens to follow. Despite pushback in some instances, Greek citizens, for the most part, accepted and conformed to contagion mitigation measures. These measures were accompanied by fines in case of noncompliance, although enforcement was not as keen as that by Chinese authorities. The main difference in terms of timing is that China was the first country to deal with COVID-19. It had to make sense of the threat, and as explained earlier, calculated inaction had consequences on manipulating expert advice and highlighting symbolic politics. Greece was already aware of the impending crisis and in fact looked to neighboring Italy (Capano, 2020), and to a lesser extent China, as examples upon which to draw lessons and make sense of the threat. Thus, unlike the Chinese example, the absence of calculated inaction in Greece led to no discernible need to manipulate scientific advice or expressly highlight symbolic power politics.

Detection of the unfolding crisis came on February 26 when the first confirmed COVID-19 case was announced. Greece quickly came up with a plan because the country's infrastructure was in dire straits. Following 10 years of economic austerity and 5 years of a concurrent migration crisis, the National Health System found its budget cut by three-quarters and the number of ICU beds standing at a mere 560 beds (Psaropoulos, 2020). It was at that time that the consequences of Italy's response to the pandemic made daily news (Smith, 2020), and the government realized it could not afford not to act. It had neither the institutional capacity nor the resources to handle a significant volume of patients; it had to be proactive, focusing on prevention, not treatment. “There were realities, weaknesses, that we were very aware of,” said Dr. Andreas Mentis, who heads the Hellenic Pasteur Institute. “Before the first case was diagnosed, we had started examining people and isolating them. Incoming flights, especially from China, were monitored. Later, when others began to be repatriated from Spain, for example, we made sure they were quarantined in hotels” (quoted in Smith, 2020). In other words, there was a deliberate decision to slow down the spread of the virus and “flatten the curve.” In that respect, weakness turned out to be a strength. “Other countries, with much better hospital infrastructure and more ICU units per population, maintained an illusion that their systems would be able to cope, so they delayed [countermeasures],” informs Yannis Tountas, head of Greece's Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine (quoted in Labropoulou, 2020).

As a result, the Greek government decided to come up with a plan though there still was no case reported in Greece. As 't Hart (2014) reminds, incumbent leaders often need to ascertain the existence of a threat early to maintain control of the situation. Acknowledging the COVID-19 epidemic as a critical problem before having a confirmed case, the Greek government deliberated and acted decisively. On Sunday, February 23, the Health Ministry created a new national committee of Public Health Protection and charged it with designing prevention and protection measures above

and beyond those already recommended by the Ministry, which was following World Health Organization (WHO) and European Union health guidelines. The first measure was taken on February 27. As a result of three confirmed cases, the government canceled carnival events throughout the country, leading to significant political pushback (In.gr., 2020). Within the span of 2 weeks, the Greek government shut down schools, bars, cafes, restaurants, nightclubs, gyms, malls, cinemas, retail stores, museums, and archeological sites (see Petridou & Zahariadis, 2021). The lockdown was complete and duly accompanied by significant political and citizen pushback when public church services during Easter were banned (Smith, 2020). The plan was reminiscent of China's sealing off the Hubei province although enforcement was more lackadaisical. At the same time, the horrific contemporary example of Italy (Smith, 2020) coupled with preliminary data issued by China and the WHO enabled the Greek Ministry of Health to make sense of the impending crisis with the help of experts. Alternatives included doing nothing but frames of a strong and confident government pointed in a different direction. Dismissing decisions made as a result of possible ideological proclivities and acknowledging rational deliberations, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis asserted at a teleconference with the Brookings Institution: "I knew from the very beginning that if something needed to be done, it was best to do it earlier rather than later... We took our first decisions even before we had the first confirmed case," (Kathimerini, 2020). He obviously regarded it a critical situation that could easily and quickly degenerate into a catastrophe. Hence unlike China, there was an absence of calculated inaction.

What effects did the absence of calculated inaction have on expert advice manipulation and symbolic politics? Without evidence of hesitation, the government constructed a narrative to explain the need for immediate social distancing, masks, and other hygiene measures. The absence of calculated inaction revealed a frame of clarity and decisiveness. The Prime Minister made it clear to an early session of the Greek parliament: "State sensitivity, coordination, resolve, swiftness, seem not to be matters of economic magnitude." And he continued: "Our schools closed before we had the first fatality. Most countries followed a week or two later after they had mourned the loss of dozens" (quoted in Psaropoulos, 2020). The narrative, therefore, weighed the tradeoff between saving lives as the main goal despite huge economic sacrifices (Labropoulou, 2020). The frame aimed to inform and reassure: The virus was highly contagious and under certain conditions extremely lethal, but the government had a plan to protect the people.

Experts were consulted and their recommendations shaped the narrative. Alex Patelis, the Prime Minister's economics adviser, put it best: "There are problems you can solve through spin and others that require truth and transparency. It was very clear we needed experts and we needed to listen to them" (quoted in Smith, 2020). Daily briefings, which were closely followed by the public (Labropoulou, 2020), were given by the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health, Dr. Sotirios Tsiodras, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Athens. He was often accompanied by the Deputy Minister for Civil Protection and Crisis Management, Nikos Hardalias. The briefings supplemented the warnings issued by the Ministry of Health about the need to adopt harsh measures early to save lives, even if leading to adverse economic repercussions. Stressing safety, Tsiodras said in his daily briefing: "I want to believe the pandemic is a victory, a victory so that we can move forward...The opportunity should not be turned into an opportunity for political tension. This experience is an opportunity to strengthen the sense of security. Everything should be done with transparency, ethical motives, and under strict regulation" (National Public Health Organization, 2020). Avoiding political blame, the frame conveyed the message that

doctors, not politicians, shaped policy. At the same time, the presence of a politician claimed credit for the government by injecting a political dimension (Zahariadis et al., 2020).

Unlike in China, Greek leaders did not have to suppress information or engage in overt symbolism. Making meaning and controlling the narrative are not easy during crises. Information overload, uncertainty, fear, and a rapidly evolving situation lead to framing contests and blame games (Boin et al., 2017). But the Greek government's meaning-making narrative enabled it to successfully project power in the face of weak opposition. Although substantively agreeing, the opposition absurdly struggled to support government policy. In one such episode, after controversially saying he agreed with the committee's recommendations and overall response plan, former Health Minister Andreas Xanthos drew his party's (SYRIZA) ire for not being more critical of the government (Ellis, 2020). Early decisions about contagion mitigation increased credit-claiming (Zahariadis et al., 2020) while reducing the need for overt symbolism and denying the political opposition the ability to construct an alternative narrative.

In conclusion, we find that the Greek response parallels the Chinese response in terms of the strict and unpopular lockdown, but it diverges significantly from manipulating expert advice and promoting symbolism. In addition to its early and aggressive public health decisions and similar coercive measures in the name of saving lives, the Greek approach demonstrates no apparent attempts at calculated inaction. Consequently, even though the Greek response to the COVID-19 crisis constitutes a political attempt to construct a narrative of a science-driven government in control, it lacks China's drive to manipulate expert advice and exhibit extravagant symbolism. Political power was still projected, but the distance between the effects of the presence and absence of calculated inaction could not be greater.

CRISES, CALCULATED INACTION, AND PUBLIC POLICY

This article examines the effects of an understudied concept, calculated inaction, by focusing on Chinese and Greek responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Our theoretical contribution takes the literature of inaction to the realm of extraordinary policy-making. As crises such as this one may threaten the foundations of existing political order (Olson, 2000), governments that engage in calculated inaction presuming the crisis will eventually dissipate also construct narratives to compensate for, not just disguise, such choices.

Our findings, which indicate that calculated inaction affects the use of scientific (expert) advice and symbolic politics in crisis responses, reinforce the argument made by Edelman (1988) that politics, especially politics during crises ('t Hart, 1993), can profitably be viewed as institutionalized drama. Faced with the dual threats of health risks by COVID-19 and risks to regime stability, Chinese leaders engaged in significant information suppression. Calculated inaction politicized and manipulated expert advice through distinct frames and heightened political symbolism. Illustrating the absence of inaction, the Greek government crafted messages not only to communicate its intentions but also to reassure citizens that safety is at the heart of the state's political order. Although the Greeks had the benefit of lesson drawing from earlier and worse cases (China and Italy), their response, much like China's, projected expertise, and political power. When governments respond to crises, political leaders need to control the national narrative by placing themselves inside it as heroic protagonists legitimized by rational experts and celebrated through symbolic acts. Crisis responses

may be institutionalized drama, but the effects of policy inaction strongly bias the narrative and its heavy emphasis on heroes and villains.

The two cases illustrate our hypotheses and provide support for future tests. However, concluding that calculated inaction affected more the symbolism and projection of political power and less the content of national crisis responses is not to summarily dismiss the impact of inaction on crisis response content. The impact is best viewed through the Chinese case where the country's past experiences dealing with SARS and other epidemics, its world-class disease surveillance systems, and two decades of science-driven public health approaches put Chinese leaders in a position to quickly identify and swiftly respond to the novel coronavirus by late December or early January. Yet, calculated inaction crucially delayed the quarantine before widespread holiday travel and carried on with a prominent holiday banquet and CCP legislative sessions while simultaneously stifling physician reporting and local newspaper coverage when government officials at multiple levels clearly knew that strict quarantine measures should have been implemented. Likewise, the decision not to announce the human-to-human transmission when the evidence (weeks earlier) indicated otherwise was followed by dramatic and highly symbolic actions ranging from the Hubei lockdown to the dramatic hospital construction spectacles. As is now highly evident, calculated inaction during the early phases of the epidemic forced Chinese leaders into implementing a more scaled-up response than the situation may have otherwise warranted.

Although we realize that China's inaction affected the Greek narrative, we pose the counterfactual question: Would national responses have been different in its absence? China would have likely witnessed fewer infections and ensuing deaths, but at one level, the intensity of the crisis (i.e., the contagious nature of the disease), would have resulted in stringent lockdown responses in both cases. At another level, such inaction carries greater analytical weight. Ironically, and as a corollary of the scaled-up response, the CCP turned the crisis into an opportunity to manipulate scientific opinion and deliver out-sized rhetorical and symbolic initiatives in manipulating the crisis situation to its advantage. Effectively, Chinese leaders transformed an undoubtedly serious two-fold threat into an outcome that projects the image of a tight CCP grip on power.

Finally, beyond the crisis response itself, communication plays a crucial role, especially among and between elites, social groups, and mass publics, and remains fundamental in facilitating ongoing political processes. Crises disrupt routines and pose challenges to the credibility of those charged with communicating narratives (Ansell & Bartenberger, 2019, p. 52). We find that calculated inaction shapes the meaning-making task of crisis management (Boin et al., 2017) by leading to policy overreaction laden with symbolism and blame avoidance for adverse consequences (Brändström, 2016; Maor, 2018). Both aspects encapsulate episodes of power projection. Calculated inaction in the form of information suppression, problem denial, and, ultimately, coercion can lead to ideational outbursts to win the hearts and minds of citizens, a process with distinct parallels to the ideologically oriented third dimension of power articulated by Lukes (2005, p. 27): "Is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have—that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?" Seeking to revive the power-critical agenda of policy studies, we find that the projection of political power inherent in policy inaction decisively shapes the content and symbolism of crisis responses. Pandemics and reactions to the crises they create are not only about saving lives. They are also about rationalizing, celebrating, or contesting political order.

ENDNOTES

¹The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) was created in 2002, and the country has since built hospitals and facilities nationwide to test, isolate, and treat SARS patients.

²As one public health expert cautioned, "I wouldn't call it a hospital. I would call it more of a triage and isolation facility." A design expert called the facility "an infection triage, treatment and recovery center." The idea is to have "essentially a center for mass quarantine of patients" (Silver, 2020).

ORCID

Nikolaos Zahariadis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2457-0561>

Stephen Ceccoli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3789-061X>

Evangelia Petridou  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7316-4899>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Nikolaos Zahariadis is Mertie Buckman Chair and Professor of International Studies at Rhodes College, Memphis, TN, USA.



Stephen J. Ceccoli is the P.K. Seidman Professor of Political Economy at Rhodes College, Memphis, TN, USA.



Evangelia Petridou is Assistant Professor in Public Administration at the Risk and Crisis Research Center at Mid Sweden University.

How to cite this article: Zahariadis, Nikolaos, Stephen Ceccoli, and Evangelia Petridou. "Assessing the Effects of Calculated Inaction on National Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis." *Risks Hazards Crisis Public Policy*. 2021;12:328–345. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12230>