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COVID-19 AND THE CHINA CHALLENGE: INTERROGATING THE DOMESTIC-INTERNATIONAL NEXUS IN BEIJING'S CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

Benjamin Tze Ern Ho¹

This article considers China's political maneuvers between February and October 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to devastate many parts of the world. It argues that the pandemic has exacerbated geopolitical tensions between China, the United States and the West. Consequently, Chinese policy-makers perceive the existence of a broad Western front which seeks to contain its global ambitions, as well as to delegitimise the rule of the Chinese government domestically. In response, the Chinese government has attempted to shore up its territorial claims while embarking on a global diplomatic offensive to cast itself as a responsible power and at the same time call into question the West's ability to practice global leadership. Taken together, these narratives have emboldened China to attempt and seize the moral high ground while at the same time undermine Western criticism that it was an uncooperative and opportunistic power that had taken advantage of the pandemic to pursue its own selfish agenda.

Introduction

The outbreak of a mysterious virus affecting thousands of Chinese citizens in Wuhan in December 2019 initially received little global attention. On 23 January 2020, the Chinese government imposed a lockdown on the city in order to quarantine the epicenter of what became later known as the Covid-19 disease. Coming on the eve of its annual Spring festival, the significance of the lockdown was not lost on many Chinese citizens in that the Chinese government was prepared to take measures, no matter how drastic, to prevent the broader spread of the disease. In contrast, life continued throughout this period as per normal in many parts of the West, the general consensus was that this was a virus that would be largely contained within East Asia.

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Writing now a year on (June 2021), the global picture has changed drastically. With over a 170 million people affected and more than three and a half million dead, the devastation to the global economy (the IMF projected global growth in 2020 to be -4.9 per cent) has led to questions and concerns over the state of international governance, particularly on the relevance of the global international order and the ostensible primacy of Western leadership, led by the United States. While these questions are not novel and have been posed by many scholars in the past¹, the Covid-19 pandemic has generated renewed debate over the ability of Western governments to lead their own countries through crisis, let alone the rest of the world. Given that China was one of the first few countries to control the outbreak (despite its early bumbling), the political message that the Chinese government sought to narrate and project in the months that followed was all too clear: China was undoubtedly better than the West (particularly the United States) in its response to the pandemic and therefore it deserves a greater say in and share of the rules of international order.²

During the same period (December 2019 to June 2021), Chinese military presence in the South China Sea also increased and became more belligerent, even as many Western leaders and officials such as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo assertively criticised China over a number of issues.³ In April 2020, a Chinese coast guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the Paracel Islands, which China and Vietnam both claim as theirs. Shortly after, a Malaysian oil exploration project had its operations disrupted off the coast of Borneo by a Chinese marine survey vessel, the *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, which was also accompanied by Chinese naval and coast guard forces. Shortly afterwards, on 20 July, the People's Liberation Army Navy conducted exercises in the South China Sea which also involved the China Coast Guard.⁴ Taken together, this article argues that China's actions over territorial matters are conceptualised and oriented towards the goal of entrenching Beijing's political presence and influence in the South China Sea. Indeed the ability to dominate territory (be it land or sea) allows Beijing to subsequently negotiate (should it need to) from a position of strength, reducing the likelihood that it would have to concede existing territory in the future.

From the above, the article highlights two key objectives that lie behind the Chinese government actions. In the case of its Covid response, it seeks to seize the moral high ground while at the same time, undermine criticisms from countries like the United States, United Kingdom and Australia that it was an uncooperative and opportunistic power that had taken advantage of the pandemic to pursue its own selfish agenda. All these are primarily trained at a domestic audience which had expressed criticism towards the Chinese government in the early days of the Covid outbreak.⁵ In the case of its territorial forays, the goal is primarily an international one as China seeks to dissuade any attempts by Southeast Asian states to challenge its regional primacy while at the same time, keeping the United States on the backfoot in having to respond to Beijing's challenge (rather than being afforded the initiative to challenge it).

The following article will examine this interplay of domestic-international factors which provide important clues as to how China sees itself in relation to the world, and what it envisages its future role to be. To do so, this article peruses the theoretical insights proffered by Robert Jervis in understanding how great powers operate and how they relate to Beijing's actions in the course of the coronavirus pandemic, both domestically and internationally.⁶ It will then go on to examine how China's diplomatic narrative has continually focused on three themes: (i) a responsible China, (ii) a self-sacrificial China, and (iii) a superior China. Internationally, China also seeks to call into question Western political norms and values as being normative for other states while promoting Chinese behavior and values as being comparatively more suitable for international emulation. In light of all these, in the years to come, it is argued that we are likely to witness China wanting an even greater say in international affairs, a hardening of its resolve to stronger claims of international influence, and to significantly resist Western attempts to challenge it domestically. The article will conclude with some implications for policy-makers, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, in seeking to address China's challenge to international politics in an era of Covid-19 and beyond.

Great Powers and Great Appetites: China the Dissatisfied Power

In a discussion of unipolarity and the workings of great powers, Robert Jervis – in reference to the United States – suggests that a superpower would seek to change the system rather than preserve it. As observed, great powers tend to exhibit the following characteristics: (i) states which are not subjected to external restraints tend to feel few restraints at all; (ii) states' definitions of their interests tend to expand along with their power; (iii) increased power brings with it new fears; and (iv) the more a state sees the current situation as satisfactory, the more it will expect the future to be worse.⁷ While a number of Chinese scholars and senior policy makers have frequently expressed China's international politics as being different from other great powers, and that Beijing does not have hegemonic designs,⁸ Chinese actions in the past few years – particularly in Southeast Asia and East Asia have generated anxiety and suspicion that as its structural power in the international system grows, its foreign policy has, unsurprisingly, become more assertive and forceful as greater power leads to greater interests. Furthermore, if one takes second-image thinking of domestic considerations seriously, then China's foreign policy to some extent is also reflective of the nature of its domestic regime. As Jervis observes “a country's foreign policy reflects the nature of its domestic regime, which means that states that rule by law and express the interests of their people will conduct benign foreign policies and that tyrannies will inflict misery abroad as they do at home.”⁹ With the above framework in mind, this essay will go on to argue that China's contemporary international relations – at its core – is that of a dissatisfied power whose international appetite is growing. The remainder of this essay will examine how this is being fleshed out in both China's Covid-19 responses as well as its territorial claims in the region.

A. *China as a Responsible Power*

A key narrative that Chinese leaders and policy makers have attempted to convey to the wider world – even before the Covid-19 pandemic – was that of China as being a responsible power and stakeholder of the international community. According to one study, China’s present global identity is very much related with that of its own identification as a “responsible great power” (*fuzeren daguo* 负责任大国) which has been a key motif in Chinese foreign policy lexicon and discourse. As observed “there is a vibrant epistemic terrain related to the responsible great power identity within China. For some time now Chinese elites have been debating intensely the kind of responsible power that China should be. That these identity debates take place frequently, away from the attention of most of the world, suggests the Chinese regard the idea of big-power responsibility far more seriously than had it been purely a convenient propaganda tool.”¹⁰

To this end, the Covid-19 pandemic came at an opportune time for the Chinese government to burnish its credentials as a responsible member of the international community. Shortly after the Wuhan lockdown, President Xi Jinping (on 28 January) met with the Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Tedros Adhanom in Beijing. Following the meeting, Adhanom expressed appreciation to the Chinese government and praised it for the “seriousness” with which Beijing was treating the outbreak, and “especially the commitment from top leadership, and the transparency demonstrated, including sharing data and genetic sequence of the virus.”¹¹ These comments by Adhanom were highly significant, reflecting an effort by the Chinese government to exonerate itself of blame regarding the virus, which stands in sharp contrast to the Chinese government back in 2003, which was heavily criticized by the WHO for its slow reporting and lack of transparency during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak. As such, the message Chinese leaders and diplomats sought to convey was crystal-clear: The China of 2020 was a different China from that of 2003, and Beijing’s response to the pandemic had vindicated the Chinese government as one that was not only more transparent, but also highly responsible.

In a report published in April 2020 by Chinese scholars and experts from the ChinaWatch (*China Daily*), Institute of Contemporary China Studies (Tsinghua University) and the School of Health Policy and Management (Peking Union Medical College), it was said that the Chinese authorities had released timely data in an “open, transparent and responsible manner” so as to provide people with “dynamic, clear and important information”.¹² It added that ensuring “the public is fully informed” was the key to establishing strong social consensus.¹³ This narrative of a “responsible China” was subsequently being played out on the international stage as then US President Donald Trump had said he had spoken to President Xi who had reassured Trump that things were under control.¹⁴ But as the virus raged on worldwide, leaders of several Western countries (notably the United States and the United Kingdom) laid blame on Beijing for

concealing the outbreak of the disease in the early days of its emergence.¹⁵ In an article written by its Foreign Minister Wang Yi on China's fight against the coronavirus, it was emphasised that China had acted responsibly as a major power in the global pandemic:

We have taken a proactive, responsible, creative and courageous attitude to fulfill our mission with regard to fighting the virus on the diplomatic front, so as to secure an enabling environment for the victory at home, contribute our part to the international cooperation, and add another dimension to major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.¹⁶

Quoting an ancient Chinese poem, "fear not the want of armor, for mine is also yours to wear," Wang Yi said "in this spirit, the Chinese people and the whole world have written together an epic of international humanitarianism. This is the best example of a community with a shared future for mankind."¹⁷ Indeed, this narrative was amplified by the Chinese government's "mask diplomacy" in which both Chinese public and private institutions donated masks, test kits and other personal protection equipment to some 83 countries hard hit by the coronavirus, including European countries like Italy, Czech Republic and Serbia, as well as those in the Middle East and Africa.¹⁸ Luo Zhaohui, its deputy foreign minister, said Beijing had done so because "China emphasises and is willing to offer what we can to countries in need" and that it also wanted to share its experience of fighting the pandemic with the rest of the world.¹⁹ This framing of China as a humanitarian power reflects both the growing capability of China to provide not just for its own people but also to address other global needs as well to challenge the pre-eminent role the United States once played in this area.²⁰

While critics of the Chinese government may simply dismiss all these as Chinese propaganda (and much of it is indeed propaganda), the point is that they allow the Chinese government to claim the moral high ground for its political decisions and that it ought to be recognized as a responsible great power. Nevertheless, why is this narrative of big/great power responsibility important for China in its international politics, and how does it serve the interest of the Chinese state in real, tangible terms? Part of the answer lies in China's international image in which being seen as a responsible power strengthens China's claim to global leadership.²¹ At the same time, global leadership – for the Chinese government – represents a penultimate objective, not an ultimate objective to be pursued at all costs. To this end, the Chinese government's goal of global leadership is a highly self-serving one: it allows the Chinese state to influence the rules and norms of international politics and to lend political legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the international community. Why is this significant? I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic came at a particularly sensitive period for the CCP in which domestic and global events had generated considerable anxiety within the Chinese government. These include the (ongoing) trade war with the United States (initiated by the Trump administration), the street protests in Hong Kong (in 2019) and the re-election

of President Tsai Ing-Wen (representing the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party) during the January 2020 Taiwanese presidential elections. All of these were seen as threats to the CCP's stranglehold of power on the mainland.²² Given the one-party system of China, the CCP was in little danger of losing power, but the possibility of a brewing power struggle between President Xi and other party members could not be ruled out, especially if these events suggested that Xi and the party's top brass were culpable for these outcomes. As such, any criticism – internal or external – of the Chinese government was viewed as an assault on the party, and by extension, calling into question the political ability and legitimacy of its leaders.

Given this backdrop of domestic struggles and unhappiness towards the central government in the early months of the pandemic, it was not difficult to see why Chinese leaders had subsequently embarked on an opportunistic aggressive propaganda attempt offered by its success in containing Covid-19 to demonstrate its credentials as a responsible great power. By doing so, it was able to respond to international criticism while at the same time communicate to its citizens that it had their best interests at heart. This would allow China not only the opportunity to show its commitment to dealing with global issues and challenges, but more crucially, to confer the Chinese government with greater moral legitimacy, in that it was responsible and therefore could be trusted by others, both internationally and domestic.

B. China the "Good Samaritan"

A second key narrative of the Chinese government amidst this global pandemic is that not only is China a responsible power, it was also prepared to be an international "good Samaritan", even putting its own citizens in potential danger to help others. The outbreak of the virus in Western Europe, notably Italy and Spain in early March saw the Chinese government send medical supplies as well as Chinese experts to provide aid to the affected countries. While the provision of Chinese humanitarian assistance is not without precedent, a closer examination of China's participation in such activities suggest that a bigger narrative was at work here: China seeks to be seen as self-sacrificial and to ameliorate international criticisms that it was a global-free rider. Indeed in recent years, humanitarian work (*rendaozhuyi gongzuo* 人道主义工作) has increasingly constituted an important facet of Chinese international diplomacy.²³ A Lowy Institute study on China's overseas aid program highlighted that Beijing tends to provide a large proportion of its humanitarian aid bilaterally, rather than through multilateral and civil society partners and relying more on bilateral rather than international mechanisms for coordination.²⁴ Another study of Chinese international development showed that between 2000 and 2014, the Chinese government spent US\$354 billion, which is comparable to the United States government expenditure of US\$370 billion to other countries. As observed by the report, "China has clearly demonstrated that it has the means and motivation to deploy the power of its purse to advance its interests in ways

that may or may not be aligned with the U.S. and its allies.”²⁵ Why does China place importance on its new humanitarian efforts? Part of the reason, I argue, lies in how the CCP seeks to construct its international image particularly under the leadership of President Xi. According to Yan Xuetong, China – under Xi – has moved from a period in which it had kept a low profile internationally to a new era whereby it “strove for achievement” (*yousuo zuowei* 有所作为).²⁶ In this respect, China’s actions in providing medical and humanitarian assistance can be seen as is part of a wider political-diplomatic objective with which to project China’s voice on the global stage, and to offer “Chinese solutions” (*zhongguo fangan* 中国方案) in combating global problems. The reasons for this are twofold: one, is it to demonstrate the viability – and consequently, superiority – of Chinese ideas to meeting global problems (this will be discussed in the final section), and two, to portray the Chinese government in a favorable light as part of a political contest for influence between the PRC government and Republic of China (ROC-Taiwan) government.

In recent years, the global prominence of China had resulted in greater Chinese state activities to further isolate and erode the influence of the Taiwanese government globally. This was particularly escalated following the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) coming to power in the 2016 elections – led by Tsai Ing-Wen – which had traditionally adopted a more confrontational approach towards the PRC government. While this is not the place to recount the complicated character of cross-straits relations,²⁷ the Covid-19 pandemic has generated considerable cross-straits dynamics suggesting that despite the Chinese government’s formidable propaganda machinery, the ROC continues to present a considerable challenge in the flesh to the CCP’s international branding and soft power. Indeed, prior to the outbreak of the virus, the PRC government was on a run of success in undermining Taipei’s international diplomacy. As observed elsewhere, the issue of Taiwan remains a core national interest to Beijing and one which all Chinese leaders cannot be seen to make any compromise over.²⁸ One way for Beijing to stamp its pressure on the ROC government is to reduce the number of diplomatic allies Taiwan has. To this end, China – under President Xi – has been highly successful in the past few years in pressurizing countries to cut diplomatic ties with Taipei. In 2013, Taiwan had official relations with 22 UN member states, this number has now dwindled to 14 UN member states, including seven states which cut ties with Taipei in 2019 alone.²⁹ While most of these recent countries are small Pacific and Oceanic states and are not considered major political players internationally, their strategic locations in key maritime waters proffer Beijing with increased opportunities to project international visibility while further eroding Taipei’s international presence and voice.

Given this backdrop of diplomatic competition, it was not surprising that both the PRC and ROC government have been highly sensitive to each other’s political maneuvers during the pandemic. This was particularly important to China given Taipei’s considerable efforts and success in combating the virus resulting in international praise and

accolades which was sharply contrasted with Beijing's early problems and subsequent criticism by a number of Western countries (especially the United States).³⁰ This "diplomatic tug of war" – as one study puts it – pitches both the PRC and ROC in a tussle for recognition as the legitimate representative state of "China" in international society.³¹ As such, one might argue that both governments are involved in a "one-up game" of political brinksmanship, each trying to outdo the other in procuring international social capital and the moral high ground to be recognized as a responsible stakeholder.

C. China is superior: from student to teacher

A third theme, and perhaps the most relevant to our discussion, is the idea that China is superior, by virtue of its ability to combat and effectively contain the virus thus legitimising the Chinese model of governance as being superior to that of the West. In a speech made by President Xi at the CCP's headquarters in Zhongnanhai on May 8, Xi said that "the experience of fighting Covid-19 has demonstrated again the strong vitality and remarkable superiority of the Chinese system. [China] can overcome any obstacles and make huge contributions to the progress of human civilization."³² Coming at a time in which China was being accused by the United States and several other Western countries for being dishonest and covering up the real causes of the virus, Xi's words reflect an attempt by the Chinese leadership to go on the diplomatic offensive and to counter the narratives that run against Beijing's preference. To this end, framing China's response to combating Covid-19 as one that was inherently superior to that of the West would allow Chinese leaders to not only maintain domestic political stability, but also not give the international community the excuse to blame China. Following the drop of Covid-19 infections and easing of lockdown measures across Chinese cities in late March, the Chinese foreign ministry went on a diplomatic offensive to tell the Chinese story while challenging narratives in the Western media that it perceived as being biased against or critical of China.

According to Zhu Zhiqun, this increasingly strident tone against the West (dubbed Wolf Warrior diplomacy) has increasingly found popular traction within China, reinforcing a presumed transition of Chinese diplomacy from "conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high profile."³³ While part of this Wolf Warrior diplomacy could be attributed to soaring nationalistic sentiments in China, a more important factor as this essay argues was due to the perceptions among Chinese political elites that the Western media was inherently biased against Beijing and that it was paramount for China to tell a better Chinese story to challenge its critics. As Zhu puts it, "From China's perspective, wolf-warrior diplomacy is a direct response to "unfair" approaches by other countries, especially the US, toward China and the Chinese people."³⁴

This emphasis on a superior China model, be it in fighting Covid-19 or in other fields of studies, it is argued, reflects a particular mindset among Chinese elites, that the West was intentionally trying to keep China down and constraining its rise and that it had

to respond forcefully by demonstrating that its social policies and approach to governance were as good, if not better than countries in the West. Indeed in recent years, the idea of a “China solution” (*zhongguo fangan*) has attracted substantial attention among Chinese scholars and policy makers. This involves China seeking to promote aspects of its developmental model to the world while insisting that its approach to international politics was better than the West due to its policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries (which may reassure them that China will not copy the behaviour of previous great powers) and not insisting that human rights issues be grounds for political intervention (and lead to ill-advised interventions abroad).³⁵ In terms of providing economic aid to other countries, Chinese leaders also generally believe that its authoritarian mercantilist model of economic development was superior to the Western approach of traditional donor aid programs. In a study of foreign aid in an era of great power competition, it was highlighted that China funds its programs through concessional loans at reduced interest rates to governments and businesses around the globe. It does this through several organisational mechanisms rather than pursuing purely commercial deals.³⁶ By doing so, this essay argues that it allows the CCP to coordinate and frame Chinese solutions in a manner that is consistent with its geopolitical objectives unlike those undertaken by the West in which private and profit-making imperatives dominate.

The Covid-19 pandemic however provided even greater impetus for the Chinese government to further promote its unique approach to tackling global problems. While projects undertaken within the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have proffered the Chinese government a mechanism to articulate its preferences to regional and international norms, these activities are mostly connected to infrastructural investments and economically driven with minimal existential implications, though this could well change in the coming years.³⁷ On the contrary, Covid-19 is viewed as a high-stake issue of global proportions with millions of lives at stake. But more than just for humanitarian purposes, the pandemic was perceived by Chinese leaders as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of its single-party authoritarian system compared to Western political models. In other words, if China was to be able to evince that its approach to combating the pandemic was good and better than the West, it would represent not only an about turn in its international standing (given its early mistakes), but more crucially, provide the CCP with the moral justification with which to challenge the claim that liberal democracy (of that which is practiced in the United States and the West) is a superior model of political governance compared to its political model of one-party system. This is most vividly illustrated in the ongoing competition between China and the West in the development of a successful vaccine against the coronavirus. In an editorial by the Chinese-state newspaper *Global Times*, China’s efforts in developing a vaccine was contrasted sharply with the United States which was being criticised for “putting politics above science.”³⁸ As the Times article puts it,

“China chooses global cooperation, while the US has been quitting international agreements and organizations. China has actively participated in international cooperation on vaccine R&D...In contrast, the US withdrew from the WHO, refused to attend the Global Vaccine Summit, declined to participate in international vaccine research, and even tried hard to interfere in international cooperation on vaccines...China seeks the common good of the world, while the US pursues its selfish gains.”³⁹

From the above discussion, I argue that the CCP’s objective – at its core – is to convince its own citizens that it remains in control and that its responses to the global pandemic is superior to most of the West, in particular the United States. Why is this important for China? If one recalls the early days of the pandemic in which the Chinese government had to bear the brunt of domestic criticism concerning its clumsy handling of the coronavirus outbreak, then much of the subsequent response is conceived and framed with this objective in mind. In order not to have its legitimacy challenged, it was necessary for the CCP to present this crisis as one that was not of its own negligence, and consequently to frame the response as one that was entirely due to its own diligence. Relating to this is the CCP’s assessment of China’s international status and global influence following the events of the pandemic. This essay argues that China perceives the shift of global international power from the United States to itself⁴⁰ and the pandemic has accelerated Western decline (particularly the United States) and thus is reducing the ability of the West to project power in the Western Pacific in order to secure its interests. For instance, Chinese scholar Cui Liru argued that the world was witnessing a new “period of historic opportunities” due to the “profound changes in the world.”⁴¹ A 2020 Lowy Institute report also showed that while the United States continue to be the number one power, it had experienced the largest drop in comprehensive power of any country in 2020 and that a ten-point lead of comprehensive power over China (in 2018) had narrowed by half in 2020.⁴² All these suggest that in China’s thinking, the coronavirus pandemic is seen as part of a broader inevitable power transition in which the United States would no longer enjoy the same amount of global influence and political goodwill it once had.

In the remaining sections, this essay will discuss how China has utilised the pandemic to consolidate, even strengthen, its position on territorial disputes. This would allow Beijing to subsequently negotiate from a position of strength and avoid the need to make any compromise that it sees as running against its fundamental interests. To do so, two events will be briefly touched on, the China-India standoff in the Galwan River valley in May 2020 and the ongoing disputes between China and other Southeast Asian claimant states.

China-India standoff: A game of chicken?

On June 16 this year, Chinese and Indian soldiers were involved in a series of brutal fist fights at the Galwan Valley, Ladakh in the Himalayas some 4,300 metres above sea level. The area is next to Aksai Chin and near China's Xinjiang province. According to media reports, some 20 Indian soldiers were killed while China suffered 43 casualties.⁴³ According to one Singapore observer, both China and India – under the current leadership of Xi and Narendra Modi respectively – adopted highly nationalistic foreign policies to advance their national interests as well as lending legitimacy to their domestic political rule.⁴⁴ To be certain countries and political leaders justifying their foreign policy decisions by referencing nationalism is hardly a unique proposition, and nationalism is sometimes utilised as a strategic means to deflect attention from domestic pressures.⁴⁵ What is interesting in China's case is that nationalism – in recent years – has been interpreted as being revealed less through expressing support for China (or even supporting the Chinese Communist Party) as being good; it is instead linked to attacking those who do criticise China (or the Chinese Communist Party) as being immoral and evil. Chinese nationalism – particularly those expressed online – is now couched within a moral language and framed within a metaphysical narrative in which the stakes are lifted to an existential level: to support China is to live, to criticise China is to die.⁴⁶

Relating this to the China-India standoff, what is at stake is the Chinese perception that any attempts to back down from its territorial dispute with India is equivalent to being unpatriotic (and therefore, evil) as opposed to viewing this purely as a territorial dispute that can be negotiated and resolved.⁴⁷ Indeed President Xi hinted at this in his meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in 2018 when he said China would not give up “even one inch” of territory that the country's ancestors left behind.⁴⁸ Given the ambiguity behind this statement (where does Chinese ancestry begin and what were the territories they had occupied?), such an assertion by Xi was arguably less about defending China's territory per se, but more to ensure that China – in its territorial disputes – would not be the first to back down, or that even if it does, it would do so from a position of strength, and not from a position of weakness. More importantly, in the Chinese political worldview, the preservation of territory and space is fundamentally linked to the legitimacy of the Chinese emperor to rule his own people and consequently, as *prima facie* of China's inherent superiority over others. As observed by Edward Wang, “Considering their country as the celestial empire and their emperor as the son of heaven, the Chinese believed that it was natural for them to become the center of the world and carry out the mission of civilizing the rest, just as heaven was superior to the subordinated earth. Thus the self-image of China, or the central kingdom, had a base in the cosmography of heaven and earth.”⁴⁹ Whatever we might think of the merits of referencing ancient Chinese thinking to make sense of modern international politics,

the point is that territorial space was ultimately tied to China's political space, and to concede any inch of this territory, as Xi puts it, is to also at once concede one's own right and legitimacy in ruling China.

South China Sea disputes: Old wine in Chinese sheepskins

In the same vein, the South China Sea disputes are also intrinsic to China's identity as a global power, for it allows China to redefine the maritime boundaries that are key to its goal of being more than just a "normal state." In the Chinese mind, the South China Sea is the core theatre by which the United States and its Western allies seek to contain and dominate it and to keep it down. This is a key reason why China needs to break out of the "first island chain" consisting of a group of islands including Taiwan, Okinawa and the Philippines and running down the Malay Peninsula, and which Beijing views as its first line of defense.⁵⁰ Consequently, any attempt by the Chinese to successfully challenge Western dominance in Asia requires it to obtain control of the South China Sea.⁵¹

To this end, the Covid-19 outbreak allowed China the opportunity to further cement its presence and authority in the South China Sea. According to one study by the International Institute of Strategic Studies, China's behaviour in the Asia-Pacific region – following the outbreak of Covid-19 globally – has been more aggressive.⁵² These include regular military maneuvers and flyovers around Taiwan, and deployments in the disputed areas of the East and South China Seas. Among the actions it had taken in the South China Sea were the naming of 80 geographical features in April 2020, something it had not done since 1983.⁵³ These came shortly after Beijing had set up two administrative districts to govern the Paracel and Spratly Islands as part of its own territory. "As observed by Legarda, "both actions were attempts by China to create facts on the ground and reassert its sovereignty over the disputed region when other countries with claims to the sea and islands were grappling with the coronavirus pandemic."⁵⁴ Around that period, Beijing also sent the survey ship *Haiyang Dizhi 8* into Vietnamese waters in the South China Sea, escorted by six Coast Guard ships. The ship also subsequently entered waters near Malaysia with coast guard escorts where it proceeded to tag an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia's state oil company Petronas. In addition, PLA Navy aircraft were also spotted at Fiery Cross Reef in May 2020, these planes included those with early warning and control systems as well as anti-submarine aircraft suggesting that the location has now become the PLA's main operating base in the South China Sea.⁵⁵ In October 2020, shortly after the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with his Australian, Indian and Japanese counterparts in Tokyo, China's foreign minister Wang Yi embarked on a five-nation Southeast Asia trip which included Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos and Thailand. In a speech made in Kuala Lumpur, Wang called upon Southeast Asian member states to work together with China to remove "external disruption" in the South China Sea – a message aimed at Washington. He added that the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy posed a "big-security risk" to Asia. He added

that the U.S. was trying to “stir up confrontation among different groups and blocs, and stoke geopolitical competition while maintaining its own predominance and hegemony system.” He added that such a strategy “goes against the mutually beneficial and cooperative spirit, clashes with ASEAN centrality, and harms the tranquility and future development of the region.” In the event such a strategy was “forcefully implemented”, Wang said that “not only would history regress, but it shall also lead to danger.”⁵⁶

While it should be emphasised on the outset that Wang’s statements are neither novel nor unsurprising, the words reflect a broader Chinese political mindset in which the issue of territory is framed in moral language. The United States (as the leader of the West) is seen as disruptive (and therefore “bad”) while Asia (of which China is part of) is seen as inherently benevolent (and thus “good”).⁵⁷ Moreover America’s presence was cast as a threat; ergo America’s absence from the region would naturally allow it to flourish and develop peacefully. From this it can be said that China’s political worldview is mostly couched in anti-Western discourse and is geared to present all that China does as good and all which the United States has done as bad. Relating this to the events of Covid-19, this is fleshed out starkly, as seen by China’s so-called “wolf-warrior” diplomacy in which the West (particularly the United States) was being singled out as being guilty of allowing the coronavirus to spread unabated while the Chinese government was virtually absolved of all blame pertaining to the virus due to its efforts to stamp it out domestically and by acting to send supplies to assist countries internationally.⁵⁸ Relating to the South China Sea disputes, what China is attempting to do is to portray America as bad and thus undercut its moral right to influence – let alone lead – the international system while China was being portrayed as good and thus deserving of its claims as a moral force for good in international politics.

Conclusion

What will a post-Covid 19 world be like? And how will the pandemic affect the configuration of international power and global leadership? What will be the outcome of the global competition between the United States and China and what changes will we see in the structure of the international system? These are weighty questions that scholars of international politics, especially in the Asia-Pacific region are considering. Related to this, a number of themes and questions have been raised throughout 2020.

Firstly, is the United States able to continue maintaining its global leadership? The early signs out of the Biden’s administration suggest that United States foreign policy – particularly towards China – is not very unlike the Trump’s administration. This is reflected by the release of the *2021 Annual Threat Assessment* of the US Intelligence Community, which viewed China as a major competitor. The report concluded that Beijing will continue its “whole-of-government efforts to spread China’s influence, undercut that of the United States, drive wedges between Washington and its allies and partners, and foster new international norms that favor the authoritarian Chinese

system.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, as highlighted by Singapore’s former top diplomat and public intellectual Bilahari Kausikan, any shifts in America’s foreign policy would be one of “style and atmospherics and in the processes by which decisions are made and communicated” and not those relating to fundamental American interests.⁶⁰ That said, it is unclear whether America – following Covid-19 – will be able to muster the political and economic resources to preserve its international primacy even if it wants to. Indeed the pandemic has revealed significant weaknesses in the American political system as seen by the domestic infighting (or disagreement) between the Trump administration and the broader Washington policy-making community.⁶¹ While these might be diminished under a new administration, some of the differences concern more basic ideological worldviews which will continue to affect American political unity and international credibility, particularly regarding whether America should still play the role of an international leader or focus its resources inwardly.⁶²

Although this by no means disqualifies Washington from being a global leader, it does raise concerns that the US has been unable to fully put its house in order and that it ought to rectify matters at home before embarking on its political pursuits overseas. Indeed, scholars such as the American political scientist John Mearsheimer have argued that the US ought to practise greater restraint in its international politics, which would consequently translate to a less interventionist foreign policy.⁶³ Others such as Hugh White have proposed sharing power with China thus effectively diluting US global influence.⁶⁴ To this end, the issue concerning whether the United States will continue to play a leading role in global affairs has major ramifications for the overall configuration of power, not least in the Asia Pacific region in which Washington’s competition with Beijing is most acutely experienced.

Assuming that America will not be able to sustain its pre-eminence and global leadership position in the long run, be it due to domestic factors or the international system, the question is whether China would step up to provide the international leadership that the US leaves behind. Given the explicit call by President Xi for wanting China to be a “world class military” by 2050,⁶⁵ and to also be a major player in a number of strategic fields such as technology and artificial intelligence,⁶⁶ the possibility of China overtaking the United States to become the number one superpower is very real, as Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew pointed out many years ago.⁶⁷ As this essay has shown, China seeks to brand itself as an exceptional power, one that is not only different, but also superior to the the West in many facets.⁶⁸ In this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed the Chinese government to establish a narrative that its model of fighting the disease is superior to that of the West. The CCP’s ability to control its population allows it to enforce measures that are seen to be incompatible with Western notions of human rights and individual freedoms. To this end, the Chinese government is likely to further emphasise its authoritarian approach to political governance as a mark of its ability and to call into question the universality of Western ideas of political governance.

That said, it would be naïve to think that the United States and China have a duopoly of power that allows them resolve global challenges. While many countries – particularly smaller ones – would prefer Sino-U.S. relations to be less combustible, the present reality of the bilateral relationship suggest that tensions are unlikely to be eased anytime soon. This essay has suggested that China's response to the coronavirus pandemic has evinced its goal to be seen as a global great power, and consequently, its actions will also be closely scrutinised by countries in the region. For its claims to exceptionalism and benevolent power status to be sufficiently convincing to others, it needs to back them up with action, and to be seen by others as being responsible and contributing to the needs of the world.

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