

The Pandemic as a
Geopolitical Gamechanger
in the Indo-Pacific:
The View from China

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How has the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped or influenced China's geopolitical outlook and its grand strategy for the years to come? This is a question that will determine China's relationship with the United States, the Indo-Pacific region, and the rest of the world. In the Chinese strategic community, the pandemic has been regarded as a "watershed" event that has reshaped the structure of the international system and the power equilibrium. Its importance is elevated to the same status as the end of World War II, which determined the bipolar international system between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War which began thirty years of U.S. hegemony in a unipolar world.

Although China began as a sheer loser in the pandemic given its culpability in the origin of COVID and its early poor management of the domestic spread of the disease, Beijing believes that it has eventually emerged as a pure winner in the pandemic: the relative gain China has made vis-à-vis the U.S.'s bigger losses in disease control, national power, economic growth, global leadership, and credibility has strengthened Chinese confidence that the tide is turning in China's favor. The "effectiveness" of the Chinese political system, as manifested in its domestic disease control, has reinforced China's ideological conviction of its superiority. As China uses COVID diplomacy to demonstrate the superiority and desirability of its political system, the pandemic is perceived as an opportunity for it to shape the new international order and promote China's desired "Community of Common Destiny." Challenges remain, as the U.S. revamps its alliance system under the Biden administration and as regional powers and Western countries grow increasingly concerned and anxious about China's growing confidence and capabilities. However, for China, the pandemic has been a great opportunity, and China has emerged from it as a pure winner.

It is an interesting question as to how the pandemic has changed the nature and the dynamics of the great power competition between the U.S. and China. Most would agree that the pandemic exacerbated, accelerated, and aggravated the deterioration of relations that the U.S. and China had already been experiencing before 2020. However, the differences lie in the degree, intensity, velocity, and extensiveness of the damage. Without the pandemic, the downward slope U.S. and China had already been on would not have come to a state of "freefall" in 2020. And that "freefall" period has long-lasting and significant implications for their bilateral relations in the post-COVID world. The damaged trust, confidence, and credibility, and the deeply entrenched sense of hostility, or even antagonism, have made any effort to repair the relations extremely difficult, if not completely impossible. And this reality will affect the regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region for the many years and decades to come.

COVID and the Changing Power Equilibrium

As the first country facing a COVID-19 outbreak, China in the early stage of the pandemic suffered tremendous losses. Beijing shut down much of its economy to prioritize battling the pandemic domestically. And China's image and reputation came under severe attack internationally as an increasing number of affected countries began to trace the responsibility and culpability of China for the pandemic. This has led to the rise of the "wolf warrior" diplomacy phenomenon as Beijing fiercely defended its reputation and position in the pandemic.

As China's stringent domestic disease control measures took effect, by early April the country's domestic activities largely returned to normal and the rest of the world succumbed to the pandemic. Since then, the gap grew increasingly worrisome between China with its effective COVID controls, and other countries, especially the United States, with their inability to effectively manage the pandemic. By the end of 2020, China was one of the few countries still able to achieve positive economic growth during the year—seeing 2.3% GDP growth—while most of the world had plunged into an economic recession.¹

When China evaluates the losses and gains from the COVID-19 pandemic, a key criterion is whether the assessment is conducted in absolute or relative terms. And the results from these two comparisons are opposite to each other. In absolute terms, China has faced tremendous difficulties in its domestic economy and foreign relations as a result of COVID. Although the domestic economic activities resumed, the economic growth rate was still the lowest in the past thirty years. Government revenue dropped by 3.9%, while government spending increased by 2.8% as Beijing tried to tackle the pandemic and prop up the domestic economy.² Internationally, China's aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy might have temporarily shut down public complaints and grievances, yet its overall diplomatic posture has hardly won the hearts or minds of many across the rest of the world. In this sense, COVID has weakened China's comprehensive national power and tarnished its international image in absolute terms.

However, the picture and interpretation could be completely reversed when things are put in relative terms. While China has taken a big hit from the pandemic, the U.S. and its allies—or the West in general—have taken an even bigger hit in terms of their domestic crisis management, effective disease control, and economic performance. Most recently, the competition over available vaccines among developed countries further dampened the hope for their leadership in providing inoculations to developing countries. Therefore, in relative terms, not only has China successfully weathered the storm of COVID, but it has also emerged as the biggest winner in the crisis. In particular, as the U.S. took a significant loss in its economic development, leadership, and credibility, many Chinese see that the gap between China and the U.S. has shrunk as a result of the pandemic and that the power balance has further shifted in China's favor.

These two fundamentally contradictory visions will jointly determine China's grand strategy today and will continue to play the key determining role in the foreseeable future. There is no doubt that China has emerged more confident about its status and its "destiny" to replace the United States; that overall strategic vision is certain. Under this conviction, COVID has presented itself as a historical opportunity to improve China's strategic position and expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. (However, what China has largely failed to take into account is the other equally true reality: that China's absolute national power has been undermined by COVID, which should dictate a strategy of retrenchment and frugality regarding its resources.)

China's Growing Confidence

The growing confidence of Beijing is best reflected in the Fifth Plenum of the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in October 2020. According to tradition, the Fifth Plenum of each Party Congress is devoted to announcing the next Five-Year Plan. This one was no exception; not only did the CCP publish the primary goals for the 14th Five-Year Plan, but it also announced a mid-term 2035 Vision, including “major elevations of China’s economic, technological, and comprehensive national power,” “significant improvement of China’s economic volume and GDP per capita,” “key breakthroughs in critical core technologies,” and “China taking the lead among innovative countries.”³ The Fifth Plenum made ambitious plans for China’s political, economic, and social development. While the detailed implementation plan probably will not be revealed until the 14th Five-Year Plan is finalized, the communiqué from the Fifth Plenum made a most important determination about China’s current external environment and the foreign policy direction it dictates.

The communiqué made a significant effort to emphasize the “profound and complicated changes” China faces in its development environment. And the overarching conclusion remains positive and bullish. China believes that it is still in the “important window of strategic opportunities,”⁴ a judgment that was missing from the narrative during the peak of the pandemic. The term was used prominently after 9/11 when China believed the U.S. was so distracted by its counterterrorism campaign that China had the chance to develop its power unnoticed and uninterrupted. By claiming that the window of opportunity is not yet closed, Beijing demonstrates a highly positive outlook about its external environment and China’s ability to capitalize on it.

The conviction of China’s positive and rising trajectory internationally is causally linked to another concept that the Fifth Plenum continues to uphold: that “the world is experiencing profound changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局).⁵ In the Chinese narrative, “profound changes unseen in a century” first and foremost are reflected in the changing power equilibrium in the international arena—in other words, China’s “predestined rise” and America’s “unavoidable decline.” Therefore, although the “increasingly complicated international environment has increased instability and uncertainty” for China, the Chinese do not believe the direction or trend has been at all reversed or shattered.⁶

Internally, according to the communiqué, China’s “advantages” in the changing power equilibrium include “its political system, improved governance capacity, positive economic growth, accumulated material wealth, rich human resources, huge domestic market, economic resilience, and social stability.”⁷ In the Chinese view, these “advantages” have not been removed or significantly weakened by U.S.-China great power competition, the trade war, or COVID. Externally, the relative gain of China vis-à-vis the U.S. as the result of COVID due to the U.S.’s bigger losses in economic power, domestic cohesiveness, credibility, and external leadership has been cited to further strengthen the belief in the positive and eventually bullish trajectory of the Chinese rise against the U.S. decline. As such, the Fifth Plenum fully recognizes the complications and hardships, but the Chinese conviction of their rise has not changed at all. In order to counter the complications and hardships, the CCP instructed the government to “understand the opportunities and risks, maintain the strategic resolve, amplify the spirit of struggle, strengthen the bottom-line thinking, and effectively deal with changes.”⁸

Broader Impact over the International System

From the Chinese perspective, COVID has expedited the “profound changes unseen in a century” not only through the power balance between China and the United States but also through the reinforcement of several trends that China sees as contributing to the creation of a new international order under a shifting international system. Together, they contribute to a new outlook for the power structure of the world. The first such reinforced trend is “the rise of the East versus the fall of the West.” While Asia had been on the rise even before the pandemic, East Asian countries’ performance in combating the pandemic, especially China’s success, is seen by many Chinese as a sign of Asia’s growing importance in the international system, with the potential to “replace the West which has dominated the human history in the past five hundred years.”⁹

The second trend reinforced by COVID is “the rise of the Global South versus the fall of the Global North.” While the Global South and emerging markets represented by China and India had been on the rise before the pandemic, COVID has demonstrated the developed countries’ domestic social conflicts and political constraints on the effectiveness of their governance structure and political system.¹⁰ The influence of the Global South, as reflected by the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) in the debt sustainability crisis during the pandemic, is expanding. The DSSI, an initiative launched by the G20 and the most consequential answer to the debt issue, is a strong testament to the rise of the emerging markets in the Global South relative to the G7 or the Paris Club, which represents the traditional Global North and bloc of developed countries.

Although China sees itself as the winner in the COVID-19 pandemic and has excelled vis-à-vis the United States, prominent Chinese experts still refrain from projecting or predicting China’s replacement of the U.S. in a unipolar world. Instead, they are keen on portraying or emphasizing the multipolarization of the international system as the result of the pandemic. For example, Chen Xiangyang argues that the pandemic finally “ushered the world into a new framework of multipolarity in 2020.”¹¹ Based on his assessment, the four major powers, the U.S., China, Europe, and Russia have each demonstrated different capabilities in tackling the pandemic. As a result, the gap between the U.S. and China has shrunk, while the gap between the U.S. and China together in the first tier and Europe and Russia together in the second tier has grown larger. The new international order and structure are therefore characterized by the coexistence of multipolarity and two superpowers.

Some other Chinese experts do not see that the pandemic has fundamentally changed the international order but agree that it has introduced important changes to it. Following in the same vein of power reshuffling and transitioning among major powers, they also believe that the process of multipolarization has strengthened and accelerated even though the world has not yet achieved a full state of multipolarity. As argued by Yang Jiemin, the pandemic has led the international order to evolve in a more “just and reasonable” direction because non-Western countries have gained more governance capabilities and voice in the pandemic and China’s “advanced” concept of “human lives above all else” won the country the respect and admiration of many across the world.¹²

Almost all Chinese strategists have emphasized the importance of non-traditional security issues such as pandemics in the national strategies of major powers and for international politics. As a common global challenge, pandemics such as COVID-19 require the collaboration and cooperation of all countries. As a relatively new area that is gaining prominence in international politics, global health cooperation and pandemics inevitably become a new issue for competition for discourse, leadership, consensus-building, and power.

Escalation of U.S.-China Tensions

The most important impact of the pandemic on China's foreign policy is on the U.S.-China front. If anything, it exacerbated and expedited the deterioration of U.S.-China relations, to the extent of a "freefall."¹³ Beijing had originally planned for a relatively stable bilateral relationship with Washington at the beginning of 2020, hoping the signing of the Phase-I trade deal in mid-January would pave the way for stability and the ability to manage any turbulence assuming President Trump would not want to rock the boat during his reelection campaign. However, the COVID-19 pandemic directly undermined Trump's original reelection strategy, creating three crises: a public health crisis, an economic crisis, and a racial justice crisis, all of which directly tanked his approval rating by the summer of 2020.

COVID-19 disrupted Trump's original strategy for reelection as it eliminated his economic achievements and created a public health crisis. As revealed by the April GOP election strategy memo, blaming China for all these failures became policy. Although China should carry some responsibility for the early mismanagement of the pandemic, the U.S. systematic failure to deal with the disease after March is hardly China's fault. Therefore, for the Chinese, the rapid deterioration and unprecedented political clashes between the U.S. and China were, by design, Trump's strategy to divert U.S. domestic attention and shift blame. The broader observation the Chinese made was that when Trump encountered unexpected domestic distress, he became psychologically unstable and lost his sense of rationality, decency, and basic rules of engagement. U.S.-China relations and China itself became the most direct victims of the U.S. failure to tackle the COVID pandemic. This Chinese perception does not take into account Chinese aggressive foreign policy, such as "wolf warrior" diplomacy, since COVID has affected American perceptions and reactions. However, the independent effect China tried to tease out is how much the drastic escalation in tensions from Washington since the pandemic began is causally related to domestic politics, especially the election in November.

Coinciding with Trump's dropping popularity was a series of actions his administration took against China after mid-July. They brought a broad sense of shock across the Chinese government over the pace, scope, severity, and strength of measures Washington pursued within a short period of time, including the end of preferential economic treatment of Hong Kong, the sanctions on Politburo member Chen Quanguo and Huawei employees, Secretary of State Pompeo's statement on China's unlawful claims in the South China Sea (SCS), the signing of the Uyghur Human Rights Act, the arms sales to Taiwan, the deployment of two aircraft carriers in the SCS, and potential sanctions on all members of the Chinese Communist Party.

The “freefall” of bilateral relations also created genuine concern within the Chinese security and military apparatus that the Trump administration might be aiming for “deliberate accidents” and “systematic escalation” with China in the region, followed by a strong desire to engage the U.S. in dialogues on “crisis management,” “crisis stability,” and “rules of engagement,” especially in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. An urgent question emerged as to what China could do to avoid a military showdown or an accident with the U.S.—in other words, how to de-escalate without “losing face.” For the sake of de-escalation, senior Chinese diplomats sent a series of signals to the U.S. to strike a conciliatory tone:

- On July 9, State Councilor/Foreign Minister Wang Yi promised in his statement at a U.S.-China think tank forum that “there is no change to China’s policy toward the U.S. and China still bears goodwill and sincerity to develop bilateral relations.”¹⁴ He hinted that China is ready for dialogue but would not make a proposal: “If the U.S. is willing, we can restore and restart dialogue mechanisms at any level, and at any time.” He also offered three proposals: 1) open all dialogue channels; 2) pursue cooperation on COVID-19; and 3) negotiate three lists: issues for cooperation, differences for dialogues, and conflicts to manage.
- On July 8, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng spoke at a virtual dialogue co-hosted by the Asia Society and Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs. Le disputed the “zero-sum” nature of U.S.-China competition, emphasizing that “the real enemy of the U.S. is not China but viruses and other non-traditional security threats.”¹⁵ He also reminded people of the profits the U.S. has made from China in the past four decades and demanded that the U.S. abandon the desire to change China, especially its political ideology. He called for “dialogue to manage differences” and “respect for each other’s core interests and concerns.”
- On July 3, former deputy chief of the Central Committee’s International Department, Zhou Li, published a widely circulated piece on the “six preparations China needs in light of the deterioration of the external environment.”¹⁶ He warned that there will be more punitive measures, unprecedented difficulties, and challenges from the U.S., and that China needs to soberly recognize the inevitability of decoupling. The piece is interpreted as a quasi-official recognition of the dire consequences, problems, and pushbacks China’s assertive policy has generated, especially on the U.S. front.

During the final six months of the Trump administration, a sense of hopelessness ran rampant in the Chinese policy community. Not only were people convinced of the irreversibility of great power competition, and the deterioration of U.S.-China relations, but the pessimistic conviction also remained solid regardless of the result of the November election. For the Chinese, the silver lining of a Biden administration is found in the anticipated different style of great power competition and how it will be implemented by Biden, but it is not found in the nature of the great power competition itself. Even if the Chinese tried to stabilize relations with the U.S. through an emphasis on and commitment to cooperation, the commitments would never be free of two caveats.

Caveat #1: Finger-pointing at the U.S. for All Problems

The first caveat lies in the Chinese assessment of the source of the tension. Indeed, without identifying the correct problem, a correct solution is out of the question. However, self-reflection is completely missing from the Chinese messages. Instead, all Chinese fingers are pointed at the U.S. for everything that has gone wrong. According to Wang Yi, “the current China policy of U.S. is based on unsubstantiated strategic misjudgment and is full of emotional venting and McCarthyist paranoia...The U.S. lacks confidence, open-mindedness, and tolerance, and is creating all kinds of ‘China threats’ leading to its self-fulfilling prophecy.” Similarly, Vice Foreign Minister Le has attributed the source of tension to the U.S. pettiness and dark mindset that “does not allow anyone to do better or be more competitive than the U.S.”¹⁷ He also attacked the U.S. for its “hysteria” and Machiavellian approaches to “beat its competitors down.”

Although Chinese interlocutors privately acknowledge the existence of self-criticism within China about its foreign policy mistakes, such reflections are certainly not shared with outsiders. More importantly, they do not appear to have generated any course correction within the Chinese foreign policy apparatus. The dominant, self-serving narrative remains that the current difficulties are all created by the U.S. due to its misunderstanding of China and its selfish calculations.

Caveat #2: Setting Perimeters for the U.S. Policy

Because the Chinese blame the U.S. for the freefall of bilateral relations, their proposals are targeted at how to set boundaries for the U.S. policy to prevent further “freefalls.” The Chinese argue that more dialogues are needed to “correct American bias and prejudice,” while historically, dialogue has been used adeptly by Beijing to “delay and conquer.” It is particularly important to understand the Chinese intent to draw the focus back to establishing the three “lists” as emphasized by Wang Yi: a list of issues for cooperation, of differences to discuss, and of conflict issues to manage. In the Chinese calculation, a long list of cooperation items could enhance the value of China to the U.S. and therefore increase the cost of confrontation—in the vein of “if the U.S. antagonizes China, China will not cooperate on North Korea, climate change, or COVID-19.

The second list—a list of differences for dialogue—is aimed at minimizing U.S. freedom of action while maximizing Chinese freedom of action because China can use dialogue to negotiate and delay actions in areas such as the Belt and Road and South China Sea. The third list—a list of conflict issues that the two sides should manage—is literally aimed at drawing redlines for the U.S. As Le Yucheng put it, “China will absolutely not allow any external interference on core interest issues including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet.”¹⁸ In other words, in the Chinese view, the issue that needs management is not U.S. dissenting views but how to prevent and isolate U.S. actions.

Into the Biden Era

Some minority Chinese policy wonks might have preferred another term served by Trump because of the damage the United States inflicted upon itself under Trump. But they certainly do not represent the broad consensus of the policy community in China. As argued before, the Chinese still believe that they are the sheer winner of the COVID-19

pandemic vis-à-vis the United States. However, exhausted by Trump's unexpected, extreme moves and his willingness to trash bilateral relations for domestic politics, by the November election, China was more than eager to move on to a new chapter of bilateral relations.

As an overarching theme, the Chinese expect a Biden presidency to stabilize U.S.-China relations. First and foremost, China sees Biden as a traditional, experienced, and rule-abiding career statesman. He is expected to be predictable and to follow the basic "rules of engagement" in international relations. Based on his experience as vice president and the composition of his foreign policy team, the Chinese believe that Biden will most likely be a "restorationist" of traditions of neoliberalism, multilateralism, and globalism that were prevalent in Obama's foreign policy. In addition, because of the Democrats' conviction and commitment to international norms, Biden is expected to respect the rules, norms, alliances, the international system. Therefore, Biden's foreign policy style and approaches will be vastly different from Trump's despite the bipartisan consensus on China as a threat.

China sees Biden returning to the "liberal hegemonism" tradition of U.S. foreign policy as supported by the establishment/elites, and strengthening U.S. global leadership by promoting liberalism in international relations. This is particularly true for the relations between the U.S. and international organizations, including multilateral trade mechanisms such as the TPP and WTO. While Trump followed a strategy of "exit" and the U.S. has withdrawn from multiple international organizations, the Chinese believe that Biden is inclined to return, including his return to the Paris Agreement and WHO. These, in the Chinese view, will refocus the competition back to norms and influence, rather than the current overwhelming focus on trade and hard national power.

Biden's priority issues will also be different from Trump's. While trade was Trump's top priority and the most contentious issue with China since 2017, Biden is expected to have a long list of issues for which China's cooperation is not optional for the U.S., such as climate change, North Korea, Iran, and global governance. Once these issues reemerge as priorities, they will offer China more leverage to counter or balance U.S. policies in other arenas through "issue linkage."

The Chinese expect Biden's policy to be more traditional, but they also recognize that a more traditional Biden will bring back challenges to China that Trump had more or less ignored. Biden is expected to rely on a coalition-based, collective approach to counter the China threat; while Trump had allowed China to expand and deepen its influence in the East Asia region, Biden is expected to push China back. Repairing ties with allies and reasserting U.S. alliances could deepen China's isolation in the region and beyond. As a result, China could face an expanding anti-China coalition, not only in military terms, but also in terms of politics, economics, regional frameworks, and rules and norms. In addition, Biden is expected to resume the Democratic Party's longstanding criticism of China's domestic politics and human rights, an area that Trump mostly avoided. These concerns do not negate the fact that China still sees Biden as a stabilizing figure, only that he will bring a different set of challenges than China had encountered in the past.

Simply put, the Chinese policy community is much more reassured by the "normalcy" of a Biden administration on a general level but is still worried that progress or improvement on specific issues may not happen quickly or happen at all. The Chinese expect much less heartburn than what was associated with Trump's drastic and dramatic disruptive policies.

For the traditional and conventional Chinese bureaucrats, turning U.S.-China relations into interactions with decency and normalcy at the core is what China needs most. In this sense, optimism prevails on the general level among Chinese foreign policy wonks, a sense of “no matter what happens, U.S.-China relations under Biden will not be worse than under Trump.”

However, the optimism is much less evident at the tactical level and on specific technical issues. The Chinese recognize that the election of Biden only changes the U.S. president but does not remove any of the friction points between the U.S. and China. In fact, although the hope is that the U.S. and China would use the first six months of the Biden administration to “reset” or “renormalize” their relationship, the more realistic expectation is that disruption will happen during the first half of 2021. And the expectation is that China under Xi will still have to react as he has in the past four years during the Trump administration.

The Alaska Meeting

The first day of the Alaska meeting has come as a surprise for many in both U.S. and China. Due to the result of the QUAD summit, the sanctions on senior Chinese officials due to Hong Kong, and the harsh tone on China from the U.S.-Japan joint statement after their 2+2, Beijing had made a serious effort to manage the expectations about the meeting before March 18 itself. However, the undiplomatic and confrontational spat during the first meeting still brought people’s perception of U.S.-China relations to a new low. One Chinese expert commented privately: “Anchorage has offered no anchor, only rage.”

China’s Pre-Alaska Expectation Management

One week before the meeting in Alaska, the foreign policy community in Beijing had painted a rather rosy picture of the upcoming “senior-level strategic dialogue” and the anticipated “deal-making.” Part of it was due to the surprise nature of the meeting announcement (the meeting was announced only one week before it happened). And the Chinese are inclined to believe that the secret negotiation must have gone on for a while beforehand. Part of it was the wishful thinking among Chinese analysts that the Biden team is practical and cooperation is important, hence imminent.

But since the meeting announcement, events rapidly declined in the Chinese eyes. The QUAD summit, especially its announcement on the quadrilateral cooperation on vaccine production and supply chain management, is bad news for China’s desired vaccine cooperation with the U.S. The joint statement from the U.S.-Japan 2+2 is even more sobering for China—with Japan publicly adopting perhaps the most critical tone on China in recent years. Furthermore, the sanctions on 24 Chinese officials due to the crackdown in Hong Kong on March 17 showed the Chinese that the U.S. is not offering any leniency or saving China any face, knowing that the meeting in Alaska is only two days away. In addition, the State Department denied any plan for the Alaska meeting to discuss a Xi-Biden virtual meeting during the climate change summit next month. These all put China in an awkward position given its previous positive “spin” on the Alaska meeting.

Senior diplomats and scholars had been mobilized since March 16 to manage expectations about the meeting. Two days before the meeting, Ambassador Cui Tiankai stated that “China doesn’t have high expectations or illusions about this dialogue” and he only hopes the meeting will be “the starting point to begin an honest, constructive and rational process of dialogue and communications.” By March 18, almost all public commentaries by Chinese experts had focused on the prospect that the meeting may not render many positive messages, and on the prediction that the battle with the U.S. will be protracted.

Who Violated Diplomatic Protocol?

The spat during the first session of the Alaska meeting is centered on the profound conflict of the American and Chinese positions. However, the issue of “diplomatic protocol” played a significant role in exacerbating the interaction. The two sides had agreed to two-minutes initial remarks, which evidently was violated by all four speakers, but to vastly different degrees. According to the media’s counting, Blinken’s opening statement lasted for 2 minutes 27 seconds, Sullivan’s 2 minutes 17 seconds, Yang’s response 19 minutes 40 seconds, and Wang’s 4 minutes 9 seconds.¹⁹ The Chinese government launched ferocious attacks on the U.S. over the issue of diplomatic protocol for “severely exceeding the time allocated for their opening remarks,” neglecting the fact that U.S. speakers were fewer than 30 seconds overtime and Yang’s speech was ten times longer than what it was supposed to be.

The other two accusations Beijing launched against the U.S. on diplomatic protocol were focused on the substance. The first, according to the Foreign Ministry, is “the wanton attack on Chinese domestic and foreign policy,” which was neither “good host manners” nor “proper diplomatic etiquette.”²⁰ The second accusation, based on Wang Yi’s remarks, is that the U.S. sanctions on Chinese officials related to Hong Kong “at the same time the Chinese delegation was leaving for Alaska,” was “not a normal way to treat guests.”²¹ The Chinese frustration was evidently not just about the U.S. exceeding the time limit.

China’s Spin on the Events Domestically

Although the first meeting in Alaska was not particularly fruitful, the second meeting, according to Wang Yi’s comments afterwards, still covered many regional issues. This raises some hope that some positive messages could still be in the cards.

However, in the Chinese domestic narrative, the confrontation between the U.S. and China in Alaska has been portrayed as the victory of China’s rise and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation with the goal to stoke nationalism and patriotism. Quotes from Yang and Wang’s long remarks were instantly promoted on Chinese social media, with examples such as, “most countries in the world do not recognize American values as global values” and “U.S. has no position to be condescending when speaking to China as the Chinese people never buy it.”²² *China Daily* even made the quotes into posters and social media handles for WeChat. Comparisons are made between the negotiation of the Boxer Protocol in 1901 and the Alaska meeting in 2021 to illustrate how “the realpolitik world has not changed but

China's status has."²³ In order to demonstrate how China has surpassed the U.S. in moral superiority and world leadership, *China Youth Daily* created a poster that compares Yang's claim that "China follows the value of the whole of mankind including peace, development, fairness, justice, freedom and democracy"²⁴ with Sullivan's statement that "the priority of the U.S. is to ensure that our approach with the world and China will benefit the American people."²⁵ The angle is that now China represents the world while the U.S. is selfishly caring only about itself.

Judging by the reaction on social media, Beijing's spin has been largely successful in China. The indoctrination among Chinese people about the "100 years of humiliation" through patriotic education makes the comparison between 1901 and 2021 particularly appealing to the Chinese audience.

Outlook on U.S.-China Relations

If anything, the Alaska meeting set the expectations straight for both the U.S. and China about each other and their bilateral relations. China came out of the meeting disillusioned about the Biden administration's China policy. Although it is still believed to be "more benevolent and less destructive" than Trump's China policy, Beijing is now focused on building its strength, both in terms of domestic development and foreign policy alignment, to counter what it perceives to be a U.S.-led coalition to counter China's rise. This means the political, security, and economic competition for influence and supremacy will only deepen in the years ahead, although its manifestation might be less disturbing or turbulent than what the world witnessed during the last two years of the Trump administration.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on geopolitics in the region and globally. It has changed the perception and trajectory of Chinese foreign policy and grand strategy. Instead of making China humbler and pursuing a policy of frugality and retrenchment, the pandemic has further convinced China of the inevitability and the acceleration of the changing power equilibrium between the U.S. and China. For Beijing, the pandemic expedited the U.S.'s relative decline vis-à-vis China's continued rise, the relative decline of the Global North versus the Global South, and the relative decline of the West versus the East. Through the pandemic, China has become more confident of the concept of the "profound changes unseen in a century" and of the superiority of its material strength and governance effectiveness, and the desirability of the international order that China tries to pursue: the community of common destiny for mankind.

The growing Chinese confidence inevitably poses tremendous challenges to the policy of the United States, as well as of other countries in the region. Not only does China understand that U.S.-China relations cannot return to their previous stage, but it also does not want to return to the status quo ante. The power equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific is shifting, and, at least between the U.S. and China, the change is not necessarily in Washington's favor. Therefore, for China, the priority is to project as much stability as possible to avoid a confrontation with the U.S. but at the same time utilize its economic and political advantages to consolidate and accelerate the trend that Beijing sees as already set into motion.

The pandemic may not have changed what had already been in place in the shifting dynamics in regional politics and international relations. But it certainly has reinforced and potentially exacerbated those trends that are possibly tremendously destabilizing. Regional politics has not exited the tunnel into a more promising future. How to manage and counter the rise of China has become more difficult than ever before.

Endnotes

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