

# China's Strategic Objectives in a Post COVID-19 World

By Benjamin Tze Ern HO<sup>1</sup>

On 1 October 2019, the People's Republic of China (PRC) celebrated its 70th birthday, thus marking another important landmark of modern China under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In commemorating the event, the Chinese government held a grand military parade with some 15,000 troops, more than 160 aircraft, and 580 active weapon systems during the event, including the latest generation nuclear missile systems such as the Dongfeng-41 mobile intercontinental ballistic missile. As the *South China Morning Post* reported, citing one insider, "the parade, which aims to showcase President Xi's achievement in military modernization and reforms in both hardware and software will carry a lot of political meaning."<sup>2</sup> Given ongoing social protests in Hong Kong and problems in western societies at that time (such as Brexit talks in the UK and political opposition to President Trump in the United States) the contrast could not have been more stark: *A powerful and prosperous China celebrates its international success while many western societies fail and flounder amidst their own domestic problems.*

Nine months on (as of writing), it would seem that the COVID-19 pandemic has levelled the international mood as far as countries are able to claim unmitigated political success. Even China, despite some success in containing the virus, was careful about portraying a celebratory front in its battle against the virus. Speaking at the National People's Congress, Premier Li Keqiang noted that, "the epidemic has not yet come to an end, while the tasks we face in promoting development are immense."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the fact that the Chinese government had spared no efforts to narrate its road to success in curbing the virus is particularly telling: *China seeks to demonstrate that its brand of governance is superior to that of the West, and consequently, it deserves a greater say in and political influence over international affairs.*

From this vantage point, I argue that a post COVID-19 global landscape is likely to witness greater intransigence, or *hardening* of Beijing's political resolve in pursuing its national interests. In addition, given the backlash and criticism it received from some western countries (particularly the United States) over its handling of the pandemic, it has generated a siege mentality among Chinese leaders, many of whom perceive an existential struggle between Beijing and Washington with the latter seen as attempting to thwart China's rise and inhibit its international influence. This article seeks to further expand on these political motifs and

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how they reflect China's strategic objectives over the past six years under the leadership of President Xi. Indeed, the issue of what the PRC's long-term intentions are, and elements of its grand strategy are crucial for scholars and policymakers seeking to make sense of China's international behavior. To this end, a number of important works have emerged in the past few years providing useful clues as to what Beijing's ultimate objectives might be.<sup>4</sup> This article seeks to complement the existing works by incorporating the events of the COVID-19 pandemic so as to obtain a more realistic appraisal of China. This is important for two main reasons; one, prior to COVID-19, it can be said that China under President Xi had not faced a crisis of such magnitude and it was thus difficult to assess the extent to which the CCP could claim political legitimacy by virtue of its ability to govern China. Secondly, given worsening Sino-U.S. relations (possibly at their historical lowest since the Mao-Nixon rapprochement in 1972), the stakes for Beijing's international diplomacy and claim to international political leadership could not have been greater. As Harvard's Graham Allison observed recently, Sino-U.S. relations look set to worsen and the endgame is a "lose-lose" situation.<sup>5</sup> With this backdrop, will China's strategic objectives evince greater change or continuity with the past? How will the COVID-19 pandemic and worsening relations with the United States affect China's foreign policy calculations, and more broadly, its role and place in the world? And what kind of changes will we see within China even as the CCP continues to insist that its brand of governance remains superior to western liberal democracy?

The rest of this article will proceed as follows; I will examine five major themes that have constituted important strategic objectives under President Xi. I will then attempt to relate these objectives to the events of COVID-19 and the worsening relationship with the United States. As the article will show, the COVID-19 pandemic has emboldened the

Chinese government to consider a model of "liberalism abroad and illiberalism at home" as a means to succeed in world politics. Such an approach allows the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to both ensure that it remains unchallenged politically at home, while at the same time proffering it the opportunity to promote a foreign policy agenda which allows it to maximize its international gains while minimizing domestic risks. Finally, I conclude that these strategic imperatives pursued by the Chinese government—if dogmatically maintained—are likely to exacerbate tensions not just between China and the United States, but also between China and countries within its neighborhood, particularly in East and Southeast Asia.

## Chinese Strategic Objectives Under Xi Jinping

### *Ensuring CCP Legitimacy*

The first, and possibly the most crucial, is the need to ensure the legitimacy of the CCP to rule China. Given Chinese leaders' criticism of western democratic systems and the problems they generate, it is incumbent upon Beijing to demonstrate that its single party, authoritarian approach to governance is superior to the West. This is easier said than done given that the party consists of more than 80 million members who are far from monolithic in their ideological worldviews and political affiliations. While Xi's centralization of political power over the last few years has greatly reduced the likelihood of political opponents challenging him for power, factional politics continue to be a mainstay of the CCP's politics, and represent a grave concern to the party.<sup>6</sup>

Given the opaque character of Chinese policymaking, it is difficult to assess the precise extent to which factions within the CCP have influenced present-day Chinese politics. Nevertheless, there are two issues worth watching; one, the views of Chinese elites towards President Trump; and two,

the amount of support for President Xi following the COVID-19 pandemic. The former relates to a key strategic aspect of Sino-U.S. relations, while the latter is intimately tied to domestic conditions such as economic growth, the availability of jobs, and the overall mood in the country.

According to a recent study by Yao Lin, many Chinese liberal intellectuals fervently idolize Donald Trump and embrace the alt-right ideologies that are espoused.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, many of these liberal intellectuals are deeply critical of the Party-state and are committed to advocating universal values and China's liberal democratization, themes which are not usually synonymous with Trump's brand of nationalistic, American-first hubristic politics.<sup>8</sup> As observed, the "traumatizing experience of Party-State totalitarianism propels Chinese liberals on an anti-CCP pilgrimage in search for sanitized and glorified imageries of western (especially American) political realities, which nurtures both their neoliberal affinity and their proclivity for a Trumpian metamorphosis."<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the problems in American (and more generally western) political life, the above study suggests a growing chorus of Chinese intellectuals who are disillusioned with China's political life and are looking to the West (even as an ideal) with which to generate solutions to the perceived problems in domestic life. While China's ongoing spat with the United States continues to generate hawkish voices from Beijing, including an aggressive Wolf Warrior diplomacy, it has also paradoxically resulted in a greater affinity for western values and ideals—seeing in them a panacea for the social maladies experienced at home.

Similarly, this growing domestic discontent has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the perceived mistakes made by the CCP in its bungling response during the initial outbreak. While large-scale randomized samples of citizens' sentiments are unavailable, there are several clues that suggest that all is not rosy with the CCP

internally. For instance, during the height of the virus outbreak in Wuhan, Premier Li Keqiang—instead of President Xi himself—was sent to lead a taskforce there. While Chinese public opinion over Xi's absence is difficult to gauge (given Chinese censorship), his absence was certainly notable. As Willy Lam puts it, "he has not visited places hard hit by the virus. This has been criticized in part because Xi claims to be the core of the leadership, the all-powerful leadership . . . and he doesn't have the guts to go the epidemic-stricken areas."<sup>10</sup>

From the above, I argue that at stake is Xi's personal reputation and his ability to rally the CCP around him to ensure the ongoing legitimacy of the Party to rule China. This can only be so if Chinese leaders are able to evince that its social policies and governance have the support of the majority of the Chinese people. Due to the absence of parliamentary style elections in China, this is difficult to ascertain; hence, material prosperity and economic growth remain central to legitimizing the CCP's political rule. To this end, any slowdown of the Chinese economy would pose a challenge to the mandate of the CCP. At the 13<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress this year, the Chinese government for the first time did not set a GDP target for the economy—a sign of the Chinese government's reading that the situation inside and outside China could get worse post COVID-19.

### *Widening the International Support Base*

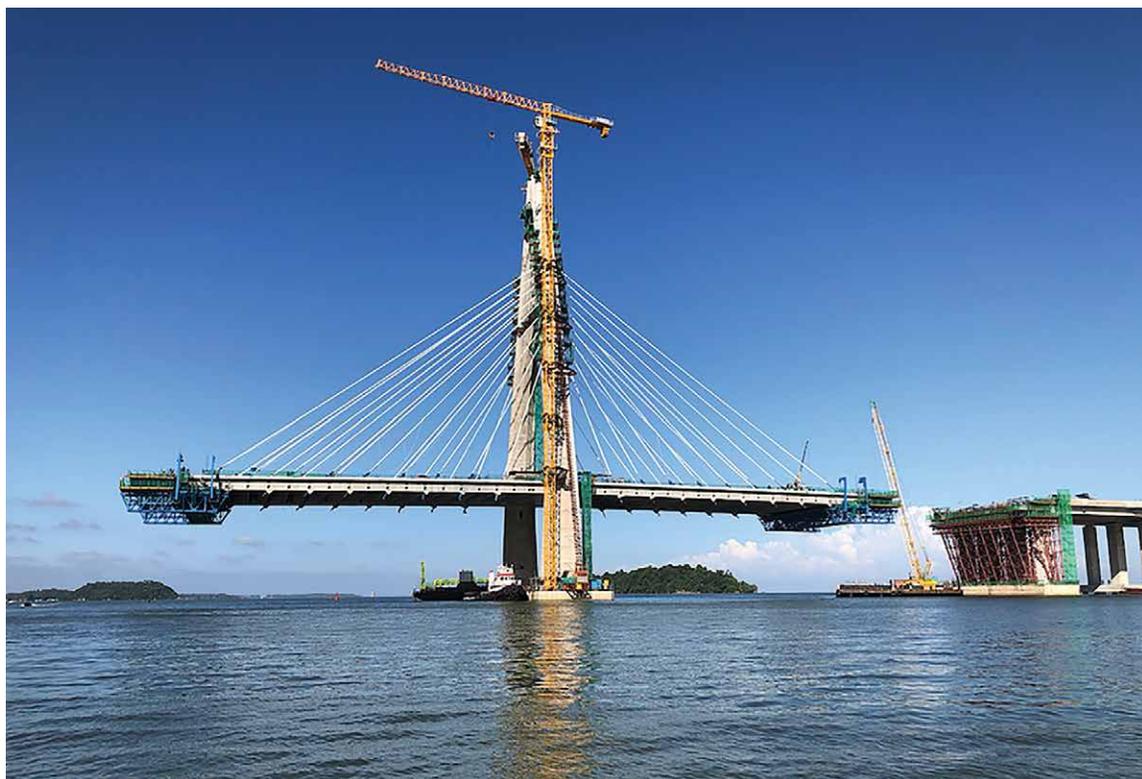
Under President Xi, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a central feature of Beijing's foreign policy. While a number of elements regarding the BRI remain unclear, particularly the economic viability and sustainability of BRI projects with other countries, one objective is certain; the BRI is conceived with the intention of widening China's international support base through economic statecraft.

In this respect some modest progress has been made. The first BRI forum in May 2017 saw 29 foreign heads of state and representatives from 130

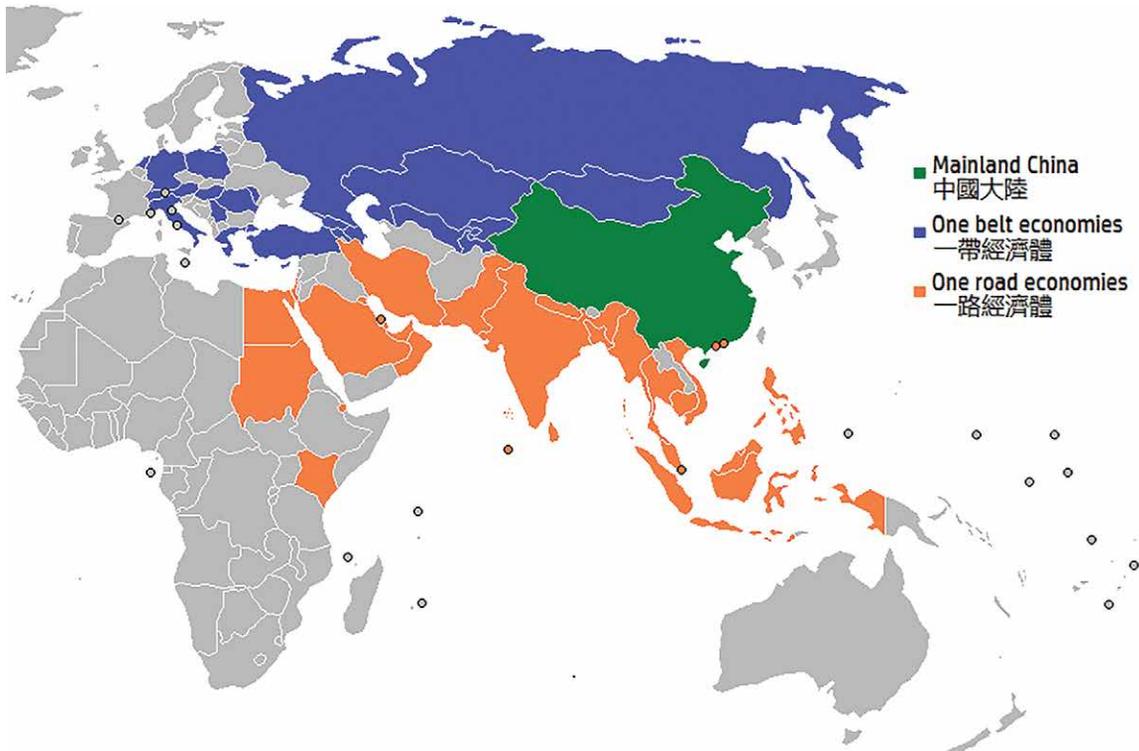
countries, while the second BRI forum in April 2019 saw an increase to 37 foreign heads of state and participation from more than 150 countries. What these numbers suggest is that China has been generally successful in using its economic statecraft to promote its political objectives. According to Baldwin, economic measures are particularly useful in helping states gain political influence for they are “likely to exert more pressure than either diplomacy or propaganda, and are less likely to evoke a violent response than military instruments.”<sup>11</sup> Seen this way, if we take economic relations between states—not as a dispassionate realm of economic activity (concerned purely with profit)—but as a derivative of wider geopolitical interests and calculations, then the political character of economic statecraft cannot be ignored.

In the case of China, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a grand strategy through

economic means;<sup>12</sup> hence, economic power is seen as a means of generating greater political influence among the countries Beijing seeks to win over into its camp. The goal of economic initiatives (like the BRI) is linked to how Chinese leaders seek to present and project Beijing’s worldview to others and to ultimately achieve China’s foreign policy and domestic goals. This “selling” of Beijing’s worldview is also closely linked to how Chinese soft power is being conceptualized and operationalized. While western iterations of soft power tend to emphasize the non-coercive aspect of soft power, and thus the stress on culture and values as instruments of soft power,<sup>13</sup> such a distinction as to whether economics ought to be seen as “hard” or “soft power” is less clear cut in China. According to one study, Chinese discourse concerning soft power is frequently expressed within its domestic context and towards



Part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the partially completed bridge at the Kota Batu end of the Temburong Bridge construction project in Brunei. (Peter L. Higgs)



The Belt and Road Initiative is a colossal economic trade route that is seen as a symbol of the economic dominance and ambitions of China and an example of economic superpower projection. (This file was derived from: Hong Kong Qatar Locator.png by Xxjkingdom)

domestic objectives, and also involves touting the economic success of China's development model.<sup>14</sup> Such a narrative suggests that in the Chinese mind, economic resources can be used as a source of soft power which allows China to evidence its political model and worldview to the outside world, thus rendering Beijing a model for others to emulate. This suggests that China would likely expend further efforts in the coming years to obtain greater international support for its global initiatives, especially among western countries that possess strong relations with the United States, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada.

This promotion of its international support base is also most clearly evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic when China—following outbreaks in Europe and other parts of the world—embarked on a “mask diplomacy” in an attempt to convey its

narrative of acting as a responsible global stakeholder.<sup>15</sup> Under these auspices, 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 several in the Middle East and Africa. According to Deputy Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui, Beijing had done so because “China empathizes and is willing to offer what we can to countries in need,” and that it also wants to share its experience of fighting the pandemic with the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup> This demonstration of solidarity I argue is done with the goal of generating greater international goodwill and to portray China as an exceptional country, and that its political governance is different and better than the West (particularly the United States).

### *Increase International Isolation of Taiwan*

The issue of the Republic of China (ROC-Taiwan) remains a core national interest and one which no Chinese leader can be seen to make any compromise over. To this end, China—under President Xi—has been highly successful in the past few years. In 2013, Taiwan had official diplomatic relations with 22 UN member states: This number has now dwindled to 14 UN member states, with five losses coming in the past year, and two within a week in September (Solomon Islands and Kiribati). While most of these countries are small Pacific and Oceanic states and are not considered major political players internationally, their strategic locations in key maritime waters proffer Beijing increased opportunities to project international visibility while further eroding Taipei's international presence and voice.

In the coming years, it is likely that China will further intensify international pressure on Taiwan. Indeed the COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant cross-Straits dynamics suggesting that despite the Chinese government's formidable propaganda machinery, the ROC continues to present a considerable thorn in the flesh of the CCP's international branding and soft power stature. Given this backdrop of diplomatic competition, it was not surprising that both the PRC and ROC governments have been highly sensitive to each other's political maneuvers during the pandemic. This was particularly so given Taipei's considerable efforts and success in combating the virus resulting in international praise and accolades which were sharply contrasted with Beijing's early problems and subsequent criticism by a number of western countries (especially the United States). This "diplomatic tug of war"—as one study puts it—pitches both the PRC and ROC in a tussle for recognition as the representative state of "China" in international society.<sup>17</sup> As such, one might argue that both governments are involved in a "one-up game" of political brinkmanship, each trying to outdo the other in procuring

international social capital and the moral high ground to be recognized as a responsible stakeholder. There are however, some subtle differences in each countries' diplomatic messaging, as evinced by their subsequent mask diplomacy.

In early April the Chinese government offered face masks to Chinese citizens living or working in Singapore, in part to assuage concerns among its citizens there as infections in the city-state witnessed a sharp spike. This was a highly unusual move given that only Chinese citizens were given face masks (as the masks were given out at the Chinese Embassy) and the Chinese Embassy had also activated a number of its organizational contacts in Singapore to help with the mask outreach.<sup>18</sup> In addition, China's Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong also visited institutions with a high enrollment of Chinese students, including both secondary and tertiary schools. Given the lack of local reporting and the absence of official participation (on the Singaporean side), one can assume that these actions were done in a private capacity (with the tacit acknowledgement of and permission from the Singapore authorities). Shortly after this, Taiwan donated some 100,000 masks to Singapore through its Red Cross as part of Taiwan's Foreign Affairs Ministry initiative to donate 10 million masks worldwide to countries affected by the pandemic. Unlike Beijing's masks, Taipei's donation was not targeted only at its own citizens but at the broader population.<sup>19</sup> While such a donation was not part of any official diplomatic arrangements, the fact that the Prime Minister's wife expressed her gratitude to Taiwan on social media suggested that such a move was not purely a private matter, but that it had also received acknowledgement at the highest levels, even though it was not carried by the local mainstream media.<sup>20</sup> Two weeks later, China donated 600,000 masks to Singapore, an event which had representatives from both the diplomatic and political communities present.<sup>21</sup>

From the above events, I argue that the health pandemic has generated an international competition “to do good” between the PRC and ROC governments. In the case of China however, there exists a more “nationalistic” character to its deeds in which the needs of “Chinese citizens” were accorded greater emphasis and importance compared to other citizens, whereas the Taiwanese government offered its international aid within a more universal, less-selective framework.

How is this significant, and are we reading too much into such diplomatic gestures? The answer is both yes and no. To be fair, given the widespread presence of Chinese citizens it was natural that the Chinese government extended its diplomatic support to them, much in the same way many countries worldwide activated repatriation flights for their citizens during the early stages of the outbreak. But what was notable about the mask diplomacy was its emphasis on “us-them” in its initial outreach, and that Chinese citizens ought to be accorded “special privileges” or were entitled to certain benefits that go beyond what ordinary citizens in their host countries receive. This runs against diplomatic protocol (especially if a country’s ambassador is involved) and is suggestive of a broader Chinese attempt to generate influence beyond traditional diplomatic channels.<sup>22</sup> From this, it can be construed that China’s international “good deeds” are framed with a more narrow nationalistic objective in mind—a sharp contrast to the paradigm of “not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore these actions are trained predominantly for a domestic audience, more so than the ROC, especially given the fact that many Chinese people—as observed by Singapore’s Kausikan—“understood their leaders had bungled the initial response to the outbreak in Wuhan [and] that the people bore the brunt of the mistakes and the drastic responses needed to recover from them.” Furthermore, “tightened censorship and the laudatory tone describing President Xi Jinping’s role in the

people’s struggle against COVID-19 suggests that the CCP is still insecure that it has put its mistakes to rest.”<sup>24</sup> To this end, I argue that the diplomatic efforts made by the Chinese government to showcase its contributions overseas are reflective of the attempt by the CCP to reframe the domestic narrative of the outbreak and to emphasize the Chinese state’s sparing no efforts to protect the well-being of its citizens.

### *Negate U.S. Influence in East Asia*

In the minds of many Chinese leaders and political observers, the presence of the United States in East Asia remains the biggest obstacle to China’s future prosperity and ability to project power regionally and internationally. According to Aaron Friedberg, the ultimate aim of Chinese policymakers is to win without fighting and to displace the United States as the leading power in Asia while avoiding direct confrontation.<sup>25</sup> Indeed it has been pointed out that part of China’s assertive international behavior is due in part as a result of the United States’ “pivot to Asia” strategy begun during the Obama administration, which in the eyes of Chinese observers represents a fundamental decision by Washington policymakers to contain China in order to preserve U.S. international primacy and global leadership.<sup>26</sup> Likewise the idea of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” is also viewed by the Chinese as a means to contain China’s development and ensure American international dominance.<sup>27</sup> Indeed Chinese paranoia towards the United States has intensified over the past five years, particularly following the 2017 publication of the National Security Strategy of the United States and the 2018 National Defense Strategy, both of which singled out China as America’s primary strategic competitor. As a response the 2019 Chinese White Paper summarized the overall character of the U.S. defense efforts by declaring that;

International strategic competition is on the rise. The US has adjusted its national security and defense strategies, and

adopted unilateral policies. It has provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability. NATO has continued its enlargement, stepped up military deployment in Central and Eastern Europe, and conducted frequent military exercises.<sup>28</sup>

From the above, China perceives a post COVID-19 world as one which will witness a shift in international power away from the West (and the United States) to Asia, and in which China is well-placed to assume a prominent position. To be certain this idea was already in circulation among Chinese policy circles, given President Xi's exhortation in 2014 of an "Asia for Asians" security cooperation structure,<sup>29</sup> and popular iterations by a number of global public intellectuals, such as Hugh White's *The China Choice* (2013), and more notably former Singapore diplomat Kishore Mahbubani's books *Has the West Lost It* (2018) and *Has China Won* (2020). What all these works hint at—in practice—is that leaders and policymakers should be prepared to confront a new international reality wherein American primacy is substantially diminished and China's influence increased. As such, it is likely that China would continue to take steps, militarily, economically and politically to further erode American presence in East Asia and Southeast Asia. All these would have significant repercussions for countries in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia where member states have traditionally practiced strategic hedging as a middle ground to navigate the complexities of great power competition between China and the United States. As observed by one Malaysian analyst of China's regional actions, "indeed, China's increasingly multifaceted maritime opportunism and coercive

presence in the disputed waters (of the South China Sea), even during the coronavirus crisis, has further deepened the weaker states' suspicions of its long-term intentions. Its increasing use of coercive means to prevent and obstruct the claimant countries' oil and gas exploration activities, together with the lack of progress on the COC (Code of Conduct) after years-long talks, further frustrated the smaller states in the region."<sup>30</sup> In other words, China's current course of actions is likely to aggravate smaller countries in Southeast Asia, a number of which are likely to pursue other institutional mechanisms (with or without the United States) to safeguard their interests that are seen to be threatened by a more assertive Chinese posture.

### *Global Rules and International Order*

It is generally perceived by Chinese leaders and political observers that the rules of the international order were made so as to preserve the interests of the West.<sup>31</sup> Given the ongoing and lively debate among western scholars over the sustainability and longevity of the existing liberal global order,<sup>32</sup> the search for alternative arrangements and theoretical frameworks to account for changes in the international system has been an intellectual holy grail of sorts for international relations scholars, both in and outside the West.<sup>33</sup>

From this vantage point, China is seen as being the flag-bearer of such a new system and one which possesses the deepest resources with which to challenge American dominance. Indeed, China's presence is ubiquitous in most if not all major global institutions and forums and Chinese representatives are now far more vocal in stating and arguing Chinese demands and interests where they arise. Furthermore, as exemplified by President Xi's proclamation of the Chinese dream and his vision of the rejuvenation of China, a far more confident China (as compared to the past) is now being portrayed on the international stage.

As such, it is likely that we will see in the coming years greater efforts by Chinese leaders and policymakers to shape international discourse about the overall distribution of global power and the rules of international order, including more assertive behavior in its foreign policy. As observed by a number of international scholars, the past decade has witnessed considerable Chinese intransigence on what it deems its core national interests, particularly in matters relating to territorial sovereignty as well as having greater say regarding the global order.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi describes China's global role as one of being a "participant, facilitator and contributor,"<sup>35</sup> while Yan Xuetong writes of China as moving "from keeping a low profile to striving for achievement."<sup>36</sup>

In a study of the Chinese vision of international order, Wu Xinbo suggests that what China aspires to is a liberal partnership order including emphasizing a series of ideas such as openness, inclusiveness, cooperation, diversity, equality, multilateral institutions and rules.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, these ideas suggested by Wu are precisely the same characteristics that are often held up to be an indicator of a liberal state. If so, it would seem that China, at least where *its foreign policy is concerned, seeks to affiliate itself with patterns of international liberalism while retaining an illiberal edge to its domestic governance.*<sup>38</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic will have further convinced the Chinese government that "liberalism abroad and illiberalism at home" is the means to success in international politics. Put in practical terms, this would mean that the Chinese government is likely to express enthusiasm for international initiatives and global actions so long as these are not seen to impinge directly on its domestic front behind which it seeks to exercise absolute sovereignty. This is seen as a win-win situation for it allows the Chinese government the opportunity to obtain skills and the technical know-how to further strengthen its domestic governance while at the same time

ensuring that it is able to limit external threats to its political rule and to demonize those it views as hostile threats. Indeed, China's criticism of the United States during the pandemic includes a not-too-subtle dig at the American political system as a failure for its inability to control the virus spread within the United States, and consequently to be blamed for the worldwide explosion of the virus transmission. In a May 2020 *Global Times* article, it was said that, "Washington is widely believed to have failed its own people and the world as the country has about 4 percent of the global population, but now accounts for one-third of all cases worldwide and nearly 30 percent of the overall death toll."<sup>39</sup> This scapegoating of the United States reflects a popular mindset at work in Chinese political circles, that the *West is culpable for the problems of the world*, while China—notwithstanding its own domestic problems—is attempting to do good and thus ought to be acknowledged by the world as such.

## Conclusion

As of writing, many scholars are raising the specter of what a post COVID-19 future will be like. Related to this is the question of China's global influence and the extent to which the pandemic has amplified or diminished Beijing's international standing. As this article has argued, these five objectives—constituting core elements of China's grand strategy—are likely to be pursued, and with greater determination particularly given the sense of crisis engendered within the CCP as a result of the global pandemic. To this end, I argue that out of the above five objectives, it is likely that the Chinese government will be most sensitive to those which it considers as challenging its domestic stability and political legitimacy. The centrality of the CCP must remain paramount and any attempt to challenge or modify this (be it from domestic sources or from outside China) will result in a strong Chinese political response. At the same time, given the challenges



Taipei skyline view in 2020. The global pandemic is likely to harden Beijing's positions on matters of party legitimacy and national sovereignty, such as over Taiwan. (Credit: 毛貓大少爺 from Taipei, Taiwan)

faced by many western countries (in particular the United States) during the ongoing pandemic, the possibility of shifting postures towards China in a post-pandemic world (when that happens) cannot be ruled out. As such, one might argue that the Chinese government might adjust its policies—so long as they do not impinge on its domestic control—in response to how other countries react.

As recent examples of China's wolf diplomacy have illustrated, China's political leaders and the foreign policy community perceive a heightened western united front to undermine China's political system and constrain Beijing's rise. As a result, over the next one to three years—barring any political upheaval within the CCP—we are likely to see a

hardening of Beijing's resolve in its international behavior and the development of a siege mentality in response to the West. This would result in greater assertiveness in China's international posture, particularly in issues that it considers as core interests, such as territorial matters and the CCP's political rule. Already the Chinese government has demonstrated its willingness to sustain its diplomatic offensive amidst the coronavirus pandemic, as evidenced by its decision to enact the Hong Kong national security law, clashing with India over border disputes, and challenging other claimant states in the South China Sea. Consequently, China is unlikely to acquiesce to any external threats and challenges posed by other countries. Any attempt to make some sort of

diplomatic bargain with Beijing will be on Chinese terms and from a Chinese position of strength. Will it succeed in doing so, and are we to expect countries to play exactly the way Beijing wants? In the author's view, this is not a given, particularly if the Chinese authoritarian system continues to be perceived as an unattractive model of political governance. Moreover, China's domestic institutions and internal political dynamics will also pose problems for the Chinese government, especially if the COVID-19 pandemic results in a sustained economic downturn, thus undermining the CCP's fragile social compact with its people.<sup>40</sup> All these would have significant repercussions for China's international and domestic politics. In a post COVID-19 era, as China continues to seek greater prestige, status, and influence on the world stage, it is also likely to be more paranoid, sensitive, and susceptible to external forces on its domestic front. PRISM

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The author can be contacted at [isteho@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isteho@ntu.edu.sg).

<sup>2</sup> Chan, Minnie. "China says national day military parade won't disappoint in scale or advanced weapons," South China Morning Post, September 24, 2019 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3030206/china-says-national-day-military-parade-wont-disappoint-scale> (retrieved June 10, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> "Full text: Premier Li's speech at the third session of the 13th NPC," <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-22/Full-text-Premier-Li-s-speech-at-the-third-session-of-the-13th-NPC-QHaP1FpB8k/index.html> (retrieved June 10, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Brown, Kerry. *China's Dream : the Culture of Chinese Communism and the Secret Sources of Its Power*. Cambridge: Polity, 2018; Shambaugh, David L. *China's Future*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016; Gore, Lance, and Zheng Yongnian. *China Entering the Xi Jinping Era*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, Yen Nee. "Endgame of U.S.-China rivalry is lose-lose, says Harvard professor", CNBC, May 26, 2020 <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/26/endgame-of-us-china-rivalry-is-lose-lose-says-harvard-professor.html> (retrieved June 10, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> For existing studies into Chinese factional politics, see Li, Cheng. *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era : Reassessing Collective Leadership* Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2016; Huang, Jing. *Factionalism in Chinese Communist Politics* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Lin, Yao. "Beaconism and the Trumpian Metamorphosis of Chinese Liberal Thinkers." *Journal of Contemporary China* (published May 18, 2020), DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2020.1766911.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Kuo, Lily. "Taking credit, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/04/blame-xi-jinping-absence-coronavirus-frontline-china-crisis>, (retrieved June 10, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Baldwin, David A. *Economic Statecraft*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.110.

<sup>12</sup> For existing discussions of Chinese grand strategy, see Friedberg, Aaron L. "Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy." *Survival* 60, no. 1 (2018): 7-40; Ma, Lian. «Thinking of China's Grand Strategy: Chinese Perspectives.» *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 13, no. 1 (2013): 155-68.

<sup>13</sup> This line of thought is most popularly captured in the ideas of Joseph Nye's discussion of soft power. See, Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Li, Mingjiang. "China Debates Soft Power." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 2 (2008): 287-308.

<sup>15</sup> For further elaboration of the idea of China as a responsible stakeholder, see, Hoo, Tiang Boon. *China's Global Identity: Considering the Responsibilities of Great Power*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Zhou, Laura. "Coronavirus: why China's mask diplomacy is raising concerns in the West." South China Morning Post, March 28, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3077333/coronavirus-why-chinas-mask-diplomacy-raising-concern-west> (retrieved May 12, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Hoo, Tiang Boon and Charles Andy. "China and Lilliputians: Small States in a Big Power's Evolving Foreign Policy." *Asian Security*, 13,2 (2017): 116-131, see 125.

<sup>18</sup> Sim, Dewey. "Coronavirus: Beijing offers Chinese nationals in Singapore face masks and support amid crisis." South China Morning Post, April 9, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3079055/coronavirus-beijing-offers-chinese-nationals-singapore> (retrieved May 18, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Everington, Keoni. Taiwan's donation of 100,000 masks arrive in Singapore. Taiwan News, April 23, 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3921380> (retrieved May 18, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> There was social media speculation over the Prime Minister's wife's real feelings towards Taiwan as evidenced by a cryptic social media post she had posted regarding the Taiwanese mask donation and whether the Taiwanese government had indeed restricted Singapore from obtaining masks from its supplier in Taiwan earlier.

<sup>21</sup> See, Yong, Clement. "Coronavirus: China donates 600,000 masks to Singapore." Straits Times, May 5, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/coronavirus-china-donates-600000-masks-to-singapore> (retrieved May 18, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> To this end, Singapore former top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan had highlighted against Beijing's attempts to impose its own state identity on Singapore including the use of information campaigns/operations to influence the Singapore identity. See Kausikan, Bilahari. *China is Messing with Your Mind*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Certainly a cynic could still insist that everything in international politics is rationally calculated and designed to serve a political purpose. I suppose this argument can be maintained and I do not disagree. However just because one might envisage a political objective in certain actions does not mean that all diplomatic actions are equally narrowly defined.

<sup>24</sup> Kausikan, Bilahari. "No, China will not get away with rewriting history." Nikkei Asian Review, March 30, 2020, <http://asia.nikkei.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/Opinion/No-China-will-not-get-away-with-rewriting-history> (retrieved May 19, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Friedberg, Aaron L. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Zheng, Yongnian, Gang Chen, and Liang Fook Lye. *China's Foreign Policy in 2012: Responding to the US Pivot to Asia and Territorial Disputes with Neighbours* Singapore: East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 2012; Zhou, Fangyin. "Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea policy." *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 869–890; Zhu, Zhiqun. *The US "Pivot" to Asia and Its Impact on US-China Relations* Singapore: East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Chen, Fangming. "Reviewing the Indo-Pacific strategy of the Trump administration". *International Strategic Studies* 132, no.1 (March 2019): 114-123; see also, He, Kai and Mingjiang Li. "Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US-China strategic competition, regional actors, and beyond." *International Affairs* Volume 96, Issue 1 (2020): 1-7.

<sup>28</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in a New Era*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2019, p.3.

<sup>29</sup> Jakobson, Linda. "Reflections From China on Xi Jinping's "Asia for Asians"." *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 219-23.

<sup>30</sup> Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. "Hedging in post-pandemic Asia: What, How, and Why?" *The Asan Forum*, June 6, 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/hedging-in-post-pandemic-asia-what-how-and-why/> (retrieved June 18, 2020). For recent discussions on China's relations with Southeast Asia neighbors, see also, Choong, William. "Smaller countries in the Asia-Pacific: Mired in the Middling Middle." *ISEAS Commentary* 2020/90, July 3, 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/smaller-countries-in-the-asia-pacific-mired-in-the-middling-middle/> (retrieved July 7, 2020); Marston, Hunter. "The COVID-19 pandemic pulls at the seams of Southeast Asia." *East Asia Forum*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/09/the-COVID-19-pandemic-pulls-at-the-seams-of-southeast-asia/> (retrieved July 7, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Deng, Yong. "Hegemon on the Offensive: Chinese Perspectives on U.S. Global Strategy." *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (September 22, 2001): 343–365; Yan, Xuetong. "Chinese values vs. liberalism: what ideology will shape the international normative order." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol 11, no.1, Spring (2018): 1-22.

<sup>32</sup> See, Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, and Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018 for two contrasting visions.

<sup>33</sup>Some examples include Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, Chih-yu Shih and Qin Yaqing. See, Acharya, Amitav. *The End of American World Order* Second edition. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018; Behera, Navnita Chadha., Amitav Acharya, and Barry Buzan. "Looking for 'the International' Beyond the West." *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, no. 5, July, 2010, 817-828; Shih, Chih-yu. *Sinicizing International Relations : Self, Civilization, and Intellectual Politics in Subaltern East Asia* First edition. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Qin, Yaqing. *A Relational Theory of World Politics* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

<sup>34</sup>Friedberg, Aaron L. *A Contest for Supremacy : China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011; Liao, Nien-Chung Chang. "The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?" *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 817-33; He, Kai, and Huiyun Feng. «Debating China's Assertiveness: Taking China's Power and Interests Seriously.» *International Politics* 49, no. 5 (2012): 633-44.

<sup>35</sup>Wang, Yi. "China's role in the global and regional order: participant, facilitator and contributor", speech at Fourth World Peace Forum, Beijing, June 27, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/2461\\_663310/t1276595.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1276595.shtml) (retrieved January 15, 2020).

<sup>36</sup>Yan, Xuetong. "From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7:2 (2014): 153-184.

<sup>37</sup>Wu, Xinbo. "China in Search of a Liberal Partnership International Order." *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 995-1018, see 1007.

<sup>38</sup>For a more in-depth analysis into liberal internationalism, see Beate, Jahn. "Liberal internationalism: historical trajectory and current prospects." *International Affairs* 94, 1 (2018): 43-61.

<sup>39</sup>Chen, Qingqing and Shumei Leng. "US owes world an explanation on COVID-19." *Global Times*, May 6, 2020 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1187598.shtml> (retrieved June 19, 2020).

<sup>40</sup>See for instance, Shirk, Susan L. *China Fragile Superpower*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.