

CORONAVIRUS, CHINA AND THE COURTING OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE CORONAVIRUS

- 1 OCT 2019: 70TH BIRTHDAY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
- A powerful and prosperous China celebrates its international success while many Western societies fail and flounder amidst domestic problems.
- Jan 2020 – present: Coronavirus pandemic (more than 400 million cases, 5.76 million deaths)
- China's response to the coronavirus: 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**.
- Greater intransigence (hardening) of Beijing's resolve to pursue its national interests; siege mentality among Chinese leaders (wolf warrior diplomacy).
- Significance of the pandemic: First truly global crisis China had faced under President Xi (test of CCP's mettle, political legitimacy); worsening Sino-U.S. relations (pandemic came in the worst possible time) "whatever can happen, will happen"
- How can China turn all these to its advantage?



Key questions:

- 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?

What this presentation will discuss: Five strategic objectives under President Xi.

Central argument: Chinese government to consider a model of "liberalism abroad and illiberalism at home" as a means of success to world politics.



CHINESE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES UNDER PRESIDENT XI

- Ensuring CCP legitimacy
- Widening international support base
- Negate US influence in East Asia
- Increase international isolation of Taiwan
- Global rules and international order

The CCP has used the coronavirus pandemic to press its advantage in all five areas, at least in the first 24 months of the crisis (up till Omicron surge).



A) ENSURING CCP LEGITIMACY

- US-China trade war have generated support for Trumpian policies among many Chinese liberal intellectuals.

“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“ (Lin, 2020)

- Early days of the coronavirus pandemic also resulted in considerable discontent towards the CCP (esp President Xi’s conspicuous absence from groundzero)

“[Xi] 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.” (Lam, in Kuo, 2020).

- ”The Party that failed: An insider breaks with Beijing“ (Cai Xia, Foreign Affairs, Jan/Feb 2021)

→ Brutal but brittle character of Chinese politics.

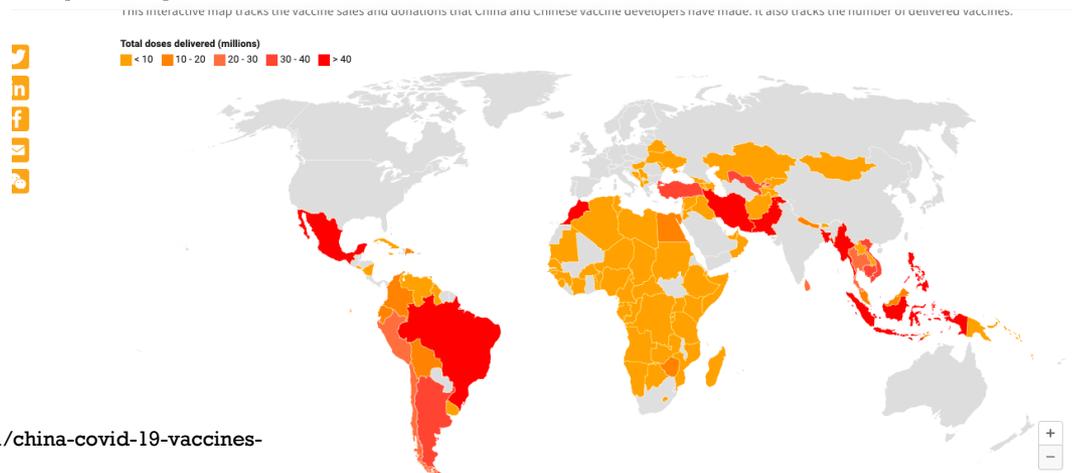


B) WIDENING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT BASE

- Belt and Road Initiative (Chinese economic statecraft)

“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.”

- Coronavirus pandemic (China’s mask and vaccine diplomacy), particularly in the developing world.



C) INCREASE INTN' ISOLATION OF TAIWAN

- In 2013, Taipei had diplomatic relations with 22 countries, now only 14.
- “diplomatic tug of war“ pitches both the PRC and ROC in a tussle for recognition as the representative state of “China” in international society (Hoo and Andy, 2017).
- Stonewalled Taiwan’s bid to participate in the WHO.
- Ongoing contest between Taipei and Beijing over keeping the pandemic in check within their respective borders (hence ongoing zero-covid strategy)
- 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.



D) NEGATE U.S. INFLUENCE IN EAST ASIA

- 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. (Friedberg 2011)

‘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’ (China Defence White Paper 2019)

- 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.
- Leaders and policymakers should be prepared to confront a new international reality wherein American primacy is substantially diminished and China’s influence increased.



E) GLOBAL RULES AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER

- China sees itself as a flag-bearer of a new alternative system, one that is untethered to the liberal international order.
- Greater efforts by China to shape international discourse about the rules of international order.
- China seeks to **affiliate itself with patterns of international liberalism while retaining an illiberal edge to its domestic governance**
- Beijing's frequently highlights the failings of the US and the West in their coronavirus response as vindication that its political system is superior. (Scapegoating of the US)



THE COURTING OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

- Why Southeast Asia?
- A) China's backyard. Geographical proximity (from Beijing) and distance (from the U.S.) allows China to challenge America's primacy (Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*; Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*)
- B) All small countries. China has inherent advantage especially in terms of its economic leverage (infrastructure, tourism etc)
- C) Less enamored with "values" or "human rights". Greater acceptance of Chinese political system. ASEAN's much vaunted rule of domestic non-interference gives China a free reign to conduct its domestic politics without any worry that it would be criticized by ASEAN.
- D) Viewed as more "pliable" due to neutrality principle.
- E) Intramural divisions make SEA susceptible to Chinese "divide and conquer" strategy.
- F) Presence of ethnic Chinese proffers Beijing to use cultural elements to generate political affinity.
- G) A ready-made market for Chinese products (for instance, Chinese vaccines).
- H) More aligned with Beijing's preferences when it comes to the Taiwan issue.



CONCLUSION

- Sense of crisis engendered within the CCP means that China would be even more paranoid and sensitive to external criticism
- Chinese policy makers perceive a United Western front to undermine China's political system and constrain its rise (AUKUS, Quad, Indo-Pacific strategy)
- China will continue to extend its influence operations throughout Southeast Asia (pro-West → neutral; neutral → pro-China; pro-China → anti-West)
- China's Achilles heel (unattractiveness of its domestic model. Growing negative perceptions among Southeast Asia elites, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Surveys, 2019-2021).
- Would China have to play catch-up with the West in a post-pandemic global system?



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