

The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Estrangement of U.S.-China Relations

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Abstract

This article assesses US-China relations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the US-China trade war created an atmosphere of bitterness and mistrust in bilateral relations and also prompted the Chinese leadership to seek to enhance its “discourse power” through “wolf warrior” diplomacy. This atmosphere hampered US-China communication and cooperation during the initial phase of the pandemic. The unleashing of “wolf warrior” diplomacy as the pandemic spread round the world, esp. the United States, has exacerbated US-China relations and served to accelerate the transition of US policy toward China from constructive engagement to strategic competition.

Key words; COVID-19, wolf warrior diplomacy, US-China trade war, US-China relations, pandemic psychology

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Pandemics such as Covid-19 not only cause sickness and death but also induce mega socioeconomic and psychological shocks. As the American Psychological Association states, the Covid-19 “coronavirus pandemic is an epidemiological and psychological crisis. The enormity of living in isolation, changes in our daily lives, job loss, financial hardship and grief over the death of loved ones has the potential to affect the mental health and well-being of many” (Dubey et al. 2020, 779-788). The pandemic has contributed to stress, anxiety, and even panic in individuals, conflict and abuse in some families, and intergroup tensions through avoidance, blame, stigmatization, and conflict over resources.

In examining the relationship between pandemics and public policy, of which foreign policy is a key dimension, much of the attention is on the harm to and protection of individuals, families, and social groups. Yet it is important to keep in mind that individuals performing their social roles during a pandemic, be they medical doctors, nurses, store clerks, teachers, diplomats, and leaders of communities and of nations, are also human beings with families, friends, and assorted other affiliations. They feel the psychological impact of a pandemic to different degrees, depending on their psychological traits, the balance of their resources, and their exposures to the varieties of stressors (Taylor 2019).

Psychologists have known that health threats and scarcity affect and skew individual decision making in particular ways (Ariely 2010; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013).¹ Less noted but of momentous importance is the impact of leaders’ health,

including psychological well-being, on political decision-making and politics (Greenstein 1987). The Covid-19 pandemic thus has the potential to affect the quality of decision making of all kinds from a psychological perspective while it causes disruptions to flows of people, information, goods, and services that need to be managed in inter-state interactions.

Imagine a leadership whose country is caught in a pandemic with its attendant psychological stresses, ranging from anxiety to depression among the affected population. The same stresses probably are felt by members of the policymaking elite, impacting the quality of policymaking. As different countries go through the pandemic asynchronously, so will the psychological impact of the pandemic be felt differently.

In this article, I review the major developments in and reorientation of US-China relations during the Covid-19 pandemic through mid-2020 by taking into consideration the pandemic's psychological impact. I begin by situating the state of US-China relations at the time of the epidemic outbreak in Wuhan in January 2020. My aim is to elucidate the tensions and animosities that had resulted from the protracted and emotionally charged US-China trade war that began in March 2018. Next, I review the shock the Wuhan outbreak brought to Chinese society and the Chinese leadership, and how the Chinese domestic response related to US-China relations during this initial phase of what would soon become a pandemic. I then describe how US-China relations turned sharply into a war over "discourse power." I pay special attention to the interactions of psychological factors—especially the

psychological impact of the pandemic coupled with the long-standing Chinese sense of *ressentiment* among policymakers and diplomats—that shaped China’s expulsion of American journalists and disinformation campaign. As the US leadership countered the Chinese actions while the pandemic spread in the United States, US-China relations were caught in a perfect storm. I sum up my findings in a concluding section.

The Pre-pandemic Context: Trade War, Nationalism, and *Ressentiment*

For decades, and especially in the aftermath of Tiananmen, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership has invoked the memories and trauma of national humiliation to inculcate sentiments of nationalism and strengthen popular support for the communist party (Zhao 2004). This tactic, coupled with an emphasis on maintaining stability, has served the Chinese party-state well as it brought China into the World Trade Organization to take advantage of the larger global market and enhance China’s economic development (Wang & Minzner 2015, 339; Yang 2017, 35-53). It is only in recent years that, having enjoyed four decades of strong economic, the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping has shifted the party discourse from an emphasis on national humiliation to calling for having pride and confidence in China and things Chinese. In his report to the Nineteenth CCP National Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping still made references to times thick and thin in the past, but he offered a vision of China as a “socialist modern strong country” that would be nothing if not a great power par excellence (Xi 2017).

Xi's rhetoric, under the rubric of the "China Dream," has resonated well with the Chinese public across all generations. In fact, in 2017, "Wolf Warrior II," a movie by Chinese director Wu Jing that showed a powerful China capable of reaching anywhere in the world to help Chinese, became the highest grossing Chinese movie ever. It offered Chinese viewers the experience of "a psychic transformation and reinvention of previous nationalist fantasies in the new context" (Shi and Liu 2019, 1-15). Taking inspiration from the Chinese government's much praised evacuation of Chinese from Libya in 2011, a popular line in the movie says that the Chinese passport "will bring you home from anywhere!" (Wolf Warrior II 2020). The movie ends with text from a (fictional) passport of the People's Republic of China:

Citizens of the People's Republic of China:

When you're in danger overseas.

Don't give up.

Remember.

Behind you.

There is a strong motherland (Wolf Warrior II 2020).

The "wolf warrior" nationalist sentiments both tapped into as well as helped stimulate the widespread cyber-nationalism that has shown itself in such phenomena as "angry youths" and "little pinks" (Fang and Repnikova 2018, 2162-2185; Liu 2019; Woods et al. 2017, 167-182). Yet growing patriotic spirit in an increasingly prosperous China has not driven out the trauma of "national humiliation" from the Chinese psyche. The mixing of the two in fact produces among many a desire for

revenge (Wang 2014). One prominent internet meme in Chinese cyberspace of the 2010s has been that “China is bound to have a fight” (必有一战 *biyou yizhan*) with Japan and other countries. There is as yet no serious study of this phenomenon but, it appears to me, that this rhetoric was especially popular among internet users in third- and fourth-tier cities.

Amid this growing confidence and rising nationalist sentiments, China warily watched the escalating attacks on China by the two leading presidential candidates in the 2016 US president race: Donald Trump the businessman, who believed that China had long been cheating on trade vs. former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who had a record of challenging China on human rights (Dollar and Wang 2016; Tatlow 2016). Following Trump’s victory, the Chinese leadership worked hard to woo him. During his Spring 2017 visit to Mar-a-Lago, Xi Jinping stated that “There are a thousand reasons to make the China-US relationship a success, and not a single reason to break it (Xi 2017).” In November 2017, Xi welcomed Trump to Beijing with extravagance and grandeur (Ma 2017).

Did China’s efforts help soften Trump’s stance on China? Even in hindsight, the answer is not obvious. Contrast the positions in the National Security Strategy reviews of the administrations of Barack Obama and Trump. The Obama administration’s last National Security Strategy (2015) stated: “The scope of our cooperation with China is unprecedented, even as we remain alert to China’s military modernization and reject any role for intimidation in resolving territorial disputes” (NSC 2015). In contrast, the Trump National Security Strategy paper, released a few

weeks after he returned from Beijing, explicitly stated that “Revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, ... use technology, propaganda, and coercion to shape a world antithetical to our interests and values” (NSC 2017). Three months later, in March 2018, Trump launched the US-China trade war.

As is well known, the US-China trade war has turned out to be an epic showdown between the world’s two largest economies (Davis and Wei 2020). For China’s leadership and especially Xi Jinping, Trump’s aggressive approach to trade following the spectacular visits of 2017 spelt betrayal and constituted an assault on China’s dignity that had to be defended. Chinese leaders also believed that China was much more capable of standing up to the United States than before and could leave behind the sense of humiliation and *ressentiment* that had bedeviled previous Chinese leaders. A Ministry of Commerce spokesman averred that China was not afraid of a trade war with the United States and “will fight for any long as necessary and is able to bear any cost” (CBN 2018).

Editorials in Chinese newspapers adopted some of the most flamboyant language to rally the public. A *Global Times* editorial in Chinese emphasized China’s confidence in making the United States feel the pain and “teach it a really hard lesson.” China might even go “in the direction of reducing the bilateral trade and investment to zero, ... until the Pacific Ocean is made a natural barrier to international trade” (Global Times Editorial 2018b). Another editorial echoed the sentiments of the top leadership: China is able to stand up to the United States and will “fight the Trump administration's trade aggression in the same way the country fought US troops

during the Korean War (1950-53). The Korean War caused China much [sic] losses but it forced the US to sign on an armistice, damaging Washington's strategic arrogance and winning many years of strategic respect for Beijing. We should fight today's trade war with the same strategic spirit that fears no sacrifice or loss . . . ” (Global Times Editorial 2018a).

In the latter half of 2018, however, Chinese regulators suddenly turned in favor of approving several dozen Trump and Ivanka Trump trademarks that had been applied for in 2016 (though Ivanka Trump had by then dissolved her namesake brand to focus on her government role) (Kinetz 2018). However, negotiations stalled and, by May 2019, the mood in Beijing had darkened. There were strenuous accusations of breach of faith on both sides. In China, the domestic media was mobilized to hurl vehement denunciations while the Chinese government also issued a special-purpose White Paper on the Chinese position blaming the United States (State Council Information Office 2019). To signal his determination to fight on and rally popular support, Xi Jinping made a visit to Jiangxi, where the Red Army was forced by Nationalist forces into a humiliating retreat that later became known as the Long March (Stevenson 2019). He also launched an intra-party campaign to bolster loyalty to the CCP and his leadership. Chinese social media amplified such messaging. Most people, including most of the elites, rallied around the national flag. It was rare to find critics like Ren Zhiqiang (a retired real estate entrepreneur now in detention for criticizing Xi's leadership) arguing that China should have softened its stance in the trade war because the United States was China's largest export market and thus largest

customer (DWnews 2018).

While the trade talks did resume and the two sides were able to reach the so-called Phase I deal, the bitterly contested talks hung over the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the PRC and the start of the new year, 2020. The signing ceremony for the Phase I deal was on January 15, 2020. Whereas Trump and Vice President Mike Pence had blue ties for the occasion, it was striking that every member of the Chinese delegation, including Vice Premier Liu He, wore black or nearly black ties. It's not clear whether members of the Chinese delegation coordinated on dress, but the color of the ties strongly suggests that it did not see the occasion as one of celebration.²

On the surface, President Trump repeatedly referred to President Xi as his friend and expressed his admiration throughout the trade war. The Chinese side reciprocated by refraining from attacking Trump by name, but doubtless little remained of their friendship. While China did mount a protracted fight against the United States, the terms of the Phase I deal were still largely about what China is required to do. The Phase I deal was thus a hard-fought truce.

Meanwhile, by making massive use of the official and unofficial media to mobilize the public, most of the Chinese public felt put upon by the United States by the time the Phase I deal was signed. Because the Trump administration had in the meantime tightened restrictions on dealing with Huawei—a symbol of China's technological prowess—many Chinese felt keenly that the US attack on Huawei and the detention of Meng Wanzhou, the CFO and a daughter of company founder Ren

Zhengfei, together with the trade war, were a patent effort by the world's greatest power to keep down their nation, the rising No. 2. Thus, in spite of the Phase I deal, the bitterness from the tough verbal battles of the trade war lingered. Distrust between the two sides was now deeper. Whereas prior to the trade war, the two sides had tried to find common ground such as on climate change rather than let the differences overwhelm the relationship, US-China relations were now defined by rivalries. For most Chinese, the sense of humiliation and *ressentiment* had not been left behind, after all.

Dealing with the Wuhan Epidemic Spread, the China Phase

Unbeknownst to most of those present at the US-China trade deal signing ceremony in Washington, D.C., the novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, first announced as an outbreak of atypical pneumonia by the Wuhan Health Commission at the end of December 2019, was already exploding. A week after the deal was signed, Wuhan and then the entire province of Hubei was put under lockdown. Unlike the spread of SARS in 2003, however, Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-Cov-2, has not been confined to a limited number of cities; it has become the worst global pandemic in a century.

In examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on US-China relations, we can mentally distinguish between two overlapping phases, one when the disease was still primarily in China, the other when the disease exploded in the United States.

In the first phase, partly because of the history of and lessons from dealing with SARS in 2002-2003, the outbreak in China had a mixed reaction in the United States: concern that it was SARS-like, relief that it was in China but not here and that China had already imposed a lockdown, and pride that America had the best research resources in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Even seasoned infectious disease specialists had difficulty recognizing it would spread outside China with such explosive and destructive effects. Some experts suffered from cognitive biases such as normalcy bias and exponential growth bias and were dismissive of the potential epidemic threat (Branswell 2020; Sieroń 2020).

Because of China's traumatic experience with SARS, Chinese medical professionals and many members of the general public are highly sensitive to any mention of SARS or SARS-like illnesses. In fact, in Chinese, SARS (非典 *feidian*) is shorthand for "atypical pneumonia." Hence as soon as the Wuhan Health Commission began to release information on the outbreak of atypical pneumonia in Wuhan, it attracted significant attention both in China and abroad, including on Twitter, as this author can testify. With the climactic lockdown of Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, leading Chinese and international publications sent their best to cover what was happening on the ground. There was also an enormous amount of information and images from private individuals and citizen journalists that circulated on social media (especially Weibo, WeChat, and Twitter). Among the key themes were overwhelmed hospitals as well as exhausted doctors and nurses who were short

of protective equipment such as N-95 face masks and gowns; patients and their families in fear as doctors on the frontline despaired trying to save the lives of acutely ill patients from a disease they knew little of and had to bootstrap in offering treatment; the cries for help from the infected (or their family members) as they could not be admitted to hospitals and thus continued to spread the virus; and crematoriums that were operating at capacity while families could not hold proper funeral services for their loved ones.

To put it simply, Wuhan and other cities in Hubei were able to cope with the enormous crises that were suddenly thrust onto them only with massive assistance. In February 2020, the Chinese national leadership replaced the party secretaries of Hubei and Wuhan, mobilized medical teams and supplies from around the country, including from the military, and helped build new care facilities or convert public stadiums or conference centers to house patients with light symptoms (State Council Information Office 2020). The Wuhan lockdown was finally lifted on April 6, after seventy-six days. As is well known, the draconian lockdown, followed by public health emergency measures adopted throughout the rest of China, allowed China to control the coronavirus epidemic within its borders.

Although the novel coronavirus epidemic was in the first instance a public health emergency requiring an urgent response, its handling, like SARS in 2003, was fundamentally political. Xi Jinping personally took leadership of and credit for the official response as he launched a multifaceted campaign that went far beyond public health. The Chinese propaganda system moved into overdrive to manage the message.

Numerous WeChat and Weibo users lost their accounts for sharing pictures and videos that showed the acute crisis that gripped Wuhan. The grief and anger among the public were palpable for all to see at the time of the death of Dr. Li Wenliang on February 6/7, 2020. For American medical professionals, public health specialists, and others with connections to China, especially Chinese-Americans, there was much exposure through social networks and social media to the shocking images and disturbing reports that came out of Wuhan/Hubei following the lockdown.

As hospitals in Wuhan and elsewhere appealed for much-needed supplies, especially protective equipment, American businesses, institutions, and many individuals rushed supplies to China (CNN 2020; Zhao 2020). In some ways, this conformed to the conventional wisdom about the US-China relationship that, in spite of its growing wealth and capabilities, China remained less developed and would look to the United States for help.

To the extent the novel coronavirus epidemic was primarily a Chinese domestic issue, its impact on and connection with US-China relations was limited and mostly businesslike. The US and Chinese CDCs—which had a decade-long collaborative relationship in the aftermath of SARS--were in close contact about the novel coronavirus beginning on January 3, 2020 (Bouey 2020). Nonetheless, China resisted US offers to send a group of specialists to help (Facher 2020). Because China has rarely been open to receiving foreign investigation/assistance teams in emergencies, it is hard to attribute the denial of the US requests to the US-China tensions that still lingered from the tough trade negotiations. We don't know whether escalating the

request to the presidential level would have made a difference, but the request was not made. Two American experts from the US CDC and NIH were later invited and able to join the WHO Joint Mission to China (February 16-24, 2020).³

For China's leaders with painful memories of SARS, a nightmarish situation in 2003 was the WHO travel advisories that suspended travel to major cities in China. In an indication of their underestimation of the epidemic's spread, the Chinese leadership worked hard to head off such a scenario in early 2020. By locking down Wuhan, they avoided an immediate decision by the WHO Emergency Committee on declaring the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). A week later, on January 30, that committee met again and made the PHEIC determination, but in its recommendation to all countries, it did "not recommend any travel or trade restriction" (WHO 2020).

In this context, the Chinese leadership and diplomatic community at the end of January, during the lunar New Year holidays, were annoyed but cooperative as the United States took the lead, beginning on January 29, 2020, in evacuating US consular staff and their families from Wuhan.⁴ The Chinese were even more annoyed when, in spite of the WHO recommendation, Trump announced the day after the WHO meeting that most foreign nationals who had been to China in the last two weeks would be banned from entry into the United States (Whitehouse.gov 2020).

Worse still, as China battered down from the second coronavirus crisis of the century, they heard from senior Trump administration officials what appeared to be expressions of *schadenfreude*. Larry Kudlow, Director of the National Economic

Council, noted that “The pandemic is, of course, in China, not the United States.” He saw “no material impact” on the US economy. While commerce secretary Wilbur Ross expressed sympathy for the disease victims, he publicly stated that the coronavirus “will help to accelerate the return of jobs to North America” (Siegel 2020).

Though the Chinese foreign ministry was on holiday schedule, ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying was quick to respond. She first contrasted the US stance and behavior with the commendations China had received from the WHO and various countries and said that the United States “took the lead in a very bad manner and was really mean” (MFA Spokesperson. 2020 Feb 4). From her perspective, the United States was clearly not acting like a friend in need. After she was back from the holiday schedule, she asked the United States “not to overreact, and to respect and cooperate with China's prevention and control efforts” (MFA Spokesperson. 2020 Jan 31).

Whatever the differences between the United States and China at the time, a phone call between Xi and Trump on February 7 (Beijing time; February 6 in Washington, DC) – hours after the tragic death of Dr. Li Wenliang – appeared to put them aside. According to the official Chinese readout of the phone call, “President Xi highlighted the all-out efforts made by the Chinese government and people to fight the novel coronavirus outbreak” and his confidence to control the epidemic and put the Chinese economy back on the “long-term upward trajectory.” He was self-congratulatory in saying that “China has taken timely, decisive and forceful

measures.” While he invoked the WHO on the need to avoid overreaction, which echoed Hua Chunying’s criticism of US actions, Xi nonetheless “expressed appreciation for President Trump’s positive comments on China’s efforts on different occasions, and thanked the various communities in the US for their donations” (MFA 2020).

Whereas the US reports on the Trump-Xi call highlighted China’s commitment to implementing the Phase I trade deal, the Chinese readout totally omitted the trade issue and showed President Trump was clearly impressed by what China had done under Xi to contain the virus. Trump expressed confidence in China and said “the US will be very calm in its response to the epidemic” (MFA 2020). Xi appeared to have mentioned to Trump that SARS had disappeared without a trace in Spring 2003. In his tweets following the call, Trump was effusive in his praise of Xi. Trump added: “as the weather starts to warm & the virus hopefully becomes weaker, and then gone (Trump 2020).” It was not until more than a month later, in March, that Trump was finally shaken into action to respond to the coronavirus crisis (Sink et al. 2020).

“Wolf Warrior” Diplomacy and the US-China Discourse War

During the US-China trade war, the Chinese leadership became frustrated with and disconcerted by President Trump’s use of Twitter. For years, China’s leaders had endeavored to enhance China’s ability to influence the global discourse and tell China’s story to the world. These efforts, bolstered by ample funding, have led to a

growing media presence and influence for China (Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020). Yet all that dominance within and influence abroad that the CCP Propaganda Department possesses appeared to wither into insignificance amid the flurries of Trump tweets plus press conferences and interviews during the early months of the trade war.

Xi has been a strong and persistent champion for “telling well China’s story ” (Liu 2019). As the intensifying trade war dampened the Chinese economy and sowed doubt within China about the strategy of tit-for-tat against the United States, Xi invoked the Long March spirit (Zhou 2019). In the fall opening class of the Central Party School, he spoke tirelessly on the need to persist in making “great struggles.” He pointed to struggles in every aspect of the CCP’s work, called for developing and making use of the “spirit of struggle” and enhancing the skills for making “struggle.” In the mode of being commander-in-chief, he called on party officials to “not only engage decisively in the struggles but also be victorious in these struggles” (People’s Daily 2019a). It was thus not a surprise, though little noted at the time, that months later, at the end of July 2020, Xi called on all involved “to take a clear-cut stand, be courageous in our struggle, actively speak out, refute erroneous statements with righteousness and strength, tell the China story well and proactively spread China’s positive energy” (People’s Daily 2019b).

Following the dictates established by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, Chinese diplomats had been known for their caution and emphasis on protocol. In the past two decades, they had become more willing to engage in public diplomacy. The frequency of the foreign ministry briefings alone--not to mention various other government press

releases -- helps to keep foreign journalists busy and tied down to Beijing.

Given how Trump as president has made Twitter his playing field, for the Chinese foreign policy establishment to up the game of telling the China story in the struggle against the United States would have required taking the struggle to Twittersphere. Yet Twitter is banned in China. It is known for being an unruly sphere. It is one thing for Chinese publications such as the *People's Daily* and *Global Times* to maintain presences on it and for trolls from China to wallow in fights large or petty, but quite another for risk-averse bureaucrats/diplomats to engage actively on Twitter in English or other foreign languages.

One exception is Zhao Lijian. Not educated in the foreign affairs or foreign languages colleges that have typically served as the training ground for Chinese foreign policy professionals, Zhao has not been content to stay in the diplomatic comfort zone. He joined Twitter in 2010, a few months after he was posted to the embassy of the People's Republic of China in Washington. This was a time of global economic upheaval, but was also a great moment for representatives of a rising China. After being posted to senior embassy posts in Pakistan, Zhao dramatically boosted his Twitter presence and his frequent critical tweets on the United States, attracting a substantial following. A couple of weeks before Xi's call for engaging in struggle to tell China's story to the world, Zhao was on Twitter defending China's practices in Xinjiang. He invoked the hot-button issue of racism in the United States and got into a heated exchange with Susan Rice, former national security advisor to President Obama (Smith 2019). He became known and was lionized among Chinese as the hottest "wolf warrior

diplomat (Hu 2019).” The following month, Zhao was back in Beijing at the ministry of foreign affairs, getting ready to be the thirty-first MFA spokesman in a team of three. The MFA Spokesperson account for Twitter (MFA_China) was launched in October 2019.

Zhao Lijian made his debut as spokesman on February 24, 2020. It was an indication of the high expectations for his combative style that both the Xinhua News Agency and the *People’s Daily* filed reports on his debut (Xinhua 2020; Xu 2020).

By then, the entire country had been mobilized to assist Wuhan/Hubei while Chinese people in the rest of China were house bound to help stop the spread of the coronavirus. Yet the revelations coming out of Wuhan/Hubei were not encouraging. It was an understatement to say that China was enveloped in an atmosphere of crisis. On February 10, 2020, the national leadership sacked the party secretaries of Hubei and Wuhan in order to better handle the situation on the ground. Amid this atmosphere, there were massive amounts of information as well as rumors, speculations, and outright conspiracy theories that I’ll come to later.

As an observer, while I saw many Chinese users of Weibo and WeChat lose access to their accounts because of what they posted or shared, I also saw how authorities steadily gained control over the discourse online after the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, which marked the appropriate peak of public anger. In these weeks, I was most struck by the sharp divide in opinion between Chinese in China and Chinese-Americans in the United States, even if they were members of the same family. Those in China defended the Chinese leaders and what was being done while those in North

America were more critical. As a consequence of the intense attitudinal differences, many on WeChat splintered into groups of like-minded members.

The intense controversies surrounding the Wuhan diaries of the writer Fang Fang provide a window onto the national backlash against those who tried to tell it as they saw it (Fang 2020; Lau and Xie 2020). While many people in China had questions about what had happened and grumbled at the inconveniences they had to endure, not to mention the health risk they faced, they bristled at criticisms coming from abroad. Personnel at the MFA were part of this social milieu. The MFA spokespersons are senior leaders of the MFA Information Department. They and their colleagues as well as their families coped with the social distancing inconveniences and worries, but they still had to carry on, by rotation, during the Chinese lunar New Year holidays. When they resumed their press briefings after the holidays, they were compelled by the coronavirus crisis to hold them online for three entire weeks (February 3 - February 21) while the rest of the world watched.

Psychologists find that people who experience traumatic events that cause injury and death suffer from various symptoms and stresses, including being hypervigilant to threats, and these stresses are aggravated by social isolation (Muldoon 2020). Now imagine a Chinese foreign policy defender who has coped with the coronavirus pandemic and then returns to work to find that his or her nation is being insulted in the *Wall Street Journal*. The offending item was an op-ed article by Walter Russell Mead published on February 3 (February 4 in Beijing). The article was less about the coronavirus outbreak than about the financial risks facing China. It would not have

attracted much attention in China but for the title: “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia (Mead 2020).” To be sure, this “sick man” term was first coined and used by Chinese thinkers Yan Fu and Liang Qichao in the late Qing Dynasty. It has also been invoked repeatedly in recent years in Europe (Yau 2020). Yet to most Chinese educated on heavy doses of patriotic education, the term immediately triggers associations of racist insult and historical memories of national humiliation. The title prompted criticisms and protests not only in China but also in overseas Chinese communities.

As defenders and promoters of Chinese discourse power, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying at first took issue with the author of the op-ed and chided him for his “arrogance, bias, and ignorance ” (MFA Spokesperson 2020 Feb 6). After Mead distanced himself from the title on Twitter (Mead 2020), the MFA took the issue up with the *Wall Street Journal* and demanded that its leadership “publicly make a formal apology, and investigate and punish the responsible person.” Spokesperson Geng Shuang explained that the *Journal*’s editor who added the “sensationalist headline tinged with racism . . . hurt the Chinese people’s feelings and aroused the consternation and condemnation of the Chinese public” (MFA Spokesperson 2020 Feb 10). The *Journal* issued a “regret” but was not willing to retract or amend the title or punish the editor (Farhi 2020).

A week later, the MFA, with approval from higher authorities, retaliated by expelling three of the *Wall Street Journal*’s credentialed reporters from China. According to the *Journal*, before this move, no credentialed foreign correspondent

had been expelled since 1998 (WSJ 2020). By the irony of ironies, all three of the expelled reporters in this disproportionate punishment were foreign citizens of Chinese ethnicity. After the US Department of State imposed restrictions on Chinese news organizations in the United States, China further retaliated on a grand scale a month later by effectively expelling most China-based journalists for the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* (Tracy, Wong, and Jakes 2020).

As a result of this set of actions and reactions, China has dramatically curtailed the American journalistic teams that have the resources and the will to pursue not only day-to-day reporting but in-depth investigative work in Wuhan, Xinjiang, and elsewhere within China. The US-China spat over journalism amid the Covid-19 pandemic thus turned into a major opportunity for the Chinese foreign ministry to play the politics of *ressentiment* and diminish the US discourse power by severely curtailing American journalism in China.

Conspiracy Theory and Discourse Offensive

Meanwhile, Zhao Lijian didn't disappoint his populist fans in his first press conference as a spokesperson. When asked repeatedly about the sanctions China imposed on the *Wall Street Journal*, Zhao took a righteous stand and declared that the "Sick Man" article was based on "malicious insults and smears". "China will not be 'silent lambs,'" he averred. The *Journal* "must bear the consequences" for acting willfully (MFA Spokesperson 2020 Feb 24).

Amid the pandemic, Zhao and his colleagues have proceeded to take the “wolf warrior” style of messaging to unusual heights. The Chinese official media referred to the novel coronavirus as the Wuhan virus in the beginning. Once the WHO had decided on the names of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19, however, Zhao Lijian and others were quick to criticize references to the “China virus” and by association the “Wuhan Virus” as irresponsible stigmatizations, a form of “political virus” (MFA Spokesperson 2020 Mar 4). When there were complaints about the quality of medical supplies from China, Zhao did not explain what was happening with the industry in China but replied with a sharp retort: “If someone claims that China’s exports are toxic, then stop wearing China-made masks and protective gowns, or using China-exported ventilators. This way you will stay clear from the virus. Political virus is more terrible than #COVID19!” (Zhao 2020).

Zhao and his colleagues’ invocation of the derogatory “political virus” label is part of their strategy to counter criticisms leveled at China. Times of pandemics tend to be times rife with rumors, speculations, and conspiracy theories as people have their lives upended and search for answers to the causes of their pain and emotional distress (Taylor 2019). In the early days of the pandemic in China, even though Chinese health authorities initially linked the source of the coronavirus with the wild animals on sale at the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, two competing speculations quickly emerged and circulated widely on Chinese social media. One was that the virology labs in Wuhan were possible sources of the virus, a suspicion that was compounded by Chinese efforts to control and censor information concerning the

coronavirus outbreak (Li 2020). The other speculation pointed to the United States, which circulated largely unimpeded in Chinese cyberspace (Shih 2020). In the United States, a Pew survey conducted in the first half of March found 29 percent of the respondents believed the coronavirus was created in a lab (Schaeffer 2020).

Scientists are virtually unanimous on the zoonotic origins of the SARS-Cov-2 virus and have ruled out the possibility that the coronavirus was made in a lab. However, they do not rule out the possibility of a lab leak in the course of research on bat-borne coronaviruses (Andersen et al. 2020; Cyranoski 2020). Beginning in February, Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, and some American commentators have speculated on the possibility that the coronavirus might have originated in or leaked from a biosafety lab in Wuhan (Firozi 2020; Stevenson 2020).

Whereas in general the Chinese leadership has learned to distinguish between the remarks of individuals legislators and the official positions of the US government, it showed no such patience amid the pandemic. Instead, using his Twitter account and his spokesman's lectern, Zhao Lijian has since March 2020 eagerly tapped various conspiracy theories and argued that the coronavirus epidemic may have started not in China but in the United States. For instance, he has linked Covid-19 to mysterious e-cigarette deaths and strange flu cases, and called for the United States to come clean on the Fort Detrick military lab in Maryland. American team members competing at the World Military Games held in Wuhan in October 2019 might have brought the virus to Wuhan, Zhao suggested (En.people.cn 2020). Such conspiracy theories have also been reported in Chinese media outlets such as CGTN and the *Global Times*, and

Zhao's tweets are quickly retweeted by other Chinese diplomats and are widely circulated (Austin and Smith 2020; Rosenberger 2020).

The peddling of conspiracy theories by Zhao Lijian and his colleagues in their public roles made such "theories" appear more credible to ordinary Chinese and further helped them to spread virally on Chinese social media. Zhao and others thus helped to relieve domestic political pressure, especially in places such as Wuhan where the residents were still under lockdown (AFP, 2020).

If the pandemic had not spread to the United States, most Americans would probably have dismissed the disinformation campaign by Zhao and others as a nasty diversion. Yet the efforts by Zhao and others to invoke conspiracy theories to suggest the coronavirus came from the U.S. happened as the Covid-19 pandemic was spreading rampantly in the U.S. and the U.S. economy and financial markets were coming under enormous distress. Regardless of one's political affiliation in the United States, the disinformation campaign by Zhao and others was a highly salient and infuriating development. A number of American policymakers saw it as act of aggression that had to be firmly countered. President Trump subsequently made references to the "China virus," the Chinese plague, and "Kung Flu," prompting criticism from Chinese-American communities.

Besides the disinformation campaign, China also made ham-handed moves in its facemask diplomacy, especially when it appeared to prioritize getting expressions of gratitude in communities distressed by the pandemic (Hornung 2020). It was also trigger-happy with sanctions or threats against Australia and others for requesting an

inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus outbreak in China or criticizing China for spreading false information (Smyth 2020; Peel and Mitchell 2020). Whereas China early on complained of American overreaction in suspending flights, it has nonetheless adopted stringent restrictions on commercial flights, stranding tens of thousands of Chinese students and workers overseas and causing complaints from the U.S. and other countries (Yuan 2020).

China's pandemic-related activities, plus actions in the South China Sea, on the Sino-India border, and especially the imposition of National Security Law on Hong Kong, have helped bring US-China relations to the lowest it has been since Tiananmen. In a surprising turn for the age of Trump, it has also brought a growing number of countries to join the United States in criticizing and confronting China. In the words of John Sawers, a former chief of Britain's MI6, "the last six months have revealed more about China under President Xi Jinping than the previous six years. China is overplaying its hand and giving western leaders no option but to stand up to it (Sawers 2020)."

Conclusion

As China gains strength and, from the Chinese perspective, continues to face major obstacles to national unification and the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," it is not surprising that China's leaders have become more assertive in defending Chinese interests. Nor is it surprising that the United States, as the established power in relative decline, will seek to defend its interests.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen crisis, Lucian Pye, a keen explorer of the interconnections among personality, culture, leadership, and the polity, noted that China's leaders, when confronted by the "overriding duty to defend a great civilization by upholding a moral order," tend to "discount the risks of irritating other governments. At the same time, they are themselves hypersensitive to perceived slights (Pye 1990, 56-74)."

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, US-China relations already had come under heavy strains as a result of the intensely contested trade war between the two countries. The trade war generated much bitterness, mistrust, and animosity that overlaid on the *ressentiment* pathos of China's "century of humiliation." It also prompted the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping to promote what has been known as "wolf warrior" diplomacy, including taking the war over discourse to Twitter to counter American hegemony.

The flexing of Chinese power during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the discourse power of China's "wolf warrior" diplomats, has aggravated already strained US-China relations in ways that would be hard to repair. There is simply no returning to the pre-pandemic status quo, let alone the pre-trade-war status quo. Instead of rising to the occasion and broadening its appeal, as some of the Chinese official rhetoric has suggested, China's leadership let its "wolf warriors" play to baser sentiments and pursued facemask diplomacy that irked those needing help. It was a missed opportunity.

For US foreign policy leaders, the Covid-19 pandemic has become a clarifying

event on China. The transactional approach to China that Trump had practiced during the trade war has given way to Trump administration officials training their eyes on the ideological and organizational foundations of China's communist party rule (O'Brien 2020; Pompeo 2020). Senior Democratic advisers believe China has shown its true colors under Xi (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper 2020). Thus the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the reorientation of U.S. policy toward China from engagement to open competition. One only hopes, as former Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying of China has recently counselled, that the US-China competition will be benign (Fu 2020).

Endnotes

¹ I note, however, that this issue has seen a resurgence of interest under the presidency of Donald Trump.

² Commerce Minister Zhong Shan wore a tie with dark blue stripes and could be considered an exception.

³ The two experts were Clifford Lane, Clinical Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and right-hand deputy to Director Anthony Fauci, and Weigong Zhou, Medical Officer, Influenza Division, National Center for Immunization and Respiratory, the U.S. CDC. Neither was on the three-person team that went to Wuhan, then still under lockdown (Fink 2020).

⁴ In all, the U.S. Department of State arranged five evacuation flights for U.S. consulate staff in Wuhan, their families, and other Americans (Weiner, Nicholas, and Gudenkauf 2020).

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