Great Power Competition and Chinese Assertiveness in the COVID World Order

Abstract

The current trends in world politics are primarily a manifestation of the hegemonic transition in which China's ascent simultaneously accompanies US retrenchment. This paper contributed to the growing scholarly attention on various aspects of the COVID world order and the domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy behavior. China's international reputation has been undermined by allegations of perfidy and opaqueness in its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak from a dominant section of the international community led by the US. The COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated populist demands in various countries, particularly in the Global North, to "decouple" and reduce their interdependence with China. The post-COVID hostility towards China has exacerbated the broader anti-globalization sentiment in the major Western nations that had been building over the past few years. This protectionist shift in the West includes Brexit, the withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the rapid deterioration of the relationship of major Anglo-Saxon powers with China. Besides, significant regional actors like Japan and India are seriously reexamining their relationship with China.

Keywords: China, liberal international order, US hegemony, China-US relations, rising powers, COVID-19

Introduction

The post-COVID 19 international system has accelerated the process of hegemonic transition in which China's global ambitions are challenging the US-dominated global order. There is almost universal consensus that disharmony and discord among the great powers will continue to characterize the international system for the foreseeable future. Under President Trump, the US abandoned all pretensions of acting as a benevolent hegemon responsible for providing the lion's share of the global public goods. The American withdrawal has impeded global governance across critical issue areas, including public health, international trade, and climate change. For instance, the US has withdrawn from the primary global public health body, the World Health Organization (WHO). The central rule-making and rule- adjudicating body for international multilateral trade, the World Trade Organization (WTO), is under unprecedented crisis. The US has attacked the WTO for its failure to control China's alleged trade abuses. The WTO's court for trade dispute settlement body has been rendered dysfunctional by the US decision to withhold funds and stalling the selection process for filling six vacancies (Kanth, 2020). Such actions betray the hostility of the Trump administration to the principles of liberal internationalism, one of the normative anchors for the post-World War II global governance architecture created by the US (Ikenberry, 2009). The US shift from liberal internationalism has been replicated by its Western allies, marking a breakdown in the transnational ideological consensus that supported and propelled the institutions and practices of global economic interdependence since World War II.

The US-led Western powers and dominant regional players like Japan and India have not taken kindly to China's role as the geographical progenitor of the coronavirus. Besides breaking ties with the WHO for its alleged bias in favor of China, the US President Trump led the global campaign pillorying China for triggering the COVID-19 devastation. Trump has fueled US-China rivalry with xenophobic terms like the "China virus" and "Kung Flu" in his public statements on the pandemic (Nakamura, 2020). Besides the US, Australia has been most vocal in its anti-China rhetoric and policy orientation since the outbreak of the COVID crisis. It has called for an independent probe under WHO auspices to determine the origins of the coronavirus. It can be safely speculated that Australia's move is driven by a desire to diminish China's international reputation. The US is pressurizing the UK to keep Huawei out of Britain's 5G telecom network. Thus far, the Boris Johnson-led government has mostly resisted the US demands, although it has capped Huawei's involvement in Britain 5G telecom network to 35% (Gold, 2020). China's chastisement by the US and other western powers after the COVID outbreak has hastened the rise of aggressive nationalism in China. This rise of nationalism has manifested in the form of "wolf warrior diplomacy" – a catch-all phrase to refer to the aggression exhibited by the Chinese leadership and others articulating its foreign policy. This phrase is named after two action movies released 2015 and 2017, which depict battles between an elite People's Liberation Army (PLA) unit, the Wolf Warriors and various mercenary groups among which Americans figure prominently.

First, we discuss some of the elements of the international system in which China's aggressive nationalism is being manifested. We focus, in particular, on the contours of the US-China competition in the context of the COVID outbreak. Second, we focus on the internal determinants of the Chinese foreign policy response after the corona outbreak. The third section concludes.

Systemic Context of Chinese Assertiveness: US-China Competition

A broad commitment to the principles of liberal internationalism drove the US support for China to integrate with a rules-based global economic system over the past three decades. In the process, the US was sometimes willing to look the other way when Chinese compliance with the rules and norms of liberal internationalism was less than perfect. The current erosion of domestic support in the US for liberal internationalism has paralleled the rise in the mass and elite hostility against China (Conrad, 2020), particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC). The post GFC negotiations among the major powers to coordinate a global response to this crisis exponentially elevated China's status vis-à-vis the US and its allied nations.

Initially, major non-Western powers like Russia and China appeared to refrain from overtly exploiting this crisis to their advantage. Instead, they seemed to affirm their accordance with the system of global capitalism that had suffered an undeniable loss of legitimacy. A contemporary piece by Birdsall and Fukuyama had observed:

> "In early 2009, at the height of the global financial panic, China and Russia, two formerly non-capitalist states, made it clear to their domestic and foreign investors that they had no intention of abandoning the capitalist model. No leader of a major developing country has backed away from his or her commitment to free trade or the global capitalist system. Instead, the established Western democracies are the ones that have highlighted the risks of relying too much on market-led globalization and called for greater regulation of global finance"(Birdsall & Fukuyama, 2011)

In major Western capitals, China was hailed as a prospective savior of capitalism in the post-crash period. For example, the then Foreign Secretary of the UK, David Miliband, gushed, "…after 1989 it is capitalism which had saved China, and post 2008 it is China which is going to save capitalism." (Borger, 2009) Simultaneously, China's growing influence triggered a US hedging strategy of propping up its regional rivals through the "pivot to Asia" initiative. The regional trade pact – the Trans-Pacific Pact (TPP) – that excluded China was key to this hedging strategy. Domestic support within the US to join and lead this agreement succumbed to rising protectionist pressures. The US refusal to join the TPP has dented its credibility as a reliable ally among regional powers concerned with the emergence of a "unipolar Asia" with China at its helm.

China's rise to global prominence after the 2008 GFC would have seemed unthinkable in 1989 when an internal factional struggle of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) spilled on to the streets in the form of student-led pro-democracy protests (Yu, 1989). Although the CCP regime survived, the crackdown on the protestors brought a lot of unwelcome international attention to China's domestic problems. To cope with this crisis and chart the path forward, the then Chinese Premier Deng Xiao Ping adopted *Tao Guang yang hui* (hereafter TGYH) to guide China's response. Deng recommended that in international politics, China should *lengjing guancha, wenzhu zhenjiao, chenzhuo yingfu* (observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly). He explained, "We will only become a big political power if we keep a low profile (TGYH) and work hard for some years, and we will then have more weight in international affairs"(Chen & Wang, 2011). It is a testament to the successful implementation of Deng's grand strategy in the years that China has consistently posted high annual economic growth rates allowing it to become a respectable and influential member of the US-led liberal international order (LIO). In 2001, the US-led international community welcomed China with open arms. By the time the incumbent, Xi Jinping rose to the position of President in 2013, China had abandoned TGYH in favor of the "striving for achievement" approach. Xi's assertive foreign policy orientation coincided with the growing animus of the US against China. President Trump's tenure in office has witnessed an uninterrupted exacerbation of animosity between the two nations. The Trump administration's

2017 National Security Strategy report named China a “revisionist” power and a “strategic competitor,” which led to the unleashing of the US-China trade war (*National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2017).

Notwithstanding the widespread skepticism regarding China’s COVID-related data in the international community, the Chinese government’s performance appears to be relatively better than many of the resource-rich Western nations, particularly the US. A core element of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy doctrine is that China’s administrative and political practices are superior to the wealthy Western democracies. The messiness of the response to the pandemic in Western democracies, significantly the US has reinforced this belief in the Chinese ruling elite (Westad, 2019). Chinese policy appears convinced that their management of the pandemic has reaffirmed the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. They believe that the Chinese state machinery has operated far more efficiently during the COVID crisis to safeguard the “common interest,” compared to the administrate state in Western democracies.

The systemic dimension within which the current avatar of Chinese nationalism is being expressed is a hegemonic transition triggered by US retrenchment and simultaneous Chinese ascent. Unlike similar shifts in world history, nuclear deterrence has mostly ruled out a shooting war to settle the competition for power between the US and China. However, the US-China completion poses a severe threat to the infrastructure of the US-led LIO designed to advance economic interdependence among states. A key triggering factor in this transition is that domestic constituencies in the US are increasingly unwilling to pay for the public goods required to maintain the LIO. David Lake, a prominent US-based IR scholar, prophesized that the unipolar moment of US hegemony after the fall of the USSR and the end of the cold war will be fleeting. It would not be long before the costs of the LIO exceeds the capacity and willingness of the US and its alliance partners to bear them. Lake predicted that when hegemonic retrenchment inevitably occurs, the stability of the LIO will depend on the working relationship between the declining power and the most credible challenger (Lake, 1993, p. 465). The events playing out today seem to bear out Lake's prediction with the role of the challenger being played by China. The current reluctance of the US to assume the costs of its hegemonic responsibilities is a tacit acknowledgment of its declining capacity. Given the diminution of US capabilities, China is unlikely to tolerate US superciliousness on the global stage. Therefore, it should be expected that the current Chinese regime will pursue its goal of 'striving for achievement' (*fenfayouwei*) in international politics in an unimpeded manner. As President Xi stated, "No one is in a position to dictate to the Chinese people what should or should not be done." (Sevastopulo, 2019)

The American penchant for labeling China as a revisionist power seeking to unilaterally change the global status quo and violate the rules-based LIO is a significant irritant for the Chinese ruling elite (Johnston, 2019). China points out that it does not get enough credit from the US for its behavior as a responsible member of the LIO. China claims that it has consistently supported the activities of the United Nations and its critical organs like the WHO. However, China's participation in the UN Security Council is mediated by its adherence to the organizing principles of the Westphalian state system – sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention norm. These principles often clash with the political elements of liberal internationalism that emphasize the virtues of representative democracy and respect for a global standard of human rights. A variant of political liberal internationalism provides a coherent set of legal and normative justifications for the violations of the non-intervention norm of sovereign states for humanitarian considerations. Given the incoherent and hypocritical use of these principles to justify US-led foreign interventions, these elements of liberal internationalism engender considerable disquiet among Chinese policymakers. Therefore, rules and norms of the LIO that clash with the way states exercise their internal sovereignty is consistently opposed by China across all international forums.

The course of the current hegemonic transition will hinge on whether China's grievances vis-à-vis the LIO will motivate it to act as a "spoiler." (Schweller & Pu, 2011) The incentives of China's behavior encourage antagonism instead of conciliation; it can single-handedly dent the LIO in the immediate future. The 2008 GFC was highly beneficial to China's ability to project power overseas as it helped diminish the ideological dominance of the Washington Consensus as a model for economic development (Layne, 2018). Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are the emerging Chinese-sponsored alternatives to the existing institutional mechanism of the LIO. China has decided to use its enhanced economic muscle to balance US power in the Asia-Pacific. China scored a significant success when two major US allies, the UK and Australia, joined the AIIB, despite US opposition. Former US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers stated that the inability of the US to pressure its allies to stay out of the AIIB "may be remembered as the moment the US lost its role as the underwriter of the global economic system."(Layne, 2018)

China's contention with the LIO largely centers on managing the Bretton Woods institutions (BWIs) – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization. China claims that its current influence in these bodies is not commensurate with its consistently good economic performance over the past three decades. Given its global export competitiveness and its attractiveness as a destination for foreign capital, China has accumulated large capital account reserves. The growing financial clout of China has altered the global financial balance in China's favor. This reality must be reflected in the power structure of the BWIs. (Nicolas, 2016,

p. 8) To pursue this goal, China has invested in a semi-institutional diplomatic forum called BRICS, a coalition comprising of India, Russia, and Brazil, and South Africa.

Although it is now the third-largest stakeholder in the IMF behind the US and Japan, China remains unhappy with the existing system of voting shares. This system was designed to ensure that US and its allies would maintain a disproportionate influence over the functioning of the IMF. To China's chagrin, its efforts to overtake Japan in the pecking order of "quotas" in the IMF were stymied by the US. China also seems determined to undermine one of the most potent sources of US hegemony: the importance of the US dollar as the world's reserve currency. In 2016, the Renminbi joined the US dollar, the euro, the yen, and the British pound in the Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) basket by the IMF, marking an essential landmark in the globalization of the Chinese currency. Apart from the AIIB, China also invested heavily in creating the New Development Bank, BRICS Fund, and the Silk Road Fund to challenge the institutional hegemony of the BWIs in global governance. China's scale of institutional investments is still not ambitious enough to ensure a command of the global commons. These capture China's unabashed aspiration of institutionalizing its regional dominance in Asia. A structure of asymmetric alliances with relatively weaker nations is central to this strategy. China's surplus economic resources also give it sufficient leeway to finance a more expansionist policy in the South China Sea.

Under Obama and Trump, the US has made some halfhearted attempts to prop up regional powers in the Asia-Pacific, such as India, Japan, and Australia, as a counterweight to China's regional dominance. This anti-China quadrilateral is unlikely to deter China's regional aspirations. The biggest reason for this is that under Trump, US foreign policy has turned highly transactional. Trump's constant haranguing of its long-standing allies as free-riders has made it harder for the US to coordinate effective strategic alignments for offshore balancing. In contrast, China's trade and political ties with the countries in the Asia-Pacific appear far more robust in comparison. Therefore, notwithstanding US entreaties, it seems unlikely that very many nations in the Asia-Pacific will openly antagonize China (Zhang, 2012).

Chinese behavior seems to align with the conception of LIO as "weaponized interdependence." The concept of "weaponised interdependence" was coined by two political scientists, Farell and Newman. In their perspective, the distribution of power in the LIO rests on control over its critical nodes – financial communications, supply chains, and the internet. Therefore, the outcome of any future power competition in the LIO will be overwhelmingly determined by whether the incumbent retain their control or not. Currently, these asymmetric network structures are dominated by the US. US can coerce less powerful actors that need access to these networks to garner the gains from interdependence in the LIO (Farrell & Newman, 2019). US policymakers view the rapid advances in 5G technological capabilities reported by the Chinese firm, Huawei, as a threat to US control over these nodes of the LIO. The strident effort by the US to undermine Huawei's operations in the global marketplace of high-technology is motivated by this threat perception. US targeting of Huawei has further undermined its role as a fair hegemonic gatekeeper of the LIO in the eyes of China. Wang and his collaborators summarize the current Chinese perspective towards the US and the LIO as follows: "It has become harder and harder for foreign-policy makers in China to discern what rules the Americans want themselves and others to abide by, what kind of world order they hope to maintain, and where Washington is on major international issues." (Jisi et al., 2018) Chinese policymakers particularly resent being told that their foreign policy behavior violates the norms of responsible state conduct in international politics. Their self-perception is that China has been a very reliable and cooperative actor on the global stage. Instead of being appreciated for its restrained and pragmatic behavior, China's actions are unfairly characterized in the West is highly alarmist terms (Zeng & Breslin, 2016, p. 249). However, China is not overly worried about hostility emanating from the US-led Western coalition. It believes that the transatlantic alliance is too riven with dissension to hurt its interests.

The US has started taking unilateral actions to penalize China that can hurt the latter's vital interests. For example, the US senate has passed the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act (HFCAA) that requires all publicly traded companies on US stock exchanges to reveal whether they are owned or controlled by a foreign government. If the House of Representatives concurs, this legislation will force some Chinese companies to delist from the US stock exchange. Under its provisions, the US Securities and Exchange Commission will have the authority to bar trading of any company whose auditor has evaded inspection from the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board for three consecutive years. (Franck, May 21, 2020) In other words, the HFCAA has weaponized the access to the US capital markets to punish Chinese firms. Anticipating the regulatory changes in the US, leading Chinese firms like Alibaba, JD.com, and NetEase have already filed new IPOs in the Hong Kong stock exchange. Hong Kong is likely to play a critical role in linking China to the Western world shortly. In this light, the decision of the Chinese government to pass a sweeping security law will have severe ramifications for the relations between China and the US. The US is already considering revoking Hong Kong's preferential status as a customs and travel territory separate from China. If this measure goes through and Hong Kong is delinked from the West, the attractiveness of the Hong Kong stock exchange will decline.

Trump administration has also urged US manufacturers to move global supply chains (GSCs) to the US. Thus far, this development has not caused widespread disquiet among China's policymakers. They are aware that China accounts for a whopping 20 percent of all goods produced in GSCs, up from merely 4 percent in 1995 (Lund et al., 2019, p. 67). As the world's largest market for automobiles, textiles, computers, and electronics China holds significant leverage over US firms facing pressure from the Trump administration (Lund et al., 2019, p. 50). The consensus in China seems to be that the relative impact of the trade war will be much more severe on the US companies (Jisi, 2020, p. 203). Over the past few years, many of these firms have achieved economies of scale and began using China as a manufacturing web to export to other promising markets at competitive prices (Lund et al., 2019). Shifting from this conducive environment to assuage the political imperatives of US foreign policy will not be easy for these firms. In aggregate terms, the imperatives of economic interdependence between the US and China may also constrain bilateral hostilities. Despite the disruption, the approximate volume of US-China trade averages USD 2 billion per day, whereas during the cold war era, in the late 1980s, it was $2 billion per year. ("China v America: A new kind of cold war," May 16, 2019)

It seems evident that one of the most significant sources of intense hostility in the US-China relationship will arise from their race for 5G supremacy. China has placed indigenous technological advancement at the center of its grand strategy. It has imposed export restrictions on rare earth metals indispensable for some tech-specific industries, Artificial Intelligence (hereafter), robotics semiconductors, and microchips. The US characterizes these measures by China as stealthy and unscrupulous attempts to “seize the tech crown” ("China's got a new plan to overtake the US in tech," May 21, 2020). In turn, China dismisses US protestations as nothing more than the frustrated haranguing’s of a hegemon in decline ("China v America: A new kind of cold war," May 16, 2019).

Investment in its technological infrastructure and reducing dependence on foreign players has become seamlessly integrated with China’s counter-cyclical spending following the COVID-

19 outbreak. China has allocated $1.4 trillion to be spent over the next six years. A lot of these funds will go towards supporting technological conglomerates like Huawei to lay the fifth-generation wireless networks, install cameras and sensors, and develop AI software. The long-term strategic goal of this investment is to help domestic firms Huawei, Digital China, Tencent, Alibaba, SenseTime Group outcompete US companies in the tech sector. ("China's got a new plan to overtake the US in tech," 2020). Indigenous Chinese firms already outstrip their European competitors in applied AI facial/voice recognition, and financial technology. China's newly acquired prowess in the technology domain has led some to predict that it will not be long before Chinese firms can give the US tech companies a run for their money (Allison, 2020). The local and provincial governments have turned into mini-laboratories for the intensive application of indigenously generated technology at the expense of US firms. For example, Digital China, a government-backed systems integration provider, is going about replacing US cloud computing majors IBM, Oracle, and EMC with domestic firms in the city of Changchun. European firms are also finding it increasingly difficult to benefit from China's investment in tech infrastructure. Recently, Sweden's global tech giant Ericsson received a meagre 10% of the 37 billion yuan contract given by China Mobile to build 5G base stations ("China's got a new plan to overtake the US in tech," May 21, 2020).

Huawei's collaboration with STMicroelectronics, a French-Italian multinational electronics and semiconductor manufacturer, is a major development in the US-China technological competition (Kynge & Ruehl, April 29, 2020). This deal gives Huawei access to advanced software and manufactures microchips through its subsidiary, HiSilicon. More importantly, STMicroelectronics will help Huawei replace two of its US suppliers – Synopsys and Cadence Design Systems. China recognizes that the more Huawei can find alternatives to US-based firms, the less effective the tactics of economic coercion by the US are likely to be. (Kynge & Ruehl, April 29, 2020) The US Department of Commerce has also barred Huawei from accessing US designs and chip-making equipment to manufacture semiconductors in overseas foundries. (Nutall, May 15, 2020) Senior US officials have openly said that such stringent rules are devised to bring about a convergence of national security goals with the incentives of US multinationals doing business in China. As Peter Navarro, the Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy explained, "The problem with our system is that everything is short term, so when you say to an American CEO 'Do you realize that the Chinese are going to take your technology and they are going to be your competitor? The CEO says, 'Yes, but I have only three or four years to get my stock up so I can get my bonus,' and they kick the can down the road, and it's the next guy's problem." (Navarro & Autry, 2011)

As part of this strategy of integrating its strategic goals with the commercial interests of its private firms, the US is also trying to wean its high tech sector away from the Asian supply chain. The US government subsidies were recently lavished to convince the world's biggest chipmaker, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation, to invest $ 12 billion to set up a manufacturing facility in Arizona. (Kynge & Ruehl, April 29, 2020) China has retaliated to US moves with blacklisting prominent brand names in the US hi-tech sector, such as Qualcomm, Cisco, Apple, and Boeing (Stacey, June 2, 2019). The downward spiral of the US-China conflict has forced CISCO to cut back manufacturing capacity in China quite significantly (Stacey, June 2, 2019). Others like Kespry, a US group that makes software for the Chinese drone maker, DJI, are also likely to follow suit (Stacey, June 2, 2019). This trend is expected to continue in the future. The US government is expected to be particularly unsparing against US firms manufacturing defense-related technological products in China (Armstrong, May 27, 2020). In the next section, we examine the domestic sources of China's aggressive response to such moves by the US and its allies.

Domestic Sources of China's Assertiveness in the International System

The COVID response has reinforced the shared civilizational consciousness within the CCP leadership based on a historical narrative of China's glorious past as a great world power. In this narrative, a cabal of Western colonial powers from the mid-nineteenth century until the Communist revolution of 1949 had interrupted China's march through history as a great power (Westad, 2019). This period of Chinese history is universally considered to be the "century of humiliation" in the consciousness of its policymakers. Hence, China's current rise is nothing unprecedented but merely its "re-emergence" to the status of a global power that it has enjoyed for long periods in its history. China's assertive nationalism under Xi's leadership is rooted in this self-image (Beeson & Li, 2015). Although the initial response of China to the 2008 global financial crisis was one of strategic restraint, it had given way to triumphalism by the end of 2012. A more unabashed claim of China's national greatness and the inviolability of the Communist state's role through a command structure permeated by the Party became the dominant characteristics of its foreign policy (Yinhong, 2019).

As China's power gradient has increased, so has the debate on its grand strategy within the community of Chinese IR scholars based in the mainland and the West (Xuetong, 2019). Those that advocate more restraint in the exercise of Chinese power have pointed out the perils of 'strategic overdraft' or 'strategic overstretch' *(zhanlue touzhi)*. Scholars like Shi Yinhong want China to learn from the mistakes of other nations in history that were tempted by their surplus material capacity to project their power on a global scale. World history is replete with seemingly invincible hegemonic powers that suffered the ruinous consequences of miscalculating the costs and benefits of their overseas commitments. Similar sentiments are expressed by Yan Xuetong, who cautions Chinese leaders against a 'strategic rash advance' *(zhanlue maojin)* (Pu & Wang, 2018). However, votaries of restraint do not appear to have many takers in China's corridors of power these days. The threats directed at China by significant sections of the international community has devolved into a tit-for-tat dynamic.

Given that this is the case, it becomes imperative to isolate the roots of the domestic consensus of overt assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy since the 2008 GFC. In this study, we rely upon the template provided by a prominent US Sinologist, Aron Friedberg, of the domestic factors/stakeholders that could have influenced Chinese grand strategy in the past few years: infusion of a new brand of nationalism through the post-Tiananmen system of "patriotic education," bargaining among interest groups representing competing institutions and levels of government and the role of "rogue" PLA officers that advocate a hardline stance (Friedberg, 2014, pp. 138-142). Although Friedberg is mostly dismissive of the part of these domestic explanations for China's shift towards assertiveness, we find some merit in investigating the role of post-Tiananmen nationalism. In the years following the Tiananmen Square incident, nationalist works like 'China can say no'(*Zhong Guo keyi shuo bu*), (Q. Song, Zhang, & Qiao, 1996) and 'Unhappy China' (*Zhong Guo bu gao xing*) (X. Song, Wang, Song, Huang, & Liu, 2009) gained currency in the various discussions related to Chinese nationalism, especially from the second half of the 1990s. Furthermore, these best-sellers became influential in shaping the different narratives on nationalism. These two mainland scholars urged the Chinese leadership to stand up to Western bullying and advocated assertive nationalism in the wake of western sanctions on China. In the first decade of this century, the failure of the US capitalist model and associated policies in the label of the Washington Consensus and the growing rise of the Beijing consensus, the runaway success of the Beijing Olympics, the successful hosting the world Expo Forum in Shanghai in 2010 became new sources of national pride for China. These developments also led to changes in the perceptions of the domestic political elite as regards China's place in the world.

Under the current leader Xi Jinping's slogans like 'China Dream' (*zhongguo meng*), 'road to renewal' (*fu xing zhi lu*), building an assertive China (*qiang zhongguo*) with more focus on military modernization' and a 'community of shared values' (*mingyun gong tongti*) became part of the party-state's discourse. It is widely believed that these nationalist discourses can be traced to contributions from mainland scholars. These derived their inspiration from the rich civilizational past of China and argued that China's future lies in referring to its glorious past. The most prominent works include Liu Mingfu's The China Dream (*Zhongguo Meng*), Jiang Rong's Wolf Totem (*Langtu Teng*), and Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia System: A Philosophy for World Institutions. These works can be broadly categorized into two broad categories. First, those that deal with China's quest for geopolitical nationalism. The second category comprised works constituting Chinese IR scholarship's advocacy of the drawbacks of the western IR theories and questioning their universal validity.

On the lines of the 'organic theory of state' and Nazi Germany's calls for Lebensraum under Hitler, Liu Mingfu (2010) and Jiang Rong's (2008) works advocated that China must engage in a 'military rise' to compete with the US. Liu Mingfu has critiqued the 'peaceful development' thesis (*fazhan heping*) and argued that economic power without political power is shallow. It will make China a 'plump sheep' (*fei yang*) in the market where it will frequently be susceptible to attacks from the stronger adversaries. Interestingly, Liu calls for a more assertive China militarily to further the cause of world peace, promoting what is called the 'kingly way (*wang dao*) as against the hegemonic tendencies of the US (*ba dao*), which has caused the world more harm than good.

Jiang Rong similarly emphasizes that the current and future leaders should discover ‘wolfish traits’ and give up; sheepish traits’ to discover the military spirit. The Chinese leadership should rally the domestic constituencies using threats of foreign threats and aim to expand its ‘living space.’ The recent crop of Chinese leaders has effectively channelized popular nationalist sentiment to shore up their positions within the general public and the military establishment (Lampton, 2014). The CCP has shrewdly crafted a nationalist discourse by fanning up patriotic emotions by citing China’s ‘century of national humiliation’ and therefore have never shied away from slogans like ‘never forget national humiliation’ (*wu wang guochi*).

Conclusion

There is little doubt that China’s behavior in the early phase of the COVID-19 outbreak hurt its reputation as a responsible state actor. If trends in US-China relations continue on their current downward trajectory, the world may be split into two rival alliance systems led by the two powers. This development will necessitate that the US and China decouple their respective economies from each other. Consequently, the world is likely to witness the emergence of two distinct ‘spheres of influence’ and a fundamental shift in the current structure of global interdependence. The COVID crisis is expected to accelerate a structural transformation from unipolarity to multipolarity. post-Cold War era, the rules and norms of liberal internationalism constituted the scaffolding of the US-led unipolar global order. Although the US often contravened these rules and norms in conjunction with its allies, the overall trajectory of the global order seemed to reinforce liberal internationalism. The current stand-off between the US and China seems to support the perspective of offensive realists like John Mearsheimer that the behavior of major powers will ultimately be driven by strategic competition with each other, irrespective of their system of government. In a multipolar system, it is more likely that great power rivalries might spin out of control(Mearsheimer, 1994). Liberal rules and norms cannot survive in a multipolar system in which a powerful authoritarian country like China constitutes one of the “poles”(Popescu, April 15, 2020).

There is almost uniform consensus that the age of *Pax Americana* is on the wane. The current US policy seems oriented towards retarding the rise of China as much as possible. Unfortunately for the US, President Trump has ceded an important normative cornerstone of US foreign policy that has traditionally been used as a cudgel against inconvenient non-democratic states like China. Unlike his predecessors, Trump has explicitly refused to champion liberal political values and democratic institutions, taking these issues off the international agenda. Trump is not overly concerned with the alleged nefariousness of China’s authoritarian political system. Instead, Trump is disquieted by his understanding of the relative gains made by the US and China through their commercial relationship. Since the freedom agenda has mainly been excised from US foreign policy rhetoric under Trump, the international pressure on China to defend its human rights record has eased. US decline makes it almost sure that China's regional supremacy in the Asia-Pacific will not be meaningfully challenged for a long time to come. With a centralized decision-making structure, China can pursue a long-term grand strategic vision that is not susceptible to wild shifts. Although the exact contours of China’s global ambitions remain unclear, the world order is inexorably moving towards some form of *Pax Sinica* built upon an exponential expansion of China’s material capabilities.

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