

CHINA, THE US, AND THE COVID-19: VOICES FROM THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

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SUMMARY

This paper sheds light on China's interpretation of the current international dynamics. As such, it links three widely-discussed topics in the Chinese academic and political circles, namely the role of anti-imperialism in Beijing's official narrative, China's international stance given the COVID-19 pandemic, and Beijing's perception of Biden's presidential victory in the context of the Sino-US tensions. By analysing both academic and political narratives in China, the author aims to present the complex dynamics between these two spheres. It is claimed that in certain aspects China's current foreign policy is a historical continuation of Mao Zedong's legacy. Hence, the paper embarks on the role of anti-imperialism and the intermediate zones theory introduced by Mao Zedong. Subsequently, China's anti-imperialist bequest is examined based on Beijing's interpretation of its current international stance in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Beijing's global standpoint is further explored in connection to Biden's victory in the presidential elections and its potential consequences to the Sino-US rivalry.

INTRODUCTION

Although various media portray China's narrative on the current international situation as a monolith overwhelmed with increasingly strict censorship and repression, a nuanced perspective on discourse in China shows a more sophisticated reality. As such, this paper is focused on three main research questions: why has China's narrative increasingly underscored anti-imperialism? How does COVID-19 pandemic affect China's international stance? Is Biden's election a chance to ease the Sino-American tensions?

The research method of this study is a discourse analysis of Chinese official statements and academic publications. The three aforementioned questions were chosen consciously since they reveal the essence of the political and academic dynamics in China. While in some spheres the high-level statements dominate, in others the academic narrative varies from the official one. Conversely, in some fields, the academic debate provides essential insight into topics that officials are restrained to discuss publicly.

HISTORICAL CONTINUATION OF MAOIST LEGACY

The discussion on China's perception of the current international situation should embark on two concepts: *imperialism* and *intermediate zones*. China's understanding of imperialism is rooted in the 'century of humiliation' – a period known to every Chinese as a time of imperialistic rule by Western powers, when the West together with Russia and Japan partitioned the Middle Kingdom in 1839. In the official historical narrative, a proclamation of the People's Republic of China a century later put an end to this period. Consequently, during the Maoist era, the propaganda portrayed Beijing as an anti-imperialist power. Ultimately, Mao Zedong's very own vision of the international order – the intermediate zones theory introduced after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960 – was built upon China's anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism.

According to Mao Zedong, the international order consisted of three groups of actors: major powers (the US and the Soviet Union), the first intermediate zone (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), and the second intermediate zone (Europe, North America, and Japan). China's strategic interest was to unify and represent the first intermediate zone. This core interest served two goals – counterbalancing Washington (the imperialist power which stopped the PRC from taking over Taiwan and gaining international recognition by joining the UN) and opposing the Soviet Union (the revisionist power that betrayed Beijing due to its *détente* with Americans). Only by representing the first intermediate zone could Beijing become a leader of the international communist movement therefore, play a greater role in the international dynamics.

Although the role of ideology in Chinese foreign policy has been gradually reduced since Deng Xiaoping's era, the opposite trend can be observed at present, with reminiscences of the intermediate zone theory, as well as anti-imperialism being illustrative examples.

While in the official American documents Beijing is characterized as an imperialistic power that aims to create an “alternative world order” (“The Elements of the China Challenge” 2020), China’s contemporary self-identification can be found in prominent political figures’ texts. Yang Jiechi, a Politburo member Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office, and Fu Ying, the chairperson of the National People’s Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, are a case in point. Yang Jiechi (2020), with an implicit reference to the “Elements of the China Challenge,” highlights that due to the ‘century of humiliation’ China sees itself as an anti-imperialist state of the Global South. Hence, as a representative of developing countries – defined by Mao Zedong as the first intermediate zone – Beijing promotes multilateralism to counterbalance Washington. Only by such means can China actively participate in the global governance system’s reform and “promote the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.” Similarly, Fu Ying (2020) denies Washington’s accusations that Beijing plans to take over the international dominance, and calls for a “cooperative competition” between China and the US. However, in Fu Ying’s eyes, such coexistence is only possible once Washington learns a lesson from its failures in the Middle East and stops “meddling in China’s internal affairs in the way that imperialists did in the past” – referring explicitly to Taiwan and the South China Sea disputes.

DISCREPANCIES IN THE COVID-19 NARRATIVE: OFFICIAL AND ACADEMIC VOICES

China’s internal debate on the pandemic provides crucial information on Beijing’s understanding of its global influence. The COVID-19 is also a prominent example that the political and academic debates in China are not a monolith. According to the official narrative represented by Yang Jiechi (2020), the COVID-19 allowed China to present its crisis management model to the world and revealed the inefficiency of the Western crisis governance. With such a narrative, Beijing is willing to become a leader in international cooperation in the fight against the pandemic. At the same time, China is portrayed by Yang Jiechi as



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an international leader in a resumption of production that aspires to become the driving force behind the recovery of the global economy. The ultimate goal of these efforts is defined as “establishing the image of a responsible major power.” As stated by Yang Jiechi, due to the COVID-19 the socialist system with Chinese characteristics “continues to increase its international influence.” Concurrently, voices supporting a radical change in the international order gained a new power, while numerous international actors increased their expectations and reliance on Beijing.

However, scholars’ views cast a contrasting light on China’s international stance in the COVID-19 era, with Shi Yinhong (Professor of International Relations and Director of the

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Centre on American Studies at the Renmin University of China) as the most prominent example. In the opinion of Shi Yinhong (2020), accompanied by the pandemic, China has become politically alienated in the world scene. In line with Washington’s increasing pressure on China, the number of developing countries that support Beijing has significantly decreased. Consequently, Shi Yinhong perceives the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for the creation of an

“international, almost comprehensive anti-China camp in the developed world.” That is because the majority of the developed countries present a US-alike approach to high-tech and high-end economy, while the pandemic has only further fuelled their fear of China’s dominance in the strategic sectors. As a result, COVID-19 has launched international processes that are very dangerous for China. At present, not only has to Beijing face the US – which is used to “directly imposing its imperialist hegemony” but it also needs to counter developed states allied with Washington.

BIDEN'S ADMINISTRATION IN CHINA'S EYES

While theoretically, a change of administration in the White House could mean an opportunity for easing the Sino-US tensions, the Chinese show little optimism over Biden. So far only Wang Yi, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, gave a brief commentary on Biden’s election, by stating that Washington and Beijing should “return to objectivity and

sustainability as soon as possible.” Yet, a heated debate in Chinese academic circles provides critical information on Beijing’s reception of the president-elect.

The major topic investigated by Chinese scholars is Biden’s approach to the trade and tech war with Beijing. Shi Yinhong (2020) highlights that Biden sees the bone of contention between China and the US as high-tech rivalry, since it is only by maintaining technological supremacy can Washington preserve its international dominance. Consequently, no suspense should be expected in the continued high-tech decoupling between China and the US. In respect of trade, Jia Qingguo (2020), Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, claims that Biden would not push for trade-reciprocity with China. Resultantly, certain tariffs set by Trump could be gradually removed. Yet, the pressure on Beijing to substantially open its market, strengthen IPR protection, and grant more space to US companies in the Chinese market is expected to continue.

Whilst Biden is likely to present a less ideological skirmish attitude towards Beijing, both scholars agree that the president-elect has no choice but to continue a tough stance toward China. Given his campaign promises, combined with a deteriorating image of China in the US, and “various strong forces united against China” in the Congress, Biden is significantly constrained. Consequently, Beijing anticipates Washington would continue its pressure on a variety of issues – human rights violations are a case in point.

Although the Sino-US relations will remain tense during Biden’s tenure, Chinese scholars indicate several fields from which the “cooperative competition” between Washington and Beijing could embark. Climate change prevention is the most promising one. Diao Daming (2020), Associate Professor from the School of International Studies at the Renmin University of China, underscores that Biden treats climate change as a national security issue. Given the appointment of John Kerry (former Secretary) as climate envoy, Beijing anticipates that combating climate change would be the top priority for the Biden’s administration. Hence, Biden (an active supporter of the Paris Agreement) would be willing to go hand in hand with Beijing under the climate change framework,

particularly after Xi Jinping's pledge on China's reaching carbon neutrality by 2060, which was announced in September 2020. With such a declaration, Beijing strives to be a step ahead of Biden's administration in the race for global climate leadership. That is because instead of putting tariffs and trade reciprocity in the spotlight, Biden is expected to throw down the gauntlet to Beijing in green growth, renewable energy, and other sectors that China covered in Washington's absence during Trump's tenure.

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CONCLUSIONS

Based on political and academic discourse analysis, this paper addressed the question of why China's narrative has increasingly underscored anti-imperialism. By portraying China as an imperial state, Washington has shaken the foundation of Beijing's self-identification based upon its historical continuity of anti-imperialism and representing developing countries following the intermediate zones theory. As a result, Beijing feels pressured to combat a new frontier in its multi-layered competition with Washington and further enhance its relations with the developing countries. From an official point of view, the COVID-19 governance narratives about China should play an essential role in increasing Beijing's influence in the first intermediate zone. This, however, might be far from reality.

On the one hand, China perceives the pandemic as a chance for exporting its crisis management model to build a brand of a responsible, globally-engaged actor. On the other hand, Beijing is aware that an initial response to the pandemic in Wuhan resulted in a deterioration of its international image.

Finally, regarding the effects of Biden's presidential triumph on the Sino-US relations, it can be summarized that the new administration in the White House brings little optimism to Beijing. Owing to three considerable constraints – Biden's tough stance on Beijing during the campaign, a worsening perception of China in the US, and Congress's unity on sanctioning China for human rights violations, China expects the Sino-American tensions to increase. Consequently, Beijing strives to anticipate and get ahead of Biden's policies,

with Xi Jinping's pledge on China's reaching carbon neutrality by 2060 as an illustrative example.

From a nuanced perspective, China is aware of being in a more advanced stage than the US in controlling the pandemic, which together with a new administration in the White House, is a chance for Beijing to improve its global image. Hence, Beijing is likely to utilize a historical foreign policy formula (anti-imperialism and Mao Zedong's intermediate zones theory) to present itself as an accountable global player and a defender of multilateralism. By underscoring the inefficiency of the Western crisis management, as well as portraying itself as a representative of the developing world, Beijing recognizes that apart from high-tech and trade conflict with Washington, managing close relations with the developing world will be critical for the future world order.

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