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## **PANDEMIC'S EFFECTS ON CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS GLOBAL POWER ROLE \*\***

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we assume that China, like other major powers, does not change its strategic views and behaviour hastily, even being affected by powerful exterior influence like the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, such significant global events could speed up or deepen ongoing trends and changes in major power relations, the global system, and China's place in it. Accordingly, changes in China's foreign policy, as the most direct tool of realising its external goals, but primarily being a reflexion of its internal political dynamics and needs for domestic security and stability, should not be affected differently. Although assuming that there have not been and will be no change to China's foreign policy's main course and medium-term goals, we study the possible catalysing effect of the pandemic and eventual changes it caused. Our analyses will try to identify and examine these changes and continuities and prove our initial assumptions.

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**Keywords:** China, major power, Covid-19, foreign policy, major power relations, global governance

## INTRODUCTION

We presume that China's primary strategic positions and following policies and goals will remain consistent and as much as possible buffered from the adverse effects of the pandemic. This hypothesis mainly relies on the People's Republic of China (PRC) being known for its strategies and following up policies pursued during the „reform and opening up” period, again rooted in previous Chinese Communist Party (CCP) orientations and earlier reformists' movements.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, China's situation on the Covid-19 pandemic is very specific. First, this destructive pandemic emerged in China and was the second pandemic to come out from the PRC in the last two decades. These specifics have put a heavy load on China's global status and cast a shadow on its ambition for global leadership. Furthermore, escalating finger-pointing coming from many Western states have continued with accusing China of not acting on time and responsibly at the beginning of the epidemic on its soil, in the late months of 2019, by preventing its citizens from travelling abroad and introducing necessary domestic measures and informing the WTO and international community of the potential peril. These events only strengthened a powerful anti-China sentiment, broadly spread across the Western world (Erlanger 2020). This analysis also observes the statements and responses of China's leaders regarding foreign policy and China's regional and global roles as usual methods when examining foreign policy. Additionally, it investigates how China's actions during the pandemic have influenced its relations with its neighbours and major global partners and its position as a major power, and if these developments were just elements of the ongoing trends or particular outcomes of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, domestic economic and political goals will remain the focus and catalyser of the CCP's decisions and policies enforced, as ever. The Party introduced „dual circulation” as a strategy<sup>2</sup> to guard China's economy against the consequences of

1 For deeper analyses, please consult: (Mitrovic 1995).

2 The phrase appeared during the Politburo Standing Committee meeting held on 14 May 2020 and again in Xi's speech on 24 August 2020 meeting of the same body.

increasingly hostile foreign investment markets, restrictions on hi-tech imports and potential weakening of foreign demand for its goods and services. Economic security once again became China's top topic, as disruptions of global supply chains due to the pandemics exposed the weakest ring of globalisation. The „dual circulation” strategy is expected to drive the economy towards its future development based on domestic demand, lesser dependency on imports and increased domestic supply, particularly high-tech equipment and other inputs that could seriously interrupt or even obstruct the domestic ICT industry. Foreign policy will continue to be one of the most efficient tools to help China achieve these goals.

In recent decades, China has confirmed its growing capacity and willpower to play a dynamic role in the international system, starting from constructing bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation with its neighbours in Central and South-East Asia. However, as the complex and dynamic global system creates many conflicting and many matching interests, Chinese foreign policy has the onerous duty of carrying out China's interests in both cases. To deal with the unexpected threats to domestic and global stability that Covid-19 has created, China will continue to pursue a two-pronged diplomatic approach and foreign policy: on the one hand, it will call and work for globalisation, solidarity, peace and development as the main themes, as well as work toward mutually beneficial cooperation and connectivity while pursuing its rising influence. On the other hand, China will continue to perform its major power foreign policy, conducting its business with no interest in compromises, concessions and common ground, especially when it comes to its „core interests” that tend to multiply accordingly with China's rise. Such course proved to be so even during the ongoing pandemic.

While trying to realise its most essential agendas China will pursue its role of „responsible great power”, and again recent global developments connected with Covid-19 do not help China's aspirations due to growing mistrust between the PRC and the USA and the Western block. To counteract and offset this anti-China trend in most Western capitals, from early 2020 and up today, China has started, and never stopped, its struggle to alter that narrative using its most effective tools: diplomatic and propaganda apparatuses (civil, military, media, culture outlets). We will also try to examine historical and cultural elements that

influenced China's current foreign policy strategies and its code of conduct.

## IS COVID-19 A GAME-CHANGER OR NOT?

Most Western media and political circles have presented China as trying to grasp the occasion to position itself as a leader in the global fight against Covid-19 by presenting the Chinese political system as proved to be more competent in combating the pandemic than Western democracies. They accused China of using „crisis as an opportunity” (Neil 2020) to „sell abroad” rudiments of its political system to rising economies and Third World countries, and some Central and European countries supposedly predisposed towards authoritarian political systems. Some argued that it was a persistence of the „China solution” platform shared with the world by its President Xi Jinping (Neil 2020).

For many, Beijing saw the initial improper EU and messy USA response to the pandemic as a catalyst for its calculated global ambitions. Numerous Chinese and Western analysts argue that the Western democracies' ineffective reaction to the pandemic had proved to Beijing that it would exceed the USA as the leading global power, while the EU has already lost most of its such attributes (Mitrović 2022). Covid-19 has created a space for China's aspirations, symbolised and transmitted through „mask and vaccine diplomacy”. After the initial mishandling of the Covid-19 outbreak, China has effectively brought the domestic epidemic under control, enabling itself to launch a global diplomatic project of providing aid, equipment, and exclusive expertise to other countries. China's success in quick recovery and assisting other countries hit by the pandemic were gigantic and evident in early 2020, as it dispatched aid in medical equipment and medical teams bilaterally to more than one hundred and twenty countries around the globe – from Japan, ASEAN countries, Latin American states, EU members, „the 17 CEECs” and to African states. Only Jack Ma's *Alibaba Foundation* sent aid to more than one hundred and fifty countries around the globe, including all African states, the USA, EU members, Russia, Iran and others (Hatton 2020). Somehow, it remained much less observed that in the early days of epidemic outbreak and lockdown in China, the

People's Republic had received generous help from Japan, the EU and other countries nearby and far.

When China intensified its attempts to lend a hand and increase its figure as a responsible global power, at the same time, its export of medical equipment, test kits, ventilators, masks, disinfectants, drugs, and other medical supplies expended. Given that China has a central position of a leading global provider of personal protective equipment, many medical devices, antibiotics, and active pharmaceutical ingredients, reduced export from China, occurred from a need to provide domestically first, has led to shortages of critical medical supplies globally, including in the United States. Chinese diplomats had an important connection-based function as countries raced to get critical supplies (The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2020). Only Taiwan and countries connected with Taipei were excluded and even threatened to be treated that way (Yu, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Chinese factories were ordered to enlarge production or adjust it to new purposes and work around the clock to manufacture the required medical utensils and pharmaceuticals for export as global demand mounted. Only in March and April 2020, China's exports of medical supplies reach about US\$10 billion (Birmingham 2020). Chinese media broadly followed the process, with official *Renmin Ribao* describing it as the performance of a „responsible great power”. *Xinhua* reported that „China has actively joined hands with the rest of the world to stem the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), with the exports of medical supplies” (*Xinhua* 2020a), presenting these commercial activities as humanitarian, perhaps pointing at export restrictions introduced by some countries that were at the moment mostly severely hit by the pandemics.

Nonetheless, in dissimilarity to these developments, mounting accusations and anti-China attitudes, rising from finger-pointing that China was the source of the crisis, were becoming thunderous in Western media. Simultaneously, growing allegations were coming from Western governments worldwide – Australia, USA, Canada, UK and the EU countries (De Weck 2020) and from the general public (Silver, Devlin and Huang

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3 According to the US Congress Report, in early February 2020, the Chinese government „nationalised control of the production and distribution of medical supplies in China—directing all production for domestic use—and directed the bureaucracy and Chinese industry to secure supplies from the global market” (Congressional Research Service [CRS] 2020).

2020).<sup>4</sup> When blamed for „spreading the poison and selling the cure”, China reacted with „wolf warrior diplomacy” that was received negatively, deepening the misunderstanding between Beijing and Washington, Brussels and other Western capitals and further harming the image of China in these countries. In one of the most illustrative cases, the Chinese Embassy in Paris exchanged viral messages on social media with French citizens after posting insulting words on how local authorities were handling the crisis in nursing homes on its website (Shi 2020)

The increase of aggressive ambassadors and other diplomats who responded in a non-diplomatic manner confirmed that many of the „reform and opening up” elements of China’s foreign policy had been altered, especially in its conduct. There is a sharp contrast between China’s ongoing global stance, expressed by its diplomatic apparatus, and Dai Bingguo’s explanation of „strategic intentions” of the PRC and the means to achieve it:

”...peaceful development, i.e. harmony and development at home and peace and cooperation abroad...This is the policy that will not change in 100 years or 1,000 years...we need to achieve the goal by peaceful means, by continued reform and improvement of our own system... and long-term friendly coexistence, equality and mutually beneficial cooperation with other countries... China will become a most responsible and law-abiding member of the international community” (Dai 2010).

Because under President Xi, the strict top-down approach was firmly imposed, many concluded that „wolf-warrior” diplomats merely reflected the call from the top, including Xi’s call pro showing a „fighting spirit” and got a more assertive style when endorsing the country’s official line. Chinese political figures from older cadres’ generations portrayed such behaviour as unrefined and harmful to China’s interests (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2020). Such harsh vocabulary and attitudes were not seen in China’s diplomatic language since the Cultural Revolution times, while superior diplomatic wisdom was one of China’s best allies when pursuing its foreign policy agendas in the first forty

<sup>4</sup> The Pew Research Centre in Washington study, published in December 2019, found that in 24 of the 34 countries across six continents included in the poll, the respondents’ perception of China was generally negative. Their new 14-country survey from June 2020 showed that unfavourable opinion rose, as most populations in these countries have an unfavourable opinion of China. In Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States, South Korea, Spain and Canada, negative views have reached their highest points since the Center began polling on this topic more than a decade ago.

years of „reform and opening up”, and it has helped Beijing to navigate many dire straits successfully. In the political reality of the Western world, this trend could hurt China as hostile Chinese voices have intensified distrust and increased existing suspicions about China's rise and intentions (Shi 2020).

However, since Xi Jinping took the critical offices in 2012/2013, China's foreign policy experienced significant changes, some of which were intense manifestations of old aspirations, while many were part of his personal ambitions and influences upon him. Hu argues that Xi Jinping's leadership has played a central role in transforming Chinese foreign policy since 2012 (Hu 2019). Xi's leadership role has not only redefined the vision and mission of Chinese diplomacy but has also led to the institutional restructuring of the Chinese foreign and security policy apparatus. China's diplomacy budget in 2018 also increased to double compared to the one from 2011 to prepare for a much broader mission (Clover and Fei, 2018). The Chinese President introduced a „new type of international relations” in 2013, and the same year he launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - at the time called OBOR - and „his” vision (actually used by Hu Jintao in 2007) of „building a community with a shared future for mankind” became a principle in China's foreign policy since 2013.

Nevertheless, Poh and Li (2017) claim that this particular transformation has remained incomplete due to constant domestic preoccupations (primarily economic and security in nature), China's lack of experience in undertaking numerous international responsibilities in a leadership role, as well as urgent and conflicting economic and security issues in China's neighbourhood. They argue that these factors have inhibited the Chinese leadership's ability to completely abandon the „keeping a low profile” international strategy and unleash its ambition completely. As China's leading media reported, the vision of „building a community with a shared future for mankind” was, by unanimous vote, adopted by the United Nations Security Council in February 2017 as part of a resolution which expressed „a consensus of the international community toward the significance and value of such a vision” (Cao 2018). The vision became part of the CPC Constitution in October 2017 and was written into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China at the annual session of the National People's Congress in March 2018 (Eder



2018).

In October 2017, President Xi told deputies at the 19th Communist Party Congress that there was time for China to take centre stage in the world and make a more outstanding contribution to humankind, as it would no longer shy away from world leadership and would even aspire to promote its economic model around the world (Mitchell and Clover 2017). His „Following a path of peaceful development and working to build a community of common destiny for humankind” speech was partial proof of continuation with the strategies of his predecessors as he did use their, albeit slightly altered, concepts and slogans but now with his strong personal stamp on it (Eder 2018). Apart from re-packing his closest associates, most highly experienced in dealing with the major Western countries (Shi 2018), in the Central Leading Group on Foreign Affairs and the Politburo Standing Committee, Xi obviously wanted to put aside professionals in MOFA while putting the Group in charge of the foreign policy. Takahara (2018) pointed out that Xi managed to „successfully strengthen his power and authority even further and virtually end collective leadership”. By doing so, Xi managed to have manoeuvre space for future China’s future external policy to be „soft” and „hard” at the same time, as, internally, criticism became less important, while his „assertive personality” would resist existing and potential pressure. Media reports also showed that the new era had indeed arrived, as apart from being overwhelmingly Xi-centred and full of news and analyses of his concepts and announcements, there were other detachments from the Party tradition and order. They started from the fact that official media reports about the Leading Group’s two conferences in 2018 did not mention either the Party leadership or previous leaders and their doctrines regarding foreign policy (*Xinhua* 2018).

Eder (2018) claims that Xi sees China at the centre of this new type of international relations in which the shifting global reality, along with the relative decline of the USA’s power, opened a strategic window for China to increase its global influence. This claim was confirmed at the high-level Central Conference on Work relating to Foreign Affairs on June 22 and 23, 2018. Xi Jinping’s thoughts on „the diplomacy of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” is a break from his previous speeches, as Xi no longer mentioned „non-alignment” with, or „non-interference” in other countries affairs. Instead of



„working towards”, he now wants to „lead” the reform of global governance (Eder 2018).

Concerning who won in the internal debate about the proper conduct of China’s diplomats – if there were room for any different expectations – the result was evident by the end of 2020. First, China’s foreign vice-minister Le Yucheng defended the manner of Chinese diplomats in totality. He criticised the use of the term „wolf warrior” as part of the „China threat theory” and deemed it as yet another „discourse trap”, saying it was designed to stop China from fighting back when being scolded by those „who have not awakened from their dreams 100 years ago” (Zhou 2020).

Such firm Chinese propaganda and fight-mode diplomacy provoked some countries to re-evaluate their China policy or at least its confidence in China as a long-term economic partner and political collaborator. Such an outcome could damage the interests of China in its pursuit of stabilisation, recovery from the global impact of Covid-19 and goals of the Two Centenaries. Moreover, it could increase the USA’s ongoing „decoupling” efforts, and Covid-19 provoked de-globalisation trends. Nevertheless, we believe that such manners and behaviour inspired by top policymakers over the past several years, and only echoed by China’s diplomatic personnel, will continue, especially concerning China’s „core interests” due to rising China’s confidence.

### **”CORE INTERESTS” AND CHALLENGES TO A GOOD-NEIGHBOUR FOREIGN POLICY**

China’s adherence to a hard-line approach when dealing with the outside world is difficult to separate from its leaders’ and maybe the general domestic public’s stands on Chinese history as an inevitable path of destiny. Furthermore, there is influential thinking of an inherited filial loyalty contract that is pertinent both inside China and between China and its neighbours (Varrall 2015). These and other elements of China’s identity, many created and propagated by the CPC and promulgated by its foreign policy apparatus – are, then again, firmly connected with Xi Jinping’s attempts focused on the Qing dynasty’s history codification and its adjustment to the current CPC’s needs, and its agenda and strategies. Chinese leaders’, intellectuals’, and the

general public's perception of Chinese history is an essential part of their worldview, including an understanding of how the outside world should treat China and vice versa. History is seen as a sort of destiny and proof of Chinese uniqueness and exceptionalism, which is taken as a fact by the Chinese and (again) has to be acknowledged by foreigners (Y. A. 2020). At the same time, due to its uniqueness, these foreigners, not being part of the Chinese cultural zone, could not accurately understand it or be a part of it. Others (Zhang 2013), although they insist that Chinese exceptionalism „does not determine its policy”, also claim that it has been a crucial way the Chinese leaders and many intellectuals see China's identity, and as such can affect their decisions as being an essential source of their ideas and values. Accordingly, it has become „a normative theory” for China's foreign policy.

We also argue that China's recent entrenchment in a „victim mentality” gives it alleged legitimacy to act aggressively in expressing claims and pursuing their realisation to the detriment of weaker neighbours and other countries. These countries might have conflicting interests or should just face retaliation for their past evil deeds as a justification for „historical injustices and humiliation” that China had experienced by Western powers and Japan. It is closely connected with the carefully crafted official narrative of China's history of the Qing dynasty during Xi's leadership and the fight against those at home and abroad who questioned that narrative (Crossley 2019). That narrative is based on the claims that the Qing dynasty was unique and different from other empires, as it had expanded its territory towards Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia, Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan peacefully, based on its cultural and economic attractiveness to other nations and states that became part of the Qing Empire or came under its dominance. The idea that the Qing Empire rising to its grandiose 18<sup>th</sup>-century size and power – from cultural to economic – was established peacefully is, as Crossley and others pointed out, the source of China's current claims in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, as well as part of its „core interests” regarding Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang or any other part of its disputed and claimed „sovereign territory”. China lays its claims on the historical geography or even cartography, as proved in the case of border clashes of the PLA troops with the Indian Army around the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh, in the Kashmir region, on 16 June 2020 that left more than twenty Indian soldiers

dead (BBC 2020), it effectively translates this narrative into actions.

Additionally, the current Chinese narrative of Chinese, by nature, peace-loving culture, many times emphasised by Xi Jinping, includes Confucianism as the core of Chinese tradition in the past and today, contrary to the traditional official historical view of it in previous works of the PRC's historians. These and other elements of a vast ideological front – revitalised during Xi's era inside China for the sake of homogenisation and towards the outside world for confrontation with competing ideologies – are part of the CPC's regular ideology work (Brown 2012). What is new is that, in Xi's time, the capacity for waging it has grown enormously – from technological capability, tightening the Party's control over the PLA and security apparatus, the state and society, to the acquired global relational and structural power of the PRC.

However, China's strategic view that peace and stability were preconditions for development and vice versa, and as such had to be maintained, was followed by China's foreign policy activities in Asia-Pacific first and within the OUN more or less constantly in the first decades of the reform and opening-up policy. For economic and security reasons, China intensified good-neighbour diplomacy during the mid-1990s, as put by Wang Yi: „The local area surrounding China represents the lynchpin vital to China's ability to protect its sovereignty and interests, and to demonstrate its international role” (Wang 2003). Nevertheless, since the time after 2008, China has progressively moved away from that consistency. According to the State Council's white paper entitled „China's Peaceful Development” from 2011, China's core interests include: 1) state sovereignty; 2) national security; 3) territorial integrity; 4) national reunification; 5) China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability; 6) essential safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development (The State Council of the PRC 2011). China's relations with ASEAN and bilateral relations with ten member states developed rapidly since the early 1990-s through a variety of frameworks, projects and initiatives launched by China within the framework of the ASEAN Plus One, the ASEAN Plus Three and others, as well as bilaterally (Mitrović 2013). Such mutually beneficial and consistent development of cooperation led to a trust-building relationship that was even more enhanced by launching the ASEAN–China Free Trade

Area. However, as misunderstandings between China and five ASEAN nations, which have disputes with China over maritime sovereignty, artificial islands, fishing areas, and continental shelf demarcation, erupted, it affected the complete relationship with ASEAN and China's relationship with most Southeast Asian countries has become burdened and complex. Complex relations with its neighbours will only become more difficult to run after the Covid-19 crisis and China's most recent forceful acts during the pandemic.

During the first months of 2020 and the pandemic, China has aggressively pursued aspirations regarding its „core interests”, behaving like any other major power. While taking uncompromising moves against countries questioning its role in the global spread of the new coronavirus, China has simultaneously been building up its military and space<sup>5</sup> capacities while increasing tensions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. China's expanded naval presence came as USA Navy ships in the area have suffered coronavirus outbreaks, where the infection was found among the crews of four USA aircraft carriers. It has since put China's neighbours on alert and added misery to the ongoing crisis. (Tangen Jr. 2020).<sup>6</sup> China continued satellite launches on 19 February 2020, in the early months of the coronavirus outbreak, by launching a Long March 2D rocket (Howell 2020). According to the China National Space Administration (CNSA), Chang'e-5, the most challenging mission in China's aerospace history, started on 24 November, landed on the moon's near side on 1 December, and returned to China on 17 December. The mission accomplished numerous milestone accomplishments for China (*Xinhua* 2020b).

On 18 April 2020, Chinese media reported on the State Council's decision to set up two administrative units on islands in the South China Sea.<sup>7</sup> This „major administrative move” meant that the Xisha district would be used for controlling Paracel Islands

5 China resumed satellite launches on 19 February 2020, amidst the ongoing coronavirus outbreak, launching a Long March 2D rocket (Howell 2020).

6 On 2 April 2020, a Chinese vessel hit a Vietnamese fishing boat, causing it to sink near Paracel Islands, with the fishers being saved by a third party. The Vietnamese foreign ministry lodged an official protest against China two days later, stating that the Chinese vessel „violated Vietnam's sovereignty”.

7 According to the State Council, Sansha City was established on 24 July 2012 „to administer the Xisha, Zhongsha and Nansha islands and their surrounding waters in the South China Sea. The whole city covers nearly two million square kilometres, but including only around 20 square kilometres of land area now”. The establishment caused protests from neighbouring states contesting the same areas of the South China Sea (*CGTV* 2020).

and surrounding waters and the Nansha district for governing the Spratly Islands and surrounding waters in the heart of the area contested by six regional countries. Again, this decision caused high tensions as it implied lasting consequences and aimed to formalise and make China's control permanent. The next day, Vietnam submitted a formal protest against the decision, followed by two protests from the Philippines (*Reuters* 2020, *Nikkei Asia* 2020).<sup>8</sup>

Even though China and ASEAN countries are working on a new practicable code of conduct (and until then, keeping the existing arrangements alive) for the issues in the South China Sea, these questions are on China's list of „core issues” and as such leave no room for negotiation. They are also in the midst of China's efforts to realise its' total geopolitical reach of the South Pacific and the USA's attempt to avert it from occurring.<sup>9</sup> Chinese foreign policy that traditionally first and foremost is focused on its neighbours, as pointed out (Wang 2003), will be challenged enormously to preserve solid relations with ASEAN countries as China continues to increase its maritime power in and from the South China Sea through the expansion of its sovereignty over the artificially constructed and militarised islands. The progressive, assertive grip of nearly the entire South China Sea by China, backed by its military force, also demonstrated during the Covid-19 crisis, has broken much of the hard diplomatic work achieved in the earlier decades. Then again, as a consequence of its antagonistic actions and using the disadvantages of others in this time of the disaster, China could isolate itself and destabilise long-term and inter-dependency in the region, even from those sharing gratefulness for Chinese medical assistance.

## **”MAJOR COUNTRY” ROLE, SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

Xi's foreign policy concentrates on global governance and China's increased role in it. During only three first years in office,

8 Manila also protested against Chinese vessels „pointing of a radar gun at a Philippine Navy ship in Philippine waters”. On 22 April, US Secretary of State M. Pompeo said that his country „strongly opposes China's bullying”. Chinese naval vessels reportedly passed between Taiwan and the Philippines on 23 April, according to the Japanese Sankei News. On 2 May, Vietnam protested against „China's unilateral fishing ban” in the South China Sea disputed area imposed unilaterally by China from 1 May to 16 August.

9 For in-depth analyses, please consult: (Zarić 2018).

he visited more than thirty countries and became the most-travelled PRC leader. Hu Jintao, by contrast, visited seven foreign countries during his ten years as the top leader (*Los Angeles Times* 2019). Xie Tao (2018) claims that Xi's foreign-policy focus is based on his determination to increase overseas political influence. Part of that project was a duty of Chinese foreign policy and media apparatus to globally spread China's narrative or keep telling the World „China's story" well (Bandurski, 2017). Engraved in Xi's foreign policy, the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was China's most strategic steps towards having a much more substantial impact on global economic and political affairs, affirming its influence on shaping the world. We argue that undoubtedly the BRI is outward-oriented, it was created to answer China's domestic economic, political, security, and social requirements. As the landmarks of the Xi era, advancement of the BRI projects has become one of the top occupations of all Chinese diplomats, including China's „core leader", but Covid-19, together with the USA's tech-war on China, created severe problems.

„What kind of world should we shape?" (Le 2019). In answering this question, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the initiative of jointly building a community with a shared future for humankind and an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security and shared prosperity. In its narrative about the existing global order and China's current and desired role in its remodelling, top Chinese officials continually propose, with rare exceptions, a productive and constructive role of China that includes public goods which China is ever more able to propose to the international community that „lives in a globalised world where countries are interdependent. It is China's proposal to the international community in response to the major changes in today's world" (Le 2019). Additionally, when describing China's capacity to offer these public goods to the world, there is a statement that devotion to „peace and harmony" is inborn in Chinese civilisation that, as claimed, has always advocated and practised the „peaceful coexistence, peaceful development and a harmonious world" (Le 2019).

In most documents and speeches of China's top officials or advisers, „peace and development" and „win-win" cooperation persist as favourable trends that lead toward a multi-polar world and strengthen globalisation. They warn against protectionism as a harmful and ineffective practice and unilateralism as a self-



destructive force in an environment of growing interdependency. They implicitly refer to the USA's unilateralism, protectionism, and disrespect of international norms or organisations, placing China on the opposite side of the line as a major country that offers solutions. The source of China's constructive and „win-win cooperation” paved path is China's role as a leader or at least the most significant helping hand of the developing countries, opening the door for the underprivileged but the majority of nations.<sup>10</sup> According to this narrative, China and the global South share a bitter history of hardship and suffering as victims of imperialist countries and, at the same time, are destined to prosper. Being the first among them to become powerful and resourceful while remaining „the biggest developing country”, China is turning to help them address the shortcomings in development and stability.

China is using its financial and other economic assets, human, political and military means, and creating platforms for multilateral and bilateral cooperation apart from enhancing the existing frameworks, such as Group 77+China, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), and the China-CELAC Forum, and the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) and others. Supported by the crucial South-South cooperation platforms, including BRICS, China's robust support to stronger relations and cooperation with the developing countries in the Arab region, Latin America, the South Pacific and other regions are showing positive drive and impetus expected to become even more profound.

The People's Republic of China Relations with Africa has always had great importance and accordingly occupied such a position in its foreign policy. In the early years of the „reform and opening up” era, Chinese leaders proposed „equality and mutual benefit, emphasis on practical results, diversity in form, and pursuit of common development” as the four basic principles of cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC [MOFA]. n.d.). President Xi offered the African countries a „China-Africa Community of Common Destiny”, announcing that China will

<sup>10</sup> Vice Minister Le Yucheng emphasised that this cooperation is showing renewed momentum supported by key South-South cooperation platforms, including the G77+China and BRICS, China's friendly relations and cooperation with developing countries in the Arab region, Latin America, the South Pacific and other regions are (Le 2019).



serve as a guardian of Africa's peace and stability and facilitate Africa's economic development by expanding investments in Africa. He promised that China would stand as a supporter of a strong, unified Africa by deepening cooperation with the African Union, Africa's sub-regional organisations, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and facilitating Africa's equal participation in international affairs. It gave impetus to China's growing ties with the continent. China's is currently Africa's number one trade partner, while China's investments and loans make the most significant *per-capita* impact in African states (Wigglesworth 2020).

Nevertheless, contrary to the regional diplomacy approach and cooperation pursued on a multilateral level, China's policy towards Africa has been mainly conducted bilaterally. China is also the most significant contributor of military forces to the UN missions in the African continent, participating in sixteen peacekeeping operations, sending approximately 20,000 troops, and taking part in anti-pirate operations in the eastern African waters. The African continent offered China the opportunity to establish its first foreign military base in Djibouti.

As part of the globalisation setup and China's transformation into a trade super-power, for most countries, China stands as the biggest trading partner as it is also the most prominent global industrial producer. Even though some multinational corporations started to shift their production units away from China, as the pandemic has shown, the existing global chains of production and trade with China at its centre proved to be unsafe. Their bottom-line profit estimation annulled many of the comparative advantages of the Chinese market. Others were motivated by rising costs of production in China and discrimination towards foreign business entities, while some, like Tesla Motors, continued their investment in China's economy. In addition to these reasons, Japanese corporations had started to develop a „China Plus” investment exit strategy after the deterioration of the bilateral relations in 2012 and orchestrated anti-Japanese riots and attacks on Japanese properties in China. Indian companies joined this trend for security reasons and based on anti-China sentiment after border classes in August 2021 (Marandi 2020).

As part of its efforts to buffer the consequences of the technology war with the United States, China started to relax

relations with Japan and made diplomatic preparations to resize bilateral ties. That would rank high on the foreign policy agenda of China in the near and medium-term framework, though difficult due to the deep mistrust of Kishida's administration towards China's ambitions and acts in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Similar and even more intense aggressive moves by China's empowered navy will undoubtedly make things more difficult in cultivating a positive response to China's foreign policy with Japan (Abe 2020).<sup>11</sup>

China-USA relations have been facing severe problems and are marked with deep mutual mistrust while their development is defined by major power competition. Significant differences between the two rose from competing ideology and values, which are mirrored in various strategic issues, quarrels on models of governance, domestic and international business practices, legal, technological and trade disputes, and breach of human rights accusations and sanctions, regional escalations in East and South China Sea – especially regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong democracy crackdown and Uyghurs rights in Xinjiang.<sup>12</sup> These are just a few of the dominant points of disagreement. The understanding in Beijing that the USA has had a strategic ideological approach towards China, which meant that they would not only disrespect China's achievements and contributions to the world but that such an approach would make them unable to interact peacefully with China, was getting a more decisive influence on decision making and foreign policy implementation in Beijing. The process of relational breakdown accelerated after the Obama administration's *Asia Pivot* and the Trump administration's targeting of China as a „revisionist power” and strategic competitor in relevant documents, further exacerbating by rising anti-China sentiment in a much broader political and public arena in the West. China

11 Amid the Covid-19 crisis and state of emergency ongoing in epidemic hit Japan, on 28 April 2020, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning and a five-ship group sailed between the Okinawa and Miyako islands in Japan's Okinawa Prefecture, according to Japanese military authorities. It occurred for the second time in that month. According to *Nikkei Asian Review*, China's Coast Guard continued to intrude into waters near the Japanese administrated Senkaku Islands that are also part of a long-time complicated dispute as China claims them as Diaoyu islands and part of its territory. On 8 May, four Coast Guard Chinese ships entered the waters and chased a Japanese fishing boat „in an unusually aggressive mode”.

12 For more in-depth analyses, please consult: (Trailović 2019).

is described in official documents and the wider USA public as seeking to „shape a world antithetical to US values and interests”.

Even though on China’s side, there is an understanding that China and the USA have closely intertwined interests and facilitate broad areas of cooperation, should pursue „common progress and development”. After the Osaka meeting of Xi and Trump in June 2019, China’s top diplomats announced that the two leaders agreed to continue pursuing a China-US relationship based on „coordination, cooperation and stability” and a new round of trade consultations. China has engaged in trade negotiations with the USA, hoping to manage their differences, remaining open to meet some demands of the USA, but firm not to accept restraints that would obstruct its development and „national rejuvenation” goals. Nevertheless, China’s „mask diplomacy” was again interpreted in Washington as a fulfilment of the discourse on gradually setting up a more substantial Chinese presence on the global stage, whereas „wolf warrior diplomacy” took this relationship to another low point. A three-hour virtual meeting of Xi and Biden on 16 November 2021 was presented by Washington as an effort „to ensure that the competition between (two) countries does not veer into conflict” (Powell and Widakuswara 2021). On his side, Xi pointed out that while running domestic affairs well, the two should bear their „share of international responsibilities and work together to advance the noble cause of global peace and development” (Powell and Widakuswara 2021). While both would prefer to avoid direct conflict and find a minimal joint platform of consent to manoeuvre the differences, neither side is ready to retreat from defending core values and strategic interests. How this strategic rivalry will be handled will significantly impact China’s future and the future of the USA and the world.

China-Russia relations will continue to play a vital role in the realisation of China’s domestic and external strategic goals, particularly in security, the economy, and regional cooperation, as well as in shared efforts on the multilateral scene, including strategic coordination. At the bilateral level, close relations between President Putin and President Xi, who met thirty times during the last eight years, provide additional impetus for developing „a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”. Chinese top diplomats describe the China-Russia relationship as being „at its best in history”. Announced Russian President Putin’s visit as a special guest at the opening of the

Winter Olympics Beijing 2022 is just another proof of it (Yang and Zhang 2021).

China's efforts to finalise negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership were being brought forward and rewarded by triumph, while those linked to the China-Japan-ROK free trade agreement were the first to recoup after the initial stage of the pandemics. A concept and practice based on building „a community with a shared future with neighbouring countries” offered not just to ASEAN, which has strategic partnership relations with the PRC, but recently extended to India, Japan, and later the entire international community. Additionally, on the positive side, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization continues to expand its influence, demonstrating a positive example of China's regional engagement while becoming a true player in regional cooperation by exercising „unity, mutual trust, shared security, mutual benefit and inclusiveness” (Le 2018).

China-EU relations, established forty-seven years ago and since developed into a strategic partnership, were traditionally constructive, based on long-time expectations and considerations. The EU was seen by China as an essential player in a multi-polar world, though shadowed and heavily influenced by EU-USA relations. The EU, as the world's largest unified global market, was of particular importance to China, proven by 1.8 billion euro in trade value per day. Although the two have had differences, especially on human rights, their cooperation has developed immensely on numerous platforms (Mitrović 2022). It has also included cooperation on wide-ranging globally important issues where shared interests were identified, such as the peaceful resolution of global conflicts, climate change mitigation, sustainable development, food and energy security, nuclear non-proliferation, social justice and connectivity, and the defence of multilateralism with the OUN at its core (Mitrović 2022).

Nevertheless, the global aspirations of China, especially after the formation of the „Sixteen plus One” format with European countries, and China insisting on its way of conducting business on its market and along the Belt and Road, including „the Sixteen/Seventeen”, became an obstacle and caused scrutiny in the EU political circles and the general public (Mitrović 2016). The European Commission released „*EU-China: Strategic Outlook*,” branding China as „an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival

promoting alternative models of governance” (Small 2020), thereby initiating a crucial shift in thinking regarding China. Clashes during the Covid-19 crisis have only served to deepen the mistrust and expose their positions. The most logical area to pursue cooperation in the future will be green recovery from Covid-19 consequences while searching for consensus on global governance and free trade.

Seeing the OUN as the fundamental institution of the existing international order, China’s crucial global role as „a major country” (Hu 2019) is connected with its engagement in settlement of political hotspots, such as having played „an important and unique role” in advancing the political settlement in the Korean Peninsula (Le 2019). On the Iranian nuclear issue, China has supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) while pursuing its interests in the Middle East. It took part and have actively facilitated peace talks and promoted the political settlement of such issues as northern Myanmar, Afghanistan, Syria and the conflict between Palestine and Israel (Le 2019).

## CONCLUSION

In this analysis, we presumed that China’s primary strategic positions and following policies and goals would remain consistent and as much as possible buffered from the adverse effects of the pandemic, which proved to be a correct assumption. We also conclude that analysed trends, sources of strategic standpoints and policies, changed modes of China’s foreign policy and diplomacy will continue.

As China sees the international landscape growing in uncertainty, instability and unpredictability (Small 2020), it finds it crucial to rely on „a growing consensus among the international community for upholding multilateralism” (Le 2019) where and when such an approach suits its ambitions and goals. Parallel to those, it will keep enforcing its unilateral or minilateral projects and agendas and „fight” to preclude and bumper threats in fulfilling its strategic goals.

China will also continue to share concerns about attempts to break existing international industrial chains of production and trade and the dangerous „practice of hegemony” and call for

a joint effort to preserve global peace and development needed by most humankind to protect its domestic economic goals, which are crucial for China's political stability and CCP security. Understandably, Chinese strategists see economic globalisation as the suitable framework for furthering China's development and rise amid global supply chains and for future development of its regional and global initiatives and projects. China's foreign policy will thus centre its activities on strengthening the globalisation processes and projects.

China's foreign policy objectives will focus on realising external elements of the China Dream goals, including the Belt and Road Initiative that stretches out over Eurasia, South-East Asia, South Asia, Africa and Latin America, and other intercontinental and regional formats for cooperation. It will also focus its attention on global governance as a favourable framework for exercising its role of „responsible great power” and on China's initiatives and policies to fulfil its desired and needed role in global leadership. Moreover, these policy measures will continue to realise President Xi's calls to actively promote economic globalisation and build an „open world economy”, including implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Nonetheless, all these goals serve the main ones – the security and stability of the existing political system with CCP as the leading force of China.

We argue that China will endure in actively fulfilling its primary strategic goals via its foreign policy as fighting to preserve stability and sustainability of its economic model. China's foreign policy will focus on realising the external conditions for fulfilling China Dream goals while minimising negative external influences. These goals allow China to offer financial assistance to numerous states and spread its cultural, economic and political influence. Realising these goals provides China with international security and increases further its power. Its economic goals will always have a high priority since, if met, they grant legitimacy to the rule of the CCP. Fulfilled economic goals provide the CCP and the PRC domestic security that constantly comes as the first strategic goal of its leaders. China's foreign policy and its self-confident diplomatic mode, as proved highly successful even during the pandemic, will continue, deeply rooted in domestic political dynamism strategic goals of the CCP.

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## **УТИЦАЈ ПАНДЕМИЈЕ НА СПОЉНУ ПОЛИТИКУ НР КИНЕ И ЊЕНУ УЛОГУ ГЛОБАЛНЕ СИЛЕ\*\***

### **Сажетак**

У овом раду полазимо од претпоставке да Кина, попут других великих сила, не мења исхитрено своје стратешке погледе и пратеће понашање, чак и када је изложена снажним спољним утицајима, каква је и пандемија Ковид-19. Са друге стране, тако значајни глобални догађаји могу убрзати или продубити текуће трендове или промене у односима великих сила, самог глобалног система и места Кине у њему. Сходно томе, утицај пандемије на промене у кинеској спољној политици, као најдиректнијој алатки за спровођење циљева у спољном свету, будући да је она одраз унутрашње политичке динамике и домаћих потреба за стабилношћу и безбедношћу, не би требало да буде другачији. Иако полазимо од тезе да до сада није било, те да и надаље неће бити промена главног курса и средњорочних циљева кинеске спољне политике, истраживали смо могуће утицаје пандемије на убрзавање или успоравање текућих токова и потенцијалних модификација насталих под тим утицајем. Наша анализа је имала за циљ да идентификује и истражи да ли је до ових промена дошло, како бисмо проверили нашу почетну претпоставку.

**Кључне речи:** Кина, велика сила, Ковид-19, спољна политика, односи међу великим силама, глобално управљање

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