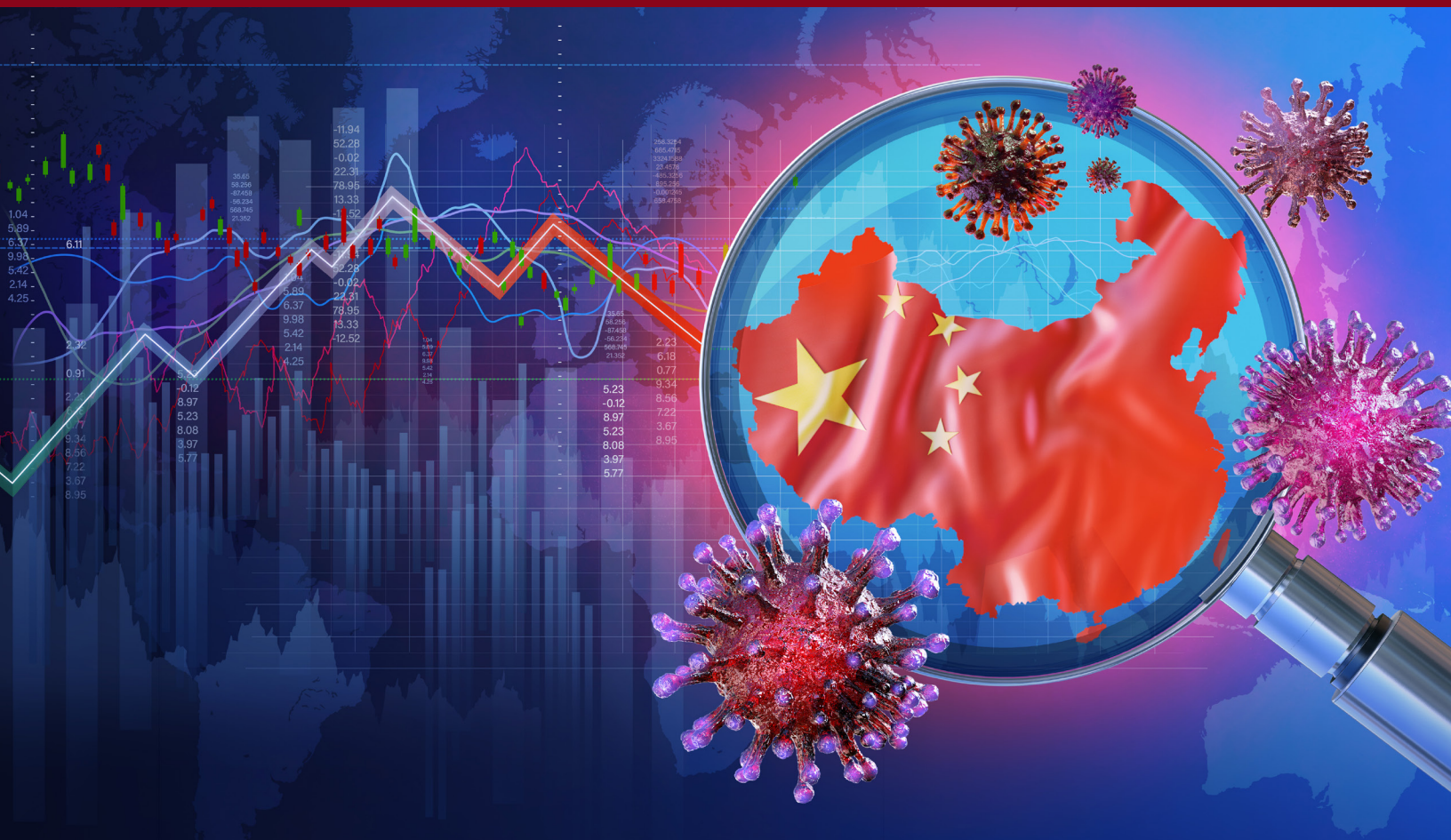


Post-COVID China: Core Strategic Drivers and Multi-Dimensional Asymmetric Warfare in Asia

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Current Drivers of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Strategic Actions: Enforcing “Rights,” Correcting Regional “Anomalies”

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, headed by President-for-life Xi Jinping, views itself as the unquestioned master of roughly 1.4 billion Chinese citizens and 5,000 years of Chinese civilizational history. Over the course of this history, the CCP believes that China has been the primary state in the Asia-Pacific region. This has been embedded in the Mandarin Chinese language with China’s name for itself, Zhongguo, which translates to English as “Middle Kingdom.” The CCP views the previous roughly 100-year time period of both Western (particularly American) and Japanese (albeit short-lived) leadership of the Asia-Pacific as historically aberrant, temporary, and due to hostile and parasitic actions carried out by China’s adversaries. Xi and the CCP leadership view their strategies and tactics as serving as correctives for these anomalies and the

current unnatural state of regional affairs. Put simply, Xi and the CCP believe that China’s time for regional dominance has come and they are entitled to redeem this right regardless of third-party considerations.

China’s Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea is not an opening negotiating position. It is an absolute claim. The same strategic principle of absolutism is present regarding the East China Sea, Taiwan, and disputed territory with India. While Xi has occasionally taken measured actions against the Kim Jong-Un regime in North Korea, China is unlikely to strategically abandon Pyongyang given concerns over a potential pro-American unified Korea. At this stage, China’s strategic map of core non-negotiable national interests is fixed, rigid, and unchanging. Given China’s self-assessed superior response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing believes that their system of governance has proven to be superior to notions of liberal democracy, free market capitalism, and constitutional government that underpin Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the United States, Australia, and India. The CCP clearly does not view it as

necessary to engage in conventional diplomacy or provide any rationale for its actions as evidenced by its recent forced absorption of Hong Kong and continuous hostile military activities against Taiwan. The CCP also continues to summarily dismiss any outside concerns over Tibet or Xinjiang and this is unlikely to change.

China's General Approach Towards the United States: Barbarian Management

Many American leaders (both public and private sector) and strategists believed that Deng Xiaoping's post-1978 reforms combined with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 would result in China moving down an inevitable pathway of a multi-party democratic system that mirrored its other East Asian neighbors as well as the United States. We now know this was a false hope. The only component of the American system that the CCP has adopted is capitalism as it enables the procurement of resources and strategic technologies for state purposes in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. There is strong evidence that the wealthier China has become, the more deeply embedded and solidified the CCP system of one-party autocratic leadership, pervasive surveillance and control, mercantilism, and militarism has become. This immense error in American strategic planning must be corrected as an urgent matter as we are near the threshold of historic irreversibility.

The CCP does not fear the United States or view the country as possessing a superior culture or system of government and economic organization. Xi and the CCP leadership even appear to view the United States as a tributary ("barbarian") state. Under this logic, America needs to be managed by co-opting certain domestic segments with financial rewards and other incentives that are designed to placate American

leadership, reduce any logical threat perceptions, and to incentivize these privileged groups to ensure that "China's Peaceful Rise" is the dominant theme.

Meanwhile, the past several decades of development of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been focused almost exclusively on US-centric anti-access and area-denial capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region. This trend has been particularly acute in the maritime domain with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Chinese Coast Guard (which has one of the largest inventories in the world and is PLAN-interoperable), and now the Maritime Militia. These forces now continuously engage in aggressive and hostile operations against American forces and a range of U.S. Treaty Allies such as the Philippines. Evidence from the CCP's dealing with key Southeast Asian states over the South China Sea dispute demonstrates a preference for bilateral dealings that disproportionately favor Beijing. For Xi and the CCP leadership, America is standing in the way of this otherwise natural regional order that enables unquestioned Chinese dominance in Asia.

In Every Crisis, There is Opportunity (For China)

Evidence has shown that the CCP and PLA leadership is taking the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to achieve strategic goals that were previously considered costly or impossible. Key CCP decisions and actions taken during the COVID-19 period suggest that most Chinese foreign policy actions have been driven by strategic considerations and by the PLA. Recent activities by the PLAN, Coast Guard and Maritime Militia demonstrate the Chinese leadership's view of American military presence and its associated security guarantees of key sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) as unnecessary.

The Chinese leadership has thus prioritized the controlling of the South China Sea and developing, validating, and maintaining the ability to blunt American abilities to intervene in multiple South China Sea scenarios. This would give China new strategic options in relation to Taiwan, traditional Southeast Asian rivals such as Vietnam, and to control highly valuable fisheries and subsea oil and gas deposits. China could also hold multiple SLOCs at risk in the event of disputes with Japan, the United States, India and other adversaries that have critical dependence on supply chains that transit the South China Sea.

The 2015 Hague Court ruling and traditional diplomacy have proven unable to calm tensions in the South China Sea. On the contrary, the strategic situation has continued to escalate exponentially without any clear de-escalation pathways. This is especially critical given China's near unitary focus on this theater pertaining to the development of its anti-access/area denial strategies which rely heavily on near-zero warning precision strike capabilities against key U.S./Allied military assets throughout the Asia Pacific, including well outside the immediate South China Sea region.

The CCP's unique strategy of simultaneously utilizing low-end and high-end methods warrants some additional examination. The low-end includes sending "civilian" fishing vessels to harass civilian and military vessels of various Southeast Asian countries, Taiwan and the United States. The high-end includes developing and deploying hypersonic missiles designed to keep U.S./Allied Forces confined to the First Island Chain, Second Island Chain, or even the U.S. West Coast. Some assessments have suggested that the DFZF, China's key deployed hypersonic missile platform, can hit targets on the U.S. West

Coast within an hour of launch, even from within China. In this highly unpredictable and escalatory environment, historical precedents and traditional established strategic templates have limited utility.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is China's increasingly aggressive and bold use of its civilian fishing vessel fleet, often referred to as the Maritime Militia. It engages in military-style operations independently or in coordination with China's Coast Guard, a force that has a fleet that closely resembles an advanced navy and can engage in conventional combat operations in the South and East China Seas. One well known tactic that has been witnessed in the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal is referred to as a "cabbage strategy" where Chinese fishing vessels, Chinese Coast Guard vessels and occasionally PLAN vessels encircle a disputed island or maritime feature like the concentric leaves of a cabbage to gradually alter the status quo and establish de-facto Chinese control.

This approach of utilizing the entire spectrum of strategic capabilities is designed to maximize strategic ambiguity and unpredictability. At the low end, traditional and validated frameworks related to deterrence (pre-event and/or in-event), response protocols, and escalation/de-escalation control become blurry and difficult to operationalize in dealing with nominally civilian Chinese fishing vessels that only occasionally operate in a multi-modal manner.

The CCP is aware of this and is willing to push these activities as close into conventional strategic territory as possible, a threshold which still has not been breached as evidenced by the fact that the U.S. Navy and other allied forces have yet to take kinetic action against a Chinese civilian fishing vessel, even during "cabbage operations."

In the domain of advanced weapons platforms, while Chinese surface ship, submarine and aircraft carrier-based capabilities are significant, it is China's hypersonic missiles that introduce the greatest number of free variables and generate the most potential instability given the challenges of determining their trajectories under highly compressed timescales. While at extreme ends of the technological spectrum, China's civilian fishing vessel fleet and its hypersonic missiles share the same set of strategic principles designed to "muddy the waters" as much as possible to keep China's adversaries off balance and in suspense about the primary impacts of any kinetic action.

All available evidence suggests that the CCP and PLA are seeking to fully maximize this blurry strategic situation in the South China Sea to bring about a solution that enforces all of China's claims without any compromise. Central to this will be the attempt to deter, confuse and/or rapidly blunt any American involvement in this theater of operations. However, this approach also carries the risk of multi-geography escalation well outside of the initial South China Sea area.

China's Multi-Dimensional Compressed Battlespace – Weaponized Viruses at the Core?

Chinese leaders and strategists do not make policy, analytical, or operational distinctions between, for example, trade and finance issues, public health, and military affairs. There is a long-standing and well-evidenced pattern of the CCP viewing all complex issues of international affairs within one single compressed battlespace in which China must aggregate and strategically utilize its comprehensive national power across these multiple domains to achieve asymmetric victories against the United

States. This strain has been present since at least the Deng Period and arguably prior to that. Wang and Qiao's landmark 1999 publication, "Unrestricted Warfare," was a manifestation of a much broader strategic philosophy that generated the currents which Wang and Qiao drew upon. Biological warfare has consistently figured centrally in this doctrine.

The net effects of COVID-19 on the American system have been severe and unprecedented. During the most acute phases of the pandemic in mid-2020, the USS Theodore Roosevelt and USS Ronald Reagan Aircraft Carrier Strike Groups had to be withdrawn from the Asia-Pacific due to COVID-19 infection risks. These withdrawals coincided with a statistical increase in Chinese strategic activities in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

While the final epidemiological figures are still being adjudicated, it appears that American fatalities from COVID-19 are more than two times the American battle deaths suffered in World War 2. The human and economic cost of COVID-19 clearly destabilized the Trump Presidency and available evidence suggests that this was one of the primary reasons for his election loss. These lessons are not lost on the CCP.

COVID-19 has proven to be a low-cost weapons system with point-of-origin obfuscation. One of the most astonishing elements of the COVID-19 pandemic is how little reliable fundamental information we presently have about it. Setting aside point-of-origin considerations (i.e., lab leak versus natural event), this virus achieved strategic effects against multiple core American interests that in some ways exceeded those that could be achieved with conventional weapons platforms. The point-of-origin of a missile for example can be readily detected and nation-state attributions can be made.

COVID-19 has also had non-linear impacts on multiple strategic national assets (i.e., defense and aerospace manufacturing facilities) as well as entire American population centers at multiple levels. Weaponized viruses can be produced with relatively small teams at a fraction of the cost of conventional weapons. Weaponized viruses are also continually generating in nature, with a particularly high frequency in China.

The Next Big One: Does China Have 'Leapfrog' Capabilities in Asymmetric Biowarfare?

Any military force and broader population that can immediately respond to and contain the next major pandemic would have a major strategic advantage and set of options over an opposing force and/or broader population that is not. In the case of China, the CCP also has the ability to force vaccinations domestically, thereby further stimulating China's own biopharmaceutical sector through bulk purchases and long-term supply contracts.

Leading American/Western vaccine manufacturers are publicly traded with all of the related considerations regarding information disclosure, transparency, and regulatory filings. This has the effect of these companies having to be highly strategic and precise regarding which vaccine development projects they pursue with strong clinical, epidemiological, and financial justifications to shareholders.

In the case of Chinese state-owned companies, few of the above considerations apply. This may allow Chinese vaccine developers to take a fundamentally different approach of widespread platform development and maintaining multiple options on "hot standby" for rapid escalation. Efficacy data of the Sinopharm/Sinovac vaccine will be critical and early indications

look promising.

Many in America have been suffering from the "Silicon Valley Effect," which essentially posits:

"We are modern people who have advanced well beyond the natural challenges that our ancestors faced. We no longer need to worry about pandemics – we are making leapfrog advances in artificial intelligence and we have smartphones."

However, predictive analytical software solutions are of little utility if there are no physical products to directly deal with the virus in question. Despite billions being spent and invested in these software solutions over decades, we all locked ourselves indoors under blanket protocols very similarly to previous generations.

The experience of COVID-19 has demonstrated that epidemiological risks have a set of properties that make them inherently strategic. Again, this lesson is not likely lost on the CCP and Chinese strategists. Given this reality, American/Western vaccine developers must engage in more fundamental epidemiological data generation and research in Asia in order to drive more precise, shareholder-endorsed vaccine development projects. This includes incentives for private sector activity. The American firefighter approach will not likely work twice. China has more firetrucks and experienced firefighters nearby.

Chinese Cyber Industrial Espionage Against American COVID-19 Vaccine Development: More Than Scientific Prestige?

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security have accused Chinese hackers of targeting multiple research institutions, health-care providers and others involved in COVID-19 vaccine development to illicitly obtain information. This has been interpreted by analysts as an attempt to be the first to market a COVID-19 vaccine. However, there are some possible flaws in this argument. For one, the uptake for any Chinese manufactured COVID-19 vaccine is highly unclear in advanced markets and the most promising major emerging markets. These governments are capable of making massive bulk orders and locking in the long-term supply contracts that make vaccine development a high risk but also highly profitable exercise. Even licensing Chinese COVID-19 vaccine technology to a reputable multinational corporation would be highly unlikely given the close and often indistinguishable links between key Chinese biomedical/pharmaceutical companies and the Chinese state.

Other infectious diseases, such as HIV, MERS and SARS-COV-1, have caused substantial harm in China yet none have an effective vaccine. Intensive research has been underway for decades, especially in the case of HIV, yet these respective researchers have not apparently been subjected to the same massive and targeted onslaught of cyber industrial espionage as their counterparts working on COVID-19 projects. This targeting anomaly is substantial and should not be underestimated. The first company or nation to market an HIV vaccine would capture a similar, if not greater, amount of economic value as would

any company that could have developed the first COVID-19 vaccine. HIV is a globally endemic disease that has been in circulation for decades and is prevalent throughout multiple socio-economic income strata. Further, an HIV vaccine would likely be reimbursed by health insurers and/or national governments around the world.

Core Summary

Treating China as an essentially non-serious “developing nation” has had enormous strategic consequences for the United States. This has enabled China to enjoy an astonishingly permissible operating environment in which it enjoyed nearly uninhibited access to international financial markets as well as multiple strategic technologies. This occurred against the backdrop of overwhelming evidence that China has had a near unitary focus on achieving asymmetric advantages against the United States in Asia with these ambitions expanding into other critical regions such as the Middle East in time. The CCP has been highly successful in marshalling these resources for the state and now apparently believes that China has the unquestioned right to dominate the Asia-Pacific at a minimum.

In aggregate, America now faces a Chinese adversary led by the CCP that possesses advanced anti-access and area-denial capabilities in the Asia-Pacific, frequently threatens U.S. Allies in Asia and engages in targeted cyberattacks against specific American IPs for state purposes. China has never attempted to compete directly with the United States in every domain of national power at a 1:1 ratio. The CCP has exercised extraordinary discipline over decades to pinpoint and asymmetrically exploit what Beijing perceives are key American vulnerabilities over multiple domains under a warfare paradigm.

Given this reality, it is essential that new fundamental approaches are taken to this problem that properly recognize the shortcomings of previous approaches. These new approaches must be able to generate clear, executable options that more effectively utilize current-state American capabilities while also providing a strategic blueprint for the new capabilities that will be necessary to cease and reverse these adverse trends. We are clearly nearing the threshold of historic irreversibility.

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