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by Stephen Nagy and Hanh Nguyen
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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U.S.-China relations have [deteriorated](#) sharply under the Trump administration, putting an end to the engagement process that started in the 1970s. U.S. official documents, like the [2017 National Security Strategy](#), [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) and [2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report](#), characterized China as a “strategic competitor” that seeks to “challenge American power, influence and interests.” The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated Sino-U.S. tensions as President Donald Trump blamed it on China, with offensive epithets such as “[China virus](#)” and “[Kung Flu](#)”. China responded with its controversial “wolf warrior diplomacy.” Tensions reached new heights with a series of speeches by U.S. senior officials, culminating in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s [speech](#) about the danger the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses to America and the world. That speech followed the [closure](#) of the Chinese consulate in Houston after the U.S. government accused it of engaging in economic espionage. China [retaliated](#) with the closure of the U.S. consulate in Chengdu. Further, Trump signed an [executive order](#) prohibiting U.S. transactions related to two popular Chinese apps, TikTok and WeChat.

At first glance, the U.S.’s aggressive approach in rhetoric and actions can be attributed to Trump’s efforts to shift the blame to China to salvage his chances for re-election. The U.S.’s disastrous response to COVID-19, resulting in more than [225,000 deaths and eight million infections](#), has put Trump on the defensive for the upcoming election. Indeed, Trump is currently trailing his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, in nearly every [poll](#). Furthermore, the U.S. economy [contracted](#) a historic 32.9 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 due to a coronavirus surge and prolonged lockdown, compounding Trump’s woes.

Aggressive, ideological rhetoric has been a prominent characteristic of U.S. foreign policy under Trump. Besides the high-profile trade war, U.S.-China rivalry has heated up in other domains such as technology, finance and manufacturing. Then, there was Vice-President Mike Pence’s [speech](#) at the Hudson Institute in 2018, in which he accused China of pursuing a whole-of-government approach to advance its interests and influence in the United States. This sentiment is not exclusive to the Republican Party. Biden and the Democratic Party have identified China as a [challenge](#) for America. This rare bipartisan consensus does not stop with politics, but pervades American society, from the military to ordinary [citizens](#). Thus, a new U.S. administration will not lead to a substantial decrease in tensions.

Recent speeches by U.S. senior officials have gone further than the usual airing of U.S. complaints about China’s conduct. They cast China as a threat to America’s survival, portraying the CCP as a “bankrupt” Marxist-Leninist totalitarian regime waging ideological and political warfare against free democracies. For instance, a comparison of Pence’s 2018 speech and remarks by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security advisor Robert [O’Brien](#) shows that Pence’s speech neglected to mention one important aspect: the CCP’s communist ideology. The speech’s criticism of China’s conduct is largely constrained within the framework of the bilateral relationship. It did not portray the CCP and its ideology as a threat to free democracies, nor did it call on other global institutions like the UN, EU or NATO to unite against China’s challenges.



Another explanation lies in American strategic calculation. Aware of its relative decline and changing balance of power, the U.S. is trying to induce other countries to join a coalition against China, speaking to Graham Allison's [Thucydides trap](#). However, instead of pursuing a multilateral approach, which is a complicated and slow process as countries contemplate the cost and benefit of jumping on the bandwagon against China, the Trump administration apparently decided to go it alone, starting with an all-out offensive. The hope would be that other countries, especially those with [grave concerns about the implications of Chinese regional hegemony](#), would get on board quickly once they realized the U.S. is committed to preventing Chinese regional hegemony from emerging in the Indo-Pacific. This approach has possibly worked in the case of Huawei, since several countries have decided either to [ban](#) Huawei's 5G equipment or gradually [phase it out](#) of their networks in the face of U.S. pressure.

While countries are preoccupied with pandemic responses and economic recession, China is pursuing a [muscular attitude](#) in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and along the Sino-Indian border. Chinese diplomats have added a more [combative tone](#) to their rhetoric by employing "[wolf warrior diplomacy](#)." They have put forward a mixture of disinformation – including about the origins of the virus, acerbic public pushback against the U.S. and its allies, and proactive mask diplomacy in ASEAN and other countries – to defend China against criticism of its pandemic response and expand its soft power. In the face of U.S. escalation of bilateral tensions, China has pursued a mix of belligerent and conciliatory rhetoric. Aside from the usual criticism of American hegemony and its fumbling pandemic response, senior officials like Cui Tiankai, Chinese ambassador to the U.S., and Foreign Minister Wang Yi offered a more diplomatic tone when discussing the state of bilateral relations. These opposing directions in China's conduct require closer attention to Chinese leaders' assessment of the current situation and domestic politics to draw the distinction between performative diplomacy and deeper underlying instability.

Andrew Small and Dhruva Jaishankar [argued](#) that China's intensifying assertiveness could be interpreted using the four metrics of imperiousness, opportunism, reactivity and insecurity. Confident of its economic power and military capabilities, China might have believed that it could finally offer an alternative to the U.S.-dominated international order. COVID-19 also provided a rare chance for China to push for strategic gains, especially as it got a head start in pandemic containment compared to other countries. The mixture of imperiousness and opportunism explains China's wolf warrior diplomacy and its muscular approach to territorial disputes.

At the same time, China's more forceful attitude can be interpreted as a reaction to growing internal and external challenges. Depending on its assessment of the nature of these challenges, China might revert to appeasement when the situation is improved or maintain its combative posture if it genuinely believes that the change is permanent. Internally, China's domestic situation is not as smooth as it tries to project. After a steep slump in the first quarter of 2020, China's economy showed [signs of recovery](#) in the second quarter. Nonetheless, an in-depth analysis [revealed](#) that the CCP again relied on state-led investments to boost performance, making the target of transitioning the economy toward consumption-based growth more challenging to achieve. The CCP continues its crackdown on [democracy activists](#) in Hong Kong opposing the new



national security law and [dissidents](#) opposing President Xi Jinping's handling of the coronavirus pandemic at home. Rather than showing strength and confidence, these actions reveal insecurity and brittleness inside the regime.

Externally, Chinese [efforts to shape narratives](#) over the CCP's image, such as the June 2020 white paper, [Fighting COVID-19 – China in Action](#) (*Kangji Xinguan Feiyan Yiqing de Zhongguo Xingdong*), and its wolf warrior diplomacy, resulted in reputational damage in the U.S. and [EU](#), as evidenced in the [most recent PEW survey](#) which found “unfavorable views of China reaching historic highs in many countries.” Even though this combative posture is aimed at the domestic audience [to shore up the CCP's legitimacy](#), which implies an acceptance of the risk to reputation abroad, China still needs a stable regional environment to facilitate development and economic growth. Concern over growing backlash in the wake of the pandemic has already appeared in a Chinese internal [report](#) warning about a wave of anti-China sentiment. COVID-19 also exposed the vulnerability of a China-based supply chain, prompting countries to pursue [efforts](#) to diversify global supply chains.

China's [strategic goals](#) regarding economic growth, territorial claims, and regional and global leaderships will inevitably put it in competition, even potential conflicts, with the U.S. and its allies. Chinese leaders were cognizant of this complication and thus sought to manage the relationship with the U.S., hoping to simultaneously diffuse tensions and gain advantages. Trump's cowboy diplomacy and scorched-earth approach not only come at the wrong moment as China is battling multiple challenges, but they also threaten to derail China's other strategic objectives, which could have implications for the twin goals of realizing “[socialist modernization](#)” by 2035 and to “[have built a modern socialist country that is strong, prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious](#)” by 2049. With those goals in mind and China's track record of reciprocation rather than escalation when faced with Trumpian cowboy diplomacy, [Putnam's two-level game theory](#) and [Small and Jaishankar's framework](#) for understanding Chinese assertiveness suggest Beijing is looking to de-escalate bilateral tensions on its own terms.

These conflicting directions imply intense debates within the CCP about the future trajectory of China's foreign policy in an uncertain and challenging environment, which mirrors [developments](#) after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Then, factions within the CPP competed for influence, which resulted in a more moderate foreign policy. Nevertheless, the security environment in 1989 was markedly different from the current situation. While Chinese leaders still desire to maintain ties with the West to facilitate development, they are better positioned to push back against external pressures. Thus, while China seeks to reduce tensions with the U.S., the level of de-escalation might vary.

With a presidential election approaching, the Trump administration will intensify its cowboy diplomacy with China. Regional countries are alarmed by China's increasing assertiveness, but that does not necessarily mean they approve of Trump's unilateral approach. Instead, states on China's periphery both accommodate China and try to strike a balance against it. Ultimately, they prefer strategic autonomy. China might continue its defensive posture and avoid further escalation, hoping to weather this downturn until the U.S. has a new administration in November.



That administration might eschew cowboy diplomacy for a diplomatic approach that, as the dean of Cold War historians, John Lewis Gaddis, explains, focuses on overarching goals yet responds pragmatically to circumstances to push Sino-U.S. strategic competition away from a zero-sum approach.

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