

The Chinese Dream Has Awakened to a Global Nightmare

A Case for US-China Cooperative Security to Regain Stability in the Wake of Coronavirus

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Domestic reality in China during the reign of Xi Jinping has always been dichotomous.¹ On one hand, most contemporary Chinese believe their lives have rapidly improved and will continue to do so. On the other hand, citizens suspect improvement comes at the cost of corruption by the insidiously repressive tiers of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—or cadre management system—and express discontent regarding asymmetries and inequities observed in development among different segments of society.² The CCP is keenly aware of this tension and insecure that collective improvement—equitable or otherwise—will raise popular expectations for continued growth and development to levels difficult to sustain.³ As a result, Chinese leadership faces the continual pressure to accelerate social and economic improvement while maintaining domestic harmony. Thus, the CCP is fearful any deterioration in social order could challenge the party's existential, core interests—to preserve the government and political system. To negotiate this balance, the CCP pairs ambitious developmental pursuits with patriotic education, stability, and service-oriented government programs in order to maintain domestic cohesion.⁴ In essence, a societal agreement has been struck that buys leadership support with improved quality of life guarantees. However, the novel coronavirus has degraded both sides of this agreement beyond reconciliation. Making matters worse, existing Chinese domestic and foreign policy mechanisms are insufficient to facilitate an effective social and economic recovery. Because of these numerous systemic Chinese challenges, restoration of global order and stability in the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic will depend upon an American-led cooperative security policy toward China.

This paper will first analyze Chinese domestic policy challenges—securing regime support through the promise of continual development—and its impotence in recovering government legitimacy, considering the virus's effect on existing social pathogens. Next, the

paper will discuss China's foreign policy inadequacies and how the CCP is holistically unprepared to counter the destabilizing effects of the virus, both domestically and abroad. The paper concludes with a cooperative security foreign policy application for the United States (US) to pursue with China to facilitate an expeditious, secure global recovery.

Chinese domestic life is saturated with stability issues. There are glaring gaps between the rich and poor and between urban and rural segments of society. The CCP derives much of its support from its nationalistic promise of the Chinese Dream and decades long track record of providing comprehensive economic development and quality of life improvements for the Chinese people. However, these improvements are not experienced equitably across regions and demographics. Furthermore, the places that have experienced incredible boons increase pressure on the CCP to continue its presumably unsustainable track record. Thus, the governmental system is insecure that any disruption, no matter how slight, will threaten the comprehensive future growth that Xi Jinping and the CCP depends upon for legitimacy and survival.⁵

Because of this fragility, destabilizing factors such as economic recession or an epidemic could seriously erode CCP legitimacy and undermine domestic stability. Destabilizing symptoms have always been a fact of life for the CCP. For example, there are currently more than 500 mass incidents or demonstrations each day conducted against government policy and actions.⁶ Xi Jinping's predecessors were concerned as well. Concerning the need for harmonious advancement, former President Hu Jintao championed the concept of "social management" to "maintain social order, promote social harmony, and ensure that people can live and work in peace."⁷ As the government works feverishly to advance the collective good, the CCP believes it must be intentional and aggressive in quelling domestic insurrection at perceived social and economic injustices.

Incidents and insurrections are stirred over many areas of domestic life including scorn for irresponsible industrial development that poisons the environment and water supply, embitterment concerning inequalities in available healthcare, and outrage over the frequently poor conditions suffered by rural and factory workers.⁸ However, the root of most dissent is a feeling that the CCP is not holding up their end of the bargain—to promote economic prosperity for all. This sentiment fuels distrust of government policy and threatens the survival of the CCP.

Chinese leaders understand that political instability is the greatest threat to continued economic growth and overtly challenges CCP legitimacy. Therefore, the CCP operates a robust, three-tiered strategy to quell popular dissent consisting of patriotic education, preservation of stability, and “service-oriented” government programs.⁹ Patriotic education focuses on instilling nationalistic feelings within the population for the purpose of establishing unity and support for the CCP. This often hinges around spinning current events affecting the Chinese nation-state. For example, the CCP packaged Beijing’s failure to host the 2000 Olympics as well as the mistaken American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade as examples of global, open hostility and racism against the Chinese people in order to grow popular nationalism and solidarity around the CCP platform of rectifying historic wrongs.¹⁰

The CCP uses the cadre management system—the central, provincial, county, and township levels of the government—to execute the second component of the strategy, the preservation of stability.¹¹ This hierarchical, task-oriented system places increasing degrees of pressure on the lower echelons to dispel dissent and build unity. Like patriotic education, propaganda is used to frame issues and persuade Chinese citizens that the state represents their best interests. Additionally, the state spends enormous sums of money on public security and policing measures to mitigate criminal, social, and economic deviance and disorder.¹²

The state has also made increasing expenditures on service-oriented programs to appeal to popular opinion and earn public trust. For example, in recent years China has invested heavily in rural healthcare systems and collective social security programs; attempts to provide evidence that the “China Model” is working.¹³ This model—the CCP plan for development—rejects the Western concept of universal values, instead favoring a unique Chinese path of social shaping, collective nationalism, and economic mercantilism to avert a threatening outside world that has historically taken advantage of China. The CCP markets the product of the China Model as the Chinese Dream—a rejuvenation of collective nationalism, international status, and domestic development, enabled through authoritative central planning.¹⁴ Though continually struggling to maintain domestic stability, the CCP has been able to consistently display evidence of forwarding the dream since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.¹⁵

However, at the end of 2019 the CCP awoke to a nightmare. This is because the novel coronavirus was spreading rapidly throughout the central city of Wuhan and threatened to derail economic development and severely degraded the effectiveness of the three mechanisms the CCP uses to maintain domestic stability. Information concerning the virus, which has infected more than 80,000 Chinese and more than 200,000 globally, resulting in more than 9,000 deaths worldwide so far, was initially suppressed and censored by the local cadre managers in Wuhan, the origination of the disease.¹⁶ This is because the cadre system places a great deal of power in the hands of local leaders who feel pressure to maintain the perception they can handle it by preserving societal control and stability. There is a strong structural incentive to not forward bad news to the next level for action.¹⁷ The suppression of information concerning the new disease infuriated the local population and exacerbated the underlying distrust the population had for party leadership. Discontent was further inflamed when the whistleblowing doctor that was

reprimanded for alerting officials to the disease later succumbed to the new virus.¹⁸ The central government proceeded to lockdown Wuhan and the surrounding area of Hubei province to restrict both the spread of the virus and the flow of information. The response seemed draconian to the outside world. But it makes sense considering the aforementioned stability mechanisms.

Concerning the mechanism of patriotic education, the lockdown restricted domestic and international information channels and allowed the CCP to shape the narrative in a more favorable light. Instead of allowing news to circulate decrying the state cover-up, government leaders at all levels of the cadre management system were quick to depict that they were expeditious and well suited to take whatever action was needed to protect public safety and welfare.¹⁹ Furthermore, rather than admit failing to take action for seven weeks while allowing Wuhan to distribute the virus around the world, Chinese officials have launched a massive disinformation campaign to lay blame elsewhere—predominately accusing the US military of bringing the disease to China through various state-sponsored propaganda outlets. This serves to fuel the well-worn nationalistic narrative the CCP commonly uses to dispel dissent—that the US is actively trying to contain China’s rise. It also plays to the victim mentality contemporary China frequently assumes within the international order. China has achieved its century-old dream of accumulating wealth but still dwells heavily on past injustices at the hands of its neighbors and the West. Blaming others—typically Japan, South Korea, or the US—bolsters the legitimacy of the CCP as a fierce protector of national interests in a world antagonistic to the Chinese Model.²⁰ That is why China is aggressively placing blame for the recent pandemic on the United States; it is a common move that has been frequently played in the past. However, unlike previous events, the Chinese are inundated with tangible evidence contrary to the CCP

narrative. Beijing will not so easily be able to cover up and deflect blame for its failed virus response as easily as other geopolitical events—Chinese are angry at the CCP’s callous response.

Popular dissent will make it challenging for the CCP to execute the second domestic policy mechanism, the preservation of stability. This is because the embittered population will soon experience the devastating effects of economic retreat, undermining the CCP’s promise of increasing prosperity and steady advancement of the Chinese Dream. As a result, a larger share of the population will not only experience the devastating effects of authoritarian corruption on a personal level—death of loved ones for example—but will also lose jobs, financial security, and the hope of a better tomorrow. Factories are beginning to reopen in the wake of the disease, but industrial production was down by 13.5% for the months of January and February. This marks the first-time industrial indicators have fallen since 1998. Additionally, the retail industry decreased by 20.5% and fixed-asset investment—a key measure of capital expenditures on property and infrastructure—dropped by 24.5%. Even more alarming, these declines are fueling concerns the Chinese economy will contract for the first time since 1976.²¹ Contraction is greatly destabilizing when the nation viewed last year’s relatively low growth rate of 6% as a cause for concern. The contracting economy will also prohibit the CCP from executing the third domestic policy mechanism, implementing service-oriented programs, as funds will be greatly limited for extraneous quality of life projects. Thus, the population will be less forgiving of the CCP’s mismanagement of the outbreak when they are suffering economically and socially, triggering more demand for political reform—which is the central government’s worst fear.

Because the coronavirus pandemic has greatly debilitated the three domestic stability mechanisms, the CCP is in a compromised position. The China Model has been undermined with unprecedented severity. Thus, the Chinese Dream is in grave danger due to the CCP’s

inability to formulate effective domestic policy in the wake of the pandemic. Unfortunately, China is equally unprepared to pursue solutions through its foreign policy apparatus.

This is because the Chinese foreign policy apparatus is irreconcilably fractured. Even though China is an authoritarian state with Xi Jinping acting not only as the President and Head of State, but as the leader of the CCP and Central Military Commission as well, many other institutions and entities within central and local government, the military, and business are involved in foreign relations and statecraft.²² Currently, China's ability to collaborate, coordinate, and integrate across a diversity of organizational interests is ineffective. This not only limits China's ability to form coherent international policy from which to secure its domestic and international interests, but fuels suspicion of hostile intentions between Beijing and the outside world. For example, China's bureaucratic fragmentation creates the risk that foreign actors will form misconceptions concerning critical information or intent due to inconsistency within the Chinese policy network.²³ At the very least, the complex web of Chinese bureaucratic politics will serve to frustrate international coordination of pandemic assistance, stifle the sharing of corporate knowledge, and complicate diplomatic solutions.²⁴

The levels of bureaucracy weighing in on policy formulation and implementation are first, the CCP, second is the Chinese government, third is the Peoples' Liberation Army, and fourth are myriad actors and groups at the margins of power.²⁵ Even within specific functions of government there are many different bureaucracies competing for preferences. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is not the sole face of foreign policy for the Chinese government. The MFA often finds its position and preferences subordinate to the Ministry of Commerce, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, or sometimes a host of national banks.²⁶ Additionally, many other bureaucracies distant from the

nexus of government contribute to foreign relations. These include prominent business executives, local government officials, researchers and academics, media representatives, and the online community who constrain CCP policy efforts by amplifying public discontent.²⁷ This makes it nearly impossible to align all stakeholders toward coordinated pandemic solutions.

Because of the immense constellation of bureaucratic interests, each “pulling and hauling” the political resultant, China’s foreign policy apparatus has become fractured.²⁸ This contributes to various competing views on international issues and how China should defend and pursue its interests. Understanding the omni-directional nature of the bureaucratic influence is critical to understanding Chinese foreign policy formation.²⁹

It also lends light to just how ill-equipped the Chinese foreign policy apparatus is for crafting coherent and coordinated policy actions to remedy global economic and societal destruction resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. This is because Chinese foreign policy is inherently reactive to a set of restrictions imposed by domestic demography, economic issues, and the crafted patriotism and nationalism previously discussed.³⁰ These issues consistently place Chinese domestic and foreign policy mechanisms in conflict with each other and result in two distinct presentations to the outside world. The first of these faces is pragmatic, meaning that Chinese leadership realizes they depend on participation in globalization to fund the Chinese Dream and preclude domestic disorder. The other face is emotional, meaning that the same leaders often feel compelled to agitate global actors—predominately Japan, South Korea, and the United States—to strengthen CCP legitimacy and protect leaders from domestic criticism. Put another way, this signifies that even though the CCP realizes cooperative foreign policy is in China’s best interest, leaders often sacrifice foreign relationships under the Chinese Model to prove to the population that China will not be taken advantage of or manipulated by foreign

actors.³¹ China's greatest fear is the "peasant rebellion" that has contributed to the fall of many previous dynasties; the CCP is less concerned with its international image.³² US foreign policy and decision-makers must understand this conundrum moving forward to efficiently heal the world in the wake of the pandemic.

Because of China's conflicted domestic and foreign policy mechanisms, the US cannot count on the CCP to act responsibly or in its own best interest. For example, when Chinese officials make absurd accusations that the US military created coronavirus to wreak havoc on China, it is not a rational act of foreign policy but a desperate attempt to construct a domestic narrative to insulate the CCP from criticism.³³ The coronavirus is the greatest threat to Xi Jinping's power to date and a problem he, and the Chinese Model, is not certain to survive. However, finger-pointing by the US and other nations over how Chinese officials failed the world only serves to exacerbate resentment and play into the narrative the CCP has conditioned the people to believe that the world is against China. Policymakers must remember that domestic demand, not foreign prodding, facilitates internal political change—there is plenty domestic demand for change already boiling over in China. US foreign policy should focus on strategically enabling China to recover—this is the only way global order can be resurrected.³⁴

The US foreign policy focus should be comprised of three main tenets to construct a cooperative security plan with China. The first tenet underlying US foreign policy should be quiet strength. The Chinese population is already suspicious of their leadership failures; no amount of American chest-thumping will add value. Instead, the US needs to maintain a quiet, ambivalent presence globally while encouraging cooperation toward collective recovery. Blaming and punishing China for the pandemic will rally the Chinese public around CCP sirens and disincentivize Chinese leadership from acting responsibly and cooperatively toward a global

recovery. The US must be the quiet force that instills confidence among global leaders—no country can accomplish recovery alone.³⁵

The second tenet—respect—seems peculiar considering the origination of the current pandemic being endured by the world. But instead of condemnation, US policy going forward must maintain public respect for China, especially the Chinese people. The Chinese Model, despite all of the shortcomings, has lifted millions out of poverty at unprecedented speed; China craves respect for its achievements and desires approval from the international community—especially from the US.³⁶ The US must take the lessons learned from its own pandemic experience to get its own house in order and show grace toward China’s failures. This is necessary to facilitate a global recovery without causing China to implode under the weight of inflamed domestic crises. This is principally needed because China is a global manufacturing hub; the world will depend on China for a supply-side recovery. Additionally, balancing respect with policy actions is critical to tactfully encourage the myriad public health improvements necessary in China to align with developed-world standards and mitigate future pandemics.

Finally, US foreign policymakers must recognize China’s domestic fragility and weigh policy actions in light of their effect on Chinese domestic policy. This certainly does not mean pander to Chinese interests or condone the illicit behavior of the cadre management system. Rather, it would behoove the US to avoid poking open wounds during the global recovery. It is better to allow Chinese domestic forces to keep internal pressure on the CCP for change. Outside agitation may cause a destabilizing slide backward, dragging the global economy with it. Keeping this domestic fragility in mind, and displaying US conscientiousness toward CCP concerns, will further encourage China to coordinate responsible, cooperative foreign policy.³⁷

In conclusion, both domestic and foreign policy mechanisms in China are ill-suited to facilitate a domestic and global social and economic recovery from the novel coronavirus. The three-part domestic policy apparatus—patriotic education, stability preservation, and service-oriented programs—have been rendered obsolete by the virus. Furthermore, the fractured foreign policy component of the China Model is insufficient to assist the recovery, both domestically and abroad. The future of China and the global order is dependent on effective cooperative security policy, led by the US, to facilitate an international return to sustained security and productivity. US cooperative security policy pursuits must be founded in quiet strength, respect, and consideration of Chinese domestic challenges. This does not equate to appeasement and condonement but is necessary to stabilize China so the world can recover. Accomplishing change within China is best accomplished through domestic channels, which are currently very active. At this time, the US must prioritize stability and allow change to occur organically. This policy will be critical to recover from the devastation of the novel coronavirus.

Notes

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