



Op-Ed Series

A Distressing Year for China's Global Diplomacy

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It has been seven months into 2020 and the year could not get any worse for international diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). China's global reputation has been undermined by a series of events that have caused more frustration and suspicion toward its status as a rising power. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has stoked the highest level of anti-China sentiment around the world since the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, according to an [internal report](#) by the Chinese government.

Since the outbreak began early this year, China has been criticized by major Western powers such as the United States, [Germany](#), [Great Britain](#), and [France](#) for initially trying to conceal the true severity and damages caused by COVID-19, whereas its neighbors in Southeast Asia have been less critical, thanks partly to their [economic dependence](#) on the PRC. While the Coronavirus seriously [damages](#) its image, the PRC has embroiled in diplomatic frictions with key players around its periphery.

First, its ties with the United States have plummeted to the lowest point in recent years. One of the reasons is because Washington has been outspoken in its criticisms of Beijing's early handling of COVID-19. Even though China is the United States' "[strategic competitor](#)" and that the Trump administration sees incentives to blame Beijing for the outbreak and to shift local as well as international attention away from its domestic control of COVID-19, which has killed more than [139,000 Americans](#), Beijing still deserves part of the blame for its [lack of transparency](#) during the early phase of the outbreak.

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has fueled higher anti-China sentiment among the U.S. population, who have grown increasingly wary of the PRC in recent years. According to the latest [survey](#) by Pew Research Center, approximately two-thirds of the U.S. population now hold unfavorable views of China, which is the highest negative ratings ever recorded since 2005. Worse still, nine-in-ten U.S. adults perceive China as a "threat."

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While this increasing unfavourability has grown out of years of political rhetoric between the two powers as well as the loss of manufacturing jobs in the United States and allegations about Beijing-sponsored commercial espionage against U.S. government and corporations, among other things, the pandemic has deepened this distrust and sowed greater antipathy toward China.

The current mood among academics, foreign policy experts, media pundits, and government officials in the United States no longer concentrates on the question of whether Washington should treat Beijing as a friend and encourage it to become a “[responsible stakeholder](#)” or as an adversary. Politicians and supporters of both the Republican and Democratic parties appear to share a broad [consensus](#) that China is a long-term strategic competitor of the United States that must be constantly checked, if not contained.

The upcoming U.S. presidential election does nothing to alleviate the growing discontent among Americans toward the PRC. Recently, U.S. President Donald J. Trump, who had previously coozied up to Chinese leader Xi Jinping by calling him “[a friend](#),” has harshly criticized the PRC for its handling of the pandemic, arguing that the virus could have been contained in the mainland and not allowed to spread outside of that country. He has repeatedly used a racist phrase such as “[kung flu](#)” to try to stoke more anger toward the Chinese. Likewise, the presumptive Democratic nominee, former Vice President Joe Biden, has adopted an openly critical tone of Xi by calling him “[a thug](#).”

The main difference between Biden and Trump is no longer about whether or not the United States, under their respective leadership, would adopt a tougher stance toward China. It is about whether a Biden administration would competently take a stronger position in confronting China than Trump has over the past three years. Getting tough with China is not an electoral risk for either candidate. It is an opportunity to win votes.



President Xi Jinping. Source: <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/chinese-president-xi-jinping-visits-a-locked-down-wuhan-signalling-turning-tide-in-covid-19-outbreak>

Second, in South Asia, China shares increasingly contentious ties with India. On June 15, the two countries engaged in a bloody, unarmed clash in the Galwan Valley, leaving at least [20](#) Indian soldiers dead and an undisclosed number of Chinese casualties. This conflict sent geopolitical shockwaves across Asia, where the world's two most populous countries reside, and plunged Sino-Indian relations into a more fragile state. The incident added another item to New Delhi's growing list of geopolitical threats posed by Beijing.

For China, the deadly clash tempers fear and suspicion among states around its periphery regarding its military ambitions. It plays directly into the hands of prominent skeptic such as offensive realist [John J. Mearsheimer](#) who have long argued that the rise of China will not be a peaceful process and that the PRC will seek to impose its own sphere of influence in Asia. Furthermore, the recent clash with India fits well with Beijing's recent pattern of behaviors, in which it adopts a pugnacious military posture in the South China Sea, showing its ability and willingness to use coercion to get what it wants.

Third, China has involved in a series of diplomatic rows with another middle-power, Australia. When Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne [called](#) for an international inquiry into the origin of COVID-19 back in April, China, guilty by its persistent lack of transparency, threatened to impose tariffs and ban on Australian [barley](#) and [beef](#), respectively. Most recently, the Australian government and institutions were [hit](#) by large-scale state-sponsored cyberattacks believed to be linked to Beijing. Although the Morrison government has not resorted to publicly naming China as the perpetrator, the incident appears to be a tit-for-tat move to retaliate against Canberra's call for an independent COVID-19 investigation. Given its history of "[sustained](#)" cyberattacks against Australia, China fits well into a small category of state actors such as Iran and North Korea, which possess such capabilities and may be incentivized to launch online attacks against [friendly](#) or [unfriendly](#) foreign governments.

Similar to the U.S. population, more Australians have a lower level of trust in China. According to the Lowy Institute's 2020 poll, [77%](#) of Australians do not think the PRC will act responsibly around the world, while only [55%](#) still see China as an "economic partner," indicating a 27% decrease from 2018.

Fourth, Beijing has caused more negative headlines from its activities in the Pacific Ocean. For example, in April, it sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands in the disputed South China Sea, leading [the Philippines](#) and the United States to throw their weight behind Hanoi. In that same month, Chinese aircraft carrier, Liaoning, provocatively sailed near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and remained there for [39 hours](#), prompting alarms from the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. These moves are largely viewed as part of China's opportunistic approach to advance its military ambition while the whole world is distracted by COVID-19.

Last but not least, the recent adoption of the [Hong Kong national security law](#) has invited a fresh wave of international criticisms against Beijing's efforts to tighten its control over this former British colony. Although not much has been done by major international players, excluding the United States, in response to the passage of this controversial law by the Beijing government, it has caused additional backlash at the PRC and undermined its diplomatic credibility and soft power around the world.

If 2019 was a tough time, 2020 is surely on a whole new level of challenges and setbacks for China's international diplomacy. In terms of bilateral ties, the pandemic has exacerbated tension in the U.S.-China relations, which have plummeted to the lowest point in recent years. The crisis has fueled higher negative perception about China among the U.S. public. In addition, Beijing has picked up fights with New Delhi, Canberra, Hanoi, and provoked Tokyo with its military. Meanwhile, Hong Kong is possibly descending into another period of prolonged internal disorder following the adoption of the new national security law.

On a global scale, the pandemic has invited criticisms toward China's handling of the deadly virus, which has resulted in the worst international public health crisis seen in a generation. Although Beijing has steadfastly engaged in the so-called "[mask diplomacy](#)" by shipping millions of facemasks, ventilators, and personal protective equipment (PPE) to many countries around the world to try to erase its culpability in the pandemic, all damages to its reputation have already been done and it may take years, if not decades, for China to earn back the confidence of the international community. If "a responsible power" is what the PRC wants itself to be known for among the community of states, its initial handling of COVID-19 has made the country look the exact opposite of that phrase.

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