

COVID-19 AS THE MAGNIFYING GLASS OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY FOR A NEW ERA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a catalyst for the already tense relations between the People's Republic of China and its major Western partners. It also made room for the global span of China's 'wolf-war diplomacy' and 'mask-diplomacy' as two simultaneously exposed faces of its foreign policy. This analysis focuses on China's foreign policy apparatus' performance during COVID-19, and its effect on China's domestic and foreign economic and political agendas. Starting from the theoretical point that China's forceful foreign policy derives from its domestic political dynamism, the analysis shows that such effects were modest. It claims that China's posting will continue to be resistant to the surroundings' impact as long as it serves as a good tool for fulfilling domestic stability and security goals.

Key words: China, foreign policy, COVID-19, wolf-diplomacy, mask-diplomacy

КИНЕСКА „СПОЉНА ПОЛИТИКА ЗА НОВО ДОБА” У УСЛОВИМА ПАНДЕМИЈЕ КОВИДА-19

Апстракт

Пандемија Ковид-19 деловала је као катализатор за већ напете односе између Народне Републике Кине и њених најважнијих партнера са Запада. Истовремено, она је у глобалним размерама отворила простор за кинеску „дипломатију вукова-ратника” и „дипломатију (заштитних) маски”, као два истовремено испољена лица њене спољне политике. Ова анализа је фокусирана на функционисање кинеског спољно-политичког апарата за време Ковида-19, и на то како је његов учинак повратно утицао на домаће, али и спољно-економске и политичке планове. Полазећи од теоријског и аналитичког оквира да робусна спољна политика Кине извире из домаћег политичког динамизма, ова анализа показује да су повратни ефекти спољних дешавања на домаће послове били умерени. Кинеско спољно-политичко постављање наставиће да буде отпорно на реакције из окру-

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жења докле год успешно служи остваривању унутрашњих политичких циљева стабилности и безбедности.

Кључне речи: Кина, спољна политика, Ковид-19, дипломатија вукова-ратника, дипломатија маски

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing pandemic has shaken the world in many aspects, including countries' foreign and security policies and international relations, especially when it comes to solidarity and sharing resources, expertise and vaccines. The pandemic was also a catalyst for the worsening ties between the PRC and its major Western partners. China's 'wolf-war diplomacy' and 'mask-diplomacy' were the two faces of its foreign policy that were simultaneously exposed during the pandemic. In this paper, we consider whether the main trends in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) foreign policy remain unaffected by COVID-19. This article argues that China's self-confident foreign policy during the pandemic derives from its domestic political dynamism and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's orientation towards stability and security, and that significant changes have not occurred. While accepting ideological, historical and cultural roots beyond China's foreign policy (Blanchard & Lin, 2013), this analysis relied on the recent contributions to the current scholarly debate on the transformation of China's foreign policy, and its roots and motivations.

As opposed to the aftermath of the outbreak of SARS, which likewise occurred in China but did not have the same global reach, China's position following the outbreak of COVID-19 was weakened by the fact that the epidemic began on its territory and spread globally. These facts elicited antagonistic reactions and accusations from many Western capitals, which blamed China for not sharing information with the world and not acting promptly at the early signs of the epidemic in Wuhan during 2019 (Rui, 2020). To deal with the unexpected threat to domestic and global stability that COVID-19 had created, China practised a two-pronged diplomatic approach and foreign policy. On the one hand, it kept calling for globalisation, solidarity, peace and development, mutually beneficial cooperation, and connectivity, which was pleasing to the ears of the audiences. To some extent, China acted according to these appeals. On the other hand, China continued to uncompromisingly perform its assertive foreign policy where its crucial interests were concerned, while pursuing its rising influence with narrowed space for concessions or common ground.

The increasing mistrust between the PRC on the one side, and the Western block on the other, provoked some Western countries to re-examine their economic dependency on China, which was likewise exposed at the beginning of the pandemic. Some continued or started to

back-pedal from globalisation with China at its core, while the majority chose to persistently seek the positive effects of the cooperation. Despite this, China's firm foreign policy mode, created by top policymakers over the past decade and echoed by China's diplomatic personnel, will remain unchanged, especially in regards to its 'core interests', which continue to expand, both in content and in geographic scope (Ekman, 2012), and which, consequently, limit the opportunities for compromises. This increasingly forceful behaviour is also based on the self-confidence China acquired when it efficiently managed to control the epidemic and became the only growth-achieving major economy in 2020. Additionally, it is derived from the realisation of the first of the Two Centenaries goals – the elimination of absolute poverty by 2021 – and from the successful completion of the 13th Five Year Plan. Although these achievements might be challenged from several perspectives, their proclamation, the general acceptance of the official victorious narrative, and the accomplishments made by the CCP serve as sufficient indicators of the success of the CCP's rule at home, publicised around the world by its diplomats and media. An additional contribution to China's success was made by the 'last minute' signing of the principal Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with the EU, which represents a political and symbolic victory for China, and which occurred just ahead of the USA's new administration's inauguration (MERCATOR, 2021; Mitrović, 2022, pp. 232-233).

However, despite this success of China's diplomacy, the ongoing trade and technology war between the USA and China, and China's increasingly discordant relationship with the EU, the pandemic has had catalysing effects in both directions: it worsened relations with major global partners and made more room for China to forcefully execute its major power role by using 'mask and vaccine diplomacy'. Beijing saw the EU and USA's initial improper and messy response to the pandemic as an accelerator for its designed global aspirations.

DOMESTIC GOALS AND CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

In this analysis, we argue that China will continue to energetically pursue its primary strategic goals via its foreign policy by vigorously trying to maximise benefits and to buffer the external downbeats, while straggling to obtain the stability and sustainability of its economic model and its results. Its economic goals will have a high priority since, if met, they grant legitimacy to the rule of the CCP. As the Chinese population has so far expressed a preference for economic rise and material benefits, fulfilled economic goals grant the CCP and the PRC domestic security. China's foreign policy goals will focus on realising the external elements of the China Dream goals, including the Belt and Road Initiative. Realising these economic goals will provide China with international security

and boost its supremacy by creating a robust structural power that would make its influence ever-more pronounced. They will also allow China to offer financial assistance to numerous states and spread its cultural, economic and political influence (Mitrović, 2017).

Other factors contributing to the forcefulness in China's posture on the international stage are closely connected to rising nationalism and national cohesion. Young Chinese people, who do not remember the hardships of their parents and grandparents, and who have only witnessed China's rising path, rightfully feel great pride in China's achievements and its existing strength. At the same time, they mostly tend to lack modesty and an understanding of the importance that good relations with each of China's international partners, including the dominant powers, have played in that rise. The nationalism of new generations, supported and fuelled by the media, pushes China to exercise its power vigorously and renders soft approaches to dispute resolution difficult to accept.

On the other hand, China's economic strategy, aimed at securing the longevity of its model, strongly relies on high technology, and China's attempt to become a global leader in it, bypassing the leading tech-powers such as the USA, Japan and others, is seen by these powers as a challenge; high technology's importance in overcoming the middle-income trap and becoming an advanced economy is pretty apparent (Cronin & Neyhard, 2020). Accordingly, an essential part of China's foreign policy rests on making room for further cooperation with technologically superior partner countries, especially the USA, the simultaneous spread of Chinese technology and ICT standards, and the employment of its state-owned enterprises. However, COVID-19 has made such attempts even more difficult.

COVID-19 AND 'MASK DIPLOMACY'

In many Western capitals, China was seen as trying to seize the opportunity to put itself in a leading position in the global struggle against COVID-19 by demonstrating how the Chinese political system proved to be more efficient than Western democracies in fighting the pandemic. Accusations that China was using the "crisis as an opportunity" (Thomas, 2020) to 'export' elements of its political system and its influence were made. Some scholars view it as a continuation of the 'China solution' platform offered to the world by President Xi Jinping (Thomas, 2020). Eder claims (2018) that Xi sees China at the centre of the new type of international relations, in which the changing global scene, along with the relative decline of USA's power, opened a strategic space for China to increase its global influence. Naturally, from their point of view, it was all seen as very negative and distractive.

Many analysts claim that the overall inefficient reaction to the pandemic by Western democracies assured Beijing that it would surpass USA, and especially the EU, as a global power (Gauttam, Singh & Kaur 2020). The initial spark which supported the emergence of such a conviction, and the corresponding acts by China, occurred during the 2008 global economic crisis. It was based on the belief that China is rising while the West is weakening (Shen 2020; Yu 2020), and that COVID-19 created an opportunity for the fulfilment of China's ambition via 'mask diplomacy' and later 'vaccine diplomacy'.

China's efforts to recover from the initial wave of the pandemic, and its efforts to centralise and expand its globally dominant production of protective medical equipment, medicines, ventilators and other necessary goods enabled it to be in a position to sell and donate those goods. The PRC's help to other countries badly affected by the pandemic has been tremendous in scope: it has sent humanitarian aid (medical equipment, protective masks and medical teams) through its diplomatic missions bilaterally, and via foundations such as the Mammoth Foundation, to more than one hundred and twenty countries around the globe – from ASEAN, and Japan, to Latin American states, EU countries and African states. Jack Ma's Alibaba Foundation sent such donations to more than one hundred and fifty countries (Hatton, 2020). Aside from providing assistance, China was able to sell vast quantities of much needed test kits, ventilators, masks, disinfectants, medicines and other essential goods. Moreover, it was later able to sell and donate vaccines.

China's 'mask diplomacy', with gratitude ceremonies in recipient countries, was meant to change the negative narrative about China in some of these countries, while presenting China as a Good Samaritan and an efficient major country at the core of global governance. The process was extensively covered in Chinese media as 'responsible great power' behaviour. Xinhua reported that "China has actively joined hands with the rest of the world to stem the novel coronavirus disease, with the exports of medical supplies" (Xinhua, 2020), promoting this mercantile activity as philanthropic. China's central role as a global supplier of personal protective equipment, medical devices, antibiotics, and active pharmaceutical ingredients proved to be crucially important for this role. As global demand increased, the Chinese government urged producers to expand or even change production, and to work non-stop to produce the required medical equipment and pharmaceuticals for export. During March and April 2020 alone, China exported medical goods worth US\$ 10 billion (Bermingham, 2020). While countries worldwide fought to provide needed goods and to share medical knowledge and protocols, Taiwan and states cooperating with Taipei were either barred from participation by the PRC, even from participating in WHO work, or were threatened with the discontinuation of the supply of the needed goods (Global Times,

2020). The acts and narrative of China as a leading global Good Samaritan have also built national coherency and self-confidence at home, and were echoed daily by its diplomats.

In stark contrast to these developments, numerous quarrels between China and many Western governments started, including the Chinese diplomats' undiplomatic online episodes with citizens in various countries which showed another face of Chinese foreign policy.

'WOLF-WARRIOR DIPLOMACY' AS ANOTHER FACE OF CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

Simultaneously with 'mask diplomacy', rising blame and anti-China sentiment stemming from accusations that China was the cause of the crisis were becoming very loud in Western countries, specifically Australia, Canada, the USA, the UK and within the EU (De Weck, 2020). Furthermore, the negative image of China was not apparent only to the officials of those countries but also to their general public. The Pew Research Centre's survey of 14 industrialised countries, published in October 2020, found that 73% of these countries' populations regarded Beijing unfavourably, which was a two-fold increase during 2019 (Magnier, 2020). China was accused of 'spreading the poison and selling the cure', and it responded with 'wolf-warrior diplomacy', only further antagonising the public in these countries.

The increase in the number of antagonistic ambassadors and mid-level diplomats has proven that China's foreign policy has changed the dominant code of conduct of the 'reform and opening up' diplomatic approach. As the top-down approach is strictly enforced under President Xi, and foreign policy was reformed to turn the Ministry of Foreign Affairs into a "logistic service" (Eder, 2018), many concluded that these 'wolf diplomats' were merely heeding the decisions from the top, including Xi's call to show a 'fighting spirit', when taking a more aggressive approach in promoting the country's official stance and defending it from the biased assaults of the Western countries. A typical example was China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesman Zhao Lijian, who stood out with his Twitter posts (though that platform was blocked in China), including the one posted on 12 March 2020 with which he introduced a theory that the USA military had smuggled the coronavirus into China and released it in Wuhan (Reuters, 2020). This act backfired disastrously, deepening distrust and further complicating the already strained Beijing-Washington relationship, as Washington did not find Beijing's accusations aimed at the USA acceptable. Additionally, several of China's ambassadors across the globe publicly claimed that, though the virus appeared in China, it was possible to find its origins somewhere else (Kuo, 2020), which was also described as an unacceptable assault in Western

capitals. It was astounding to see the efforts of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomats, and the lengths they went to in their campaign of denial and anti-propaganda which mainly focused on shifting blame. They gave over four hundred interviews and published more than three hundred articles on COVID-19 during the first few months of the pandemic alone (Verma 2020). Although only recently engaged on Western social media platforms, the number of Twitter and Facebook accounts of Chinese diplomats more than tripled and doubled, respectively, following the end of 2019 (Ji, 2021).

As a consequence of these efforts, during the last week of April 2020 alone, seven ambassadors of the PRC were summoned by hosting Ministries of Foreign Affairs to answer for “spreading insulting rumours” (France and Kazakhstan) and the “racist treatment” of Africans in China (Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and the African Union) (Huang & He 2020). According to various sources (AFP, 2020), Chinese ambassador Lu Shaye was summoned by the French Foreign Minister to explain an unsigned post on the Embassy's webpage that accused French workers of running away from their jobs and “allowing residents to die of hunger and illness” in nursing homes. Also, the Chinese Embassy exchanged viral messages with French citizens on social media regarding the same post (Shi, 2020). In Germany, Chinese diplomats publicly attacked German public figures who were critical of China's handling of the epidemic (Erlanger, 2020). In Australia and Canada, Chinese Embassies accused the locals of spreading propaganda, and threatened to punish them economically after they joined calls for an independent investigation of the virus's origins and reparations from China. Soon after, China forbade the import of Australian beef and barley, and later introduced an unofficial ban on Australian cotton, lobsters, timber and coal, as well as high import tariffs on Australian wine, in 2020 (ABC News, 2020).

Some senior Chinese foreign policy advisers have marked these actions as ill-mannered and counterproductive seeing as, in the long run, this trend could hurt China due to the fact that aggressive Chinese tones have deepened mistrust and fuelled existing doubts about China's rise and intentions (Shi, 2020). However, since Xi Jinping took the key offices in 2012 and 2013, China's foreign policy has experienced significant changes (Hu 2019) that enhanced its performance and confidence. Takahara (2018) pointed out that Xi managed to “successfully strengthen his power and authority and virtually put an end to collective leadership” (p.1). By doing so, Xi managed to create room for manoeuvre, so that China's future external policy can be both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ depending on what was needed – he created what we described as the two faces of China's foreign policy.

Moreover, China's diplomacy budget in 2018 doubled in comparison with the budget from 2011, in order to prepare for a much broader

mission (Clover, Fei & Sh 2018; Mitrović 2022a). We argue that China's new assertive diplomacy, accompanied with a possible penalty for the opponents – from import bans and tariffs, and stopping or lagging projects, to military conflict – as one face of its diplomacy, is a tool for creating a specific perception of China in the targeted countries and globally. This perception rests on the notions that China could be harmful and that it is not possible for any country to try to obstruct China in the pursuit of its interests. Simultaneously, the other face - one that calls for 'peace and development', multilateralism and other generally looked-for themes - will carry on. By the end of 2020, China's foreign vice-minister Le Yucheng defended the manner of Chinese diplomats. He criticised the use of the term 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' as part of the 'China threat theory' and deemed it yet another 'discourse trap' designed to stop China from fighting back when being scolded by those "who have not awakened from their dreams 100 years ago" (Zhou, 2020), announcing the continuation of the two-pronged diplomatic approach.

AGGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SOUTH AND THE EAST CHINA SEA

Throughout the early months of the pandemic, China had been building up its military and space capacities while occasionally escalating tensions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, proving its enormous capacity and major power strategic course. China's extended naval presence in these waters came as USA Navy ships in the area were hit by coronavirus outbreaks, and contagion was confirmed among the crews of four USA aircraft carriers. It put some of China's neighbours on alert and added further worries to the ongoing disaster (Mitrović 2022a). On 2 April, a Chinese vessel hit a Vietnamese fishing boat, causing it to sink near the Paracel Islands, with the fishermen being saved by a third party (Reuters 2020). On 3 and 8 April, the Chinese Coast Guard deployed two ships to monitor the China - Philippines contested islands. On 14 April 2020, a Chinese vessel, accompanied by a China Coast Guard ship, was reportedly spotted within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone, while the Chinese Foreign Ministry said on the same day that the ship was "conducting normal activities in waters administered by China". A Chinese vessel reportedly entered Malaysian waters on 16 April, following an exploration vessel of Malaysia's oil company Petronas (Abe, 2020; RFA 2020).

Chinese media reported¹ on the State Council's decision to set up two administrative units on the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South

¹ On 18 April 2020;

China Sea: 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” (Ministry of National Defence of the PRC, 2020). This decision provoked high tensions again as it implicated lasting outcomes and aimed to formalise China’s control and make it permanent. Vietnam submitted a formal protest against the decision the following day, and two protests from the Philippines followed. Manila also protested against a Chinese vessel’s “pointing of a radar gun at a Philippine Navy ship in Philippine waters”. Chinese naval vessels reportedly passed between Taiwan and the Philippines on 23 April (Burke & Ichihashi, 2020). On 2 May, Vietnam complained against ‘China’s unilateral fishing ban’ in the disputed area of the South China Sea, imposed unilaterally by China between 1 May and 16 August (Reuters, 2020). The US resumed the so-called ‘back-to-back freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea’ on 28 April, sending warships within 12 nautical miles of the artificial islands built by China, which caused China to protest against “intruding into Chinese territory” (Doornbos 2020). While the world was fighting against COVID-19, the geopolitical landscape in the South China Sea experienced some offensive plays. While fighting the pandemic at home and performing its ‘mask diplomacy globally’, China was, at the same time, harshly executing its military might in the neighbourhood.

China and ASEAN member states are searching for a new feasible code of conduct for the issues in the South China Sea. However, the problems of the South China Sea belong to China’s folder of ‘core issues’ and sovereignty² (Ekman, 2012), which, as previously stated, leaves no room for compromise. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned once more that China has been using a two-pronged diplomatic approach while, during the same period, initiating ASEAN plus One activities to combat the economic consequences of the pandemic, and an intensive ‘vaccine diplomacy’ that these countries could not refuse based on their dependence on China’s crucial involvement in their economic and medical affairs.

SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION WITH AFRICA SHAKEN BUT NOT DISTRACTED DURING COVID-19

Africa has traditionally been essential to the PRC’s foreign policy’s goals via offering platforms for South-South cooperation and having China assist the development of the developing countries, but BRI’s projects in Africa gave this relation a new dimension. Africa became particularly significant for realising China’s economic goals, such as providing crucial resources, deploying its financial placements and its corporations’

² China announced this in 2010, according to USA’s diplomatic and other sources.

engagements, among others, while exercising its major country role and empowering China's position in global governance. Although COVID-19 exposed some problems in China-Africa ties, China's significant economic influence in many African economies proved to be a decisive source of its confidence when confronting competitors. However, the economic area has created several controversial issues for their ties, making relations more complex and troublesome. In recent years, there have been growing complaints regarding how China's initiatives, loans, the debt-crises of the recipient countries, and projects carried out by Chinese corporations affected local actors, and how the Chinese side treated their concerns. On the other hand, these problems did not diminish the great importance of China's engagement in Africa for local citizens, the elite and local economic dynamism. At the same time, they provoked new versions of the 'China threat' theory, which was transformed into a 'debt-trap diplomacy' narrative, particularly developed and spread by Western security and media mechanisms (Lo, 2021).

According to the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at Johns Hopkins University, China is the biggest lender in Africa, with about US\$148 billion in (mostly) BRI projects such as railroads, ports and airports, which are part of the cooperation that provides China with oil and copper, cobalt and other natural resources. CARI found that the debt owed to government creditors in seventy-three developing countries reached US\$178 billion in 2020, of which China is owed more than 63%.

Nevertheless, the Chinese loans are, like elsewhere, firmly connected to infrastructure projects built by Chinese corporations and financed by credits from Chinese state-owned banks and various other forms of loaning. As mentioned, there exists a narrative, and criticism based on it, that China has been lending too much to the least developed countries without scrutinising their ability to repay their debt. Still, on several occasions, the Chinese Foreign Ministry rejected criticism based on debt-trap assumptions. On the other hand, official Chinese lenders have "expanded their portfolios dramatically and are not fully participating in the debt rescheduling processes that were developed to soften previous waves of debt," World Bank President David Malpass said in early October 2020 (Takeshi & Iori, 2020). As Ghanaian Finance Minister Ken Ofori-Atta pointed out in the *Financial Times*, Western countries are allegedly "reluctant to offer concessions for fear that released resources will simply be transferred to Beijing", which explains the ongoing reality of African debt obligations towards China and the attitude of Western creditors (Wigglesworth, 2020).

More unexpectedly, during the ongoing global problems caused by COVID-19, China's foreign relations experienced a blow due to the least predictable argument. In early April 2020, more than one hundred African residents of Guangzhou were confirmed to be infected with

COVID-19, which initiated a discriminatory treatment of African residents there, which, in turn, led to the formal diplomatic protests of four African countries and the African Union against the PRC (Huang & He, 2020). It was the first time the African 'bloc' confronted China on such a broad basis, with a high-profile reaction and on grave grounds amid its 'mask diplomacy' efforts in Africa. China publicly announced investigations and corrective measures, and denied racism, but failed to offer an apology. Although a highly sensitive incident, it did not have any powerful impact on the ongoing cooperation and the great expectations arising from it³.

Despite all the challenges to China-Africa ties, China's ambitions and growing presence in Africa was never in question, and neither was its importance to African countries. Hence, to use the momentum after closing the CAI ahead of the Biden administration's inauguration in late 2020, in January 2021, Wang Yi headed to Africa to visit six countries: Nigeria, Botswana, Tanzania, the Seychelles, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kenya. Since 1991, Chinese foreign ministers have traditionally first visited Africa, and this visit was crucial due to the rather strong anti-China sentiment built upon the aforementioned discriminatory acts towards Africans in China during the pandemic. No less important was polishing China's hard stand towards easing the debt within the G20 initiative exposed by IMF and the leading figures of the World Bank, and assuring African partners that the BRI was as vital and in as good a shape as ever. During the visit, Botswana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) joined the BRI. China cancelled the debt owed to it by the DRC and offered a new funding scheme for infrastructure construction. Above all, the visit was crucial for China to secure the DRC's cobalt, essential for electric vehicles⁴, as part of its strategic competition with the USA in Africa (Africa News, 2021).

DE-GLOBALIZATION, DE-COUPPING AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Even though China is the top trading partner of over one hundred and thirty countries, the pandemic has caused further concerns about the form of globalisation with China in its centre, especially after China introduced and insisted on its zero-Covid policy in 2021 and 2022, which cut off the global supply chain from its major financial, administrative and high-tech hubs such as Shanghai and Beijing (Ren, Quand, Cao). Mounting security costs, connected with the disruptions of supply chains, wiped off some of the advantages of the Chinese market, which were ad-

³ At the same time, far away from Africa and China, Chinese people, and Asians in general, were facing numerous racist attacks in the US and, to a lesser extent, Western and Central Europe.

⁴ According to the IMF, the DRC produces about 60% of the global cobalt output.

ditionally decreased by the rising costs and the discriminatory practices towards foreign businesses that have made the 'playing field very uneven' for state-owned domestic corporations and foreign corporations. The subsidies designated by Japan's government in the early months of the pandemic were focused on helping corporations cover up to two-thirds of their expenses when returning products to Japan. Shortages of protective material at the beginning of the pandemic only revitalised the continuing debate (which has lasted since 2012) over pulling manufacturing out of China. Though small in value and uncertain in their practicability, these subsidies were seen in Beijing as one step that could initiate a shift in the same direction among many foreign investors. In reality, similar moves were made by tech companies from Taiwan, the USA and India, all of which opted to move part of their production out of China. Apart from presenting a vast market, the Indian government also offered subsidies for major global corporations to shift production from China, and start using India as a production base and as their export centre (Marandi, 2020). After a military clash with India in Ladakh in June 2020, fifty-nine Chinese companies were shut out of India, including WeChat and TikTok, 30% of whose global users reside in India (Kuo, 2020).

In an attempt to lessen this trend and the consequences of the trade and technology war with the USA, Chinese leadership began to warm up relations with Japan. In spite of this, amid the COVID-19 crisis and the ongoing state of emergency due to the epidemic in Japan, in April 2020, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning, together with a five-ship group, sailed between the Okinawa and Miyako Islands twice, according to Japanese military authorities. Additionally, according to Japan's Coast Guard reports, Chinese Coast Guard vessels went into the contiguous zone of the Senkaku Islands in the greatest numbers ever, three hundred times greater than in 2012 (Huang 2020). At the same time, in another reflection of China's two-sided foreign policy approach, Wang Yi visited the Republic of Korea and Japan in November 2020 (WHJ, 2020) to convey a message from Xi Jinping to the new Japanese Prime Minister, and in an apparent attempt to revitalise some of China's most important relationships amidst the tough negotiations with the EU over the CAI, and mounting problems with Trumps' outgoing administration.

China-USA relations are loaded with uncertainty and mistrust, as significant differences between the two range from ideological and strategic issues to China's domestic and international business practices which, according to the USA and EU, create uneven conditions for foreign companies, and opportunities for technology theft and for breach of human rights. The aforementioned claims, the sanctions based on them, the increase of security threats in the East and South China Seas, especially re-

garding Taiwan, the Hong Kong democracy crackdown and Uyghurs rights in Xinjiang⁵ are just a few of the major points of contention between China and the US. The process of the bilateral ties' rundown fast-tracked after the Obama administration introduced Asia Pivot, and after the Trump administration pointed towards China as a strategic rival and a 'revisionist power' in related documents⁶. China is seen in official documents, and by the broader USA public, as pursuing to "shape a world antithetical to US values and interests". The Trump administration's de-coupling efforts broke thousands of strings of advanced cooperation between the two countries, while its tech-war blacklisted more than three hundred of China's corporations crucial for its global engagement and technological expansion (Reuters, 2020). These measures were to stay for a long time, based on the generally dominant anti-China sentiment, and the more values-based and interventionist foreign policy of the Biden administration.

Wang and Sun (2021) claim that de-globalisation changes in the global economic system, as well as those in USA's and China's respective economies, started after the 2008 crisis, and that a change in the nature of their relations "from symbiotic to increasingly competitive" was one of the factors that caused globalisation to decline, while the pandemic only "gave it momentum". They also say that "regionalisation and localisation" filled the gap as part of the ongoing trend. By focusing the analyses on our topic, we argue that the trade/tech war (which started before the pandemic) and the USA's pressure pushed China towards changing its previous economic strategy, which it began to develop after 2008. Whether China's "Made in China 2025" and "China Standards 2035" strategic policies triggered strategic USA suspicion or were simply adjustments to an altered and deteriorated environment is difficult to surmise, but they strongly affected the two parties and the global economy. However, under Xi's vision of the Chinese economy, 'reform' becomes secondary, and a 'dual circulation' strategy becomes crucial. Essentially, it resembles the "Made in China 2025" technology program's goal of providing a technology platform to substitute essential high-tech imports, and even creating a lead in some crucial hi-tech sectors. Making the economy less exposed to external shocks and securing its uninterrupted

⁵ For more in-depth analyses, please consult: (Trailović, 2019);

⁶ An extended period of American over-dependence on China for medicine and medical supplies has led the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission to label it a "security risk" in 2019. It became even more striking in February 2020, when many Chinese producers halted export due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving Americans helpless. Six months later, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) still declaimed the shortage of 118 drugs. At that point, interdependence on the economic front proved to be a security problem and prompted the USA administration to adopt an even stricter stance against it.

development, while still using all the possible advantages of China's outward economic engagements, are at the core of this strategy, as highlighted throughout the 14th Five Year Plan. This also requires a more prominent role of the state, a further reduction of room for market-oriented reforms, and more sustainable growth in an attempt to regain control over the economy. Making the economy less exposed to external shocks and securing its uninterrupted development is at the core of the 'dual circulation' strategy⁷. After forty-four years of pursuing a 'reform and opening-up policy', China is turning towards self-sufficiency, a position it was in more than sixty years ago. Still, this time it is driven there by the administrative measures of the leader of the liberal global economic order, fuelled by ideology and power struggles. Could this be more of a paradox of history?

This shift, again, exposes China's numerous calls for globalisation, its profession of being a leader in pursuit of it, and its criticism of 'forces that obstruct globalisation', which points towards the USA and its unilateralism. However, at home and abroad, Chinese leadership under Xi is determined to put control above market efficiency which comes with unavoidable fluctuations, as control of the CCP over the economy makes it possible to mobilise the whole society towards achieving the economic and political goals determined by the CCP. Additionally, China's economic strategy strongly relies on high technology and China's attempt to become a global leader by bypassing the leading tech powers; high technology's significance in overcoming the middle-income trap and becoming an advanced economy is pretty obvious, and it also provides a dual-use, which could turn China into a military super-power as well. (Cronin & Neyhard, 2020)

China has engaged in trade negotiations with the USA, hoping to 'handle' the situation and reduce tensions by remaining open to meeting some of the USA's demands, especially in regards to increasing the import of agriculture products (down by 50% of the promised quantity due to logistic and other pandemic-caused obstacles). China usually chose to make vague promises and forward the bill for any particular loss (concession) to a third party, which the EU had complained about. Despite China's compromise in meeting some of the USA's demands, China's 'mask diplomacy' was seen in Washington as the fulfilment of the discourse on China gradually setting itself up for a global leadership role, whereas the 'wolf warrior diplomacy' was harshly dismissed. Growing confidence on China's part, and its domestic and external actions which directly oppose the USA's concerns and interests (and the concerns and interests of the EU, Japan, and the USA's other partners) push towards a further destabi-

⁷ The phrase was announced during the Politburo Standing Committee meeting held on May 14 2020, and again in Xi's speech on the August 24 meeting of the same body.

lisation of the existing mode of global governance, instability, and a narrowed path for peaceful cooperation of the two.

Despite the dubious results of the trade war, the previous USA administration dealt with China with determination, and thus the US is one of the few countries that have not just verbally challenged China. As it is dependent on the import of sophisticated ICT components from the USA, China has had to accept the continued struggle for a new trade deal, and has tried to bypass American sanctions imposed on its corporations. Even in this case, China will continue to defend its interests. When dealing with almost all other partners, it will continue its forceful diplomacy, which includes punishment for its opponents – from import tariffs, and lagging projects, to military clashes, if needed. It will keep digging the rows between EU member states, diluting the negotiating power of the Union, and between the ASEAN countries, supported by its ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomatic style when required. At the same time, it will remain ready and open for viable cooperation where and when feasible, as proved by the global hold of its ‘mask and vaccine diplomacy’.

CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE EU – REALITY CHECK BY COVID-19

In 2020, the cooperation between China and the EU, which grew into a strategic partnership, marked its forty-fifth year. For most of that period, it was traditionally constructive and based on long-time expectations and interests. China saw the EU as an essential player in a multipolar world, even if strongly influenced by the USA. The EU's unified market was, and is, crucial to China and vice versa, as confirmed by EUR1.8 billion in trade value per day in 2019 (DEUC, 2020). Although the two have had differences, especially concerning human rights, their cooperation has developed immensely on various platforms. It has also included a more or less fruitful collaboration on numerous globally significant issues, such as sustainable development, climate change mitigation, food and energy security, the peaceful resolution of global conflicts, nuclear non-proliferation, and, especially in the early years of their relations, the defence of multilateralism with the OUN at its centre.

Nevertheless, throughout the decades of growing cooperation, the EU failed to acknowledge the change in China's power, created by its global economic grasp and the influence built on it. That failure was partly caused by the incoherent interests of the member states, and primarily Germany, the UK, France and Italy's press on an ever-deeper engagement with China. Nevertheless, China's global ambitions, presented on European soil through the “Sixteen/Seventeen plus One” framework and the BRI, along with its purchases of several critical infrastructure assets and

technologically advanced corporations of the EU, distressed the EU political circles and the general public (Mitrovic, 2016, 2022).

For its part, however, China counted on the EU's weak points, as evident with the CAI, which only fortified the confidence expressed by China's foreign policy figures. After the EU-PRC (virtual) summit on 22 June 2020, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel criticised China. They threatened China with "very negative" consequences if China pressed on with the security law in Hong Kong and the actions against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Still, no sanctions or other measures were, or have been introduced. In fact, among the twenty-seven member states, only Sweden proposed sanctions over the deteriorating developments in Hong Kong. When it comes to the EU's criticism of China, which lacks appropriate consequences, there have been plenty of other examples regarding China's actions in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, etc. Most remarkably, Brussels' weakness and China's influence within the EU were revealed when some member states close to China blocked resolutions condemning China's behaviour regarding particular matters of concern in the European Parliament and the UN's relevant bodies (Guardian, 2017).

Although the European Commission adopted the "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), this might start a shift in the manner China is regarded, but not in the outcome of the engagement. In June 2020, after the EU-China summit, President Michel said that the EU "would robustly defend EU interests and stand firm on our values" (EC, 2020), which cast doubt on the feasibility of CAI being concluded within the timeframe. However, the deal was closed on 30 December due to a strong push from Germany and France, which opposed the interests of the less investment-oriented EU member states, voices from human rights groups and the European Parliament, the EU-USA partnership, and the EU's reputation (MERCATOR, 2021). The EU has gained a bit, but lost the momentum of favourable dynamics, and its hard-won upper-hand position is so rarely found when dealing with China (Kuo, 2021). However, the Agreement's ratification has since been stalled. China relied on the EU's weak points, exposed in relation to the CAI, which only fortified the self-assurance expressed by China's top foreign policy figures and their chosen diplomatic mode, emphasised during the pandemic. Nevertheless, it seemed as though this might not be enough to move relations forward.

By late June 2022, the stalemate of ratifying CAI had not changed in either direction, and neither had Beijing's position. PRC would consider cutting its sanctions on respected EU politicians, lawmakers, researchers and think tanks only after the EU removed its sanctions imposed on China in March 2021, based on Xinjiang human rights breach accusa-

tions⁸. In a bold move not seen since 1989 and the Tiananmen incident, Brussels coordinated its hostile and arrogant motion with the USA, Canada and the UK. China made two conciliatory moves through the National People's Congress, approving the two International Labor Organization conventions on forced labour, and allowing the UN human rights envoy Michelle Bachelet to visit Xinjiang in May 2022, but there were no corresponding moves from the EU. Furthermore, in January 2022, the European Commission had opened a case against the PRC at the WTO, claiming that China enforced economic bullying on Lithuania. China's all-around pressure on Lithuania for 'dismantling' 'the 17+1' framework in a particularly insulting manner proved challenging to verify, and Beijing denied that any such decision was made. The EC might refrain from going further than the consultation phase. Still, damage to the ties and the CAI stalemate remained a burden on the bilateral relations.

The mounting tensions during the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic deepened mutual distrust and revealed both sides' views on each other, and their respective positions. These distortions will not, however, distract either party from further engagement in mutually beneficial cooperation in areas such as the global economic recovery from the pandemic, especially the recovery of trade, connectivity in transport, tourism, prevention of future hazards in health and climate changes, energy security, and environmental and other issues that need global governance.

CONCLUSION

This analysis focused on China's foreign policy, its apparatus' performance during COVID-19, and the manner in which the pandemic has affected China's domestic and foreign economic and political agendas, and its confidence. Starting from the theoretical approach which asserts that China's self-confident foreign policy derives from its domestic political dynamism, the analysis shows that such effects have remained constant. At the same time, it argues that China's posting will continue to be forceful towards the mostly inconsistent and insufficient pressure from abroad, providing that it serves as a good tool. China's many achievements at home and overseas during the pandemic crises, which occurred despite severe obstacles, will only solidify its leaders' firm positions and act as proof of efficiency in fulfilling domestic stability and security goals.

The PRC's global economic reach has its own string of problems, making China's foreign relations more complex. In recent years, there have been even more Western narratives and complaints regarding the manner in

⁸ Wasim Cornet, "Western nations sanction China over rights abuses, prompting tit-for-tat response", *France24*, March 23, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210322-china-eu-impose-tit-for-tat-sanctions-over-human-rights-abuses>

which China's initiatives, loans, the debt-crises of the recipient countries, and Chinese corporations' projects have affected local actors, and how the Chinese side treated their concerns. Although it attaches great importance to 'South-South cooperation', China is being increasingly criticised for using similar platforms for self-promotion and for achieving its unilateral goals at the Global South's expense. Nevertheless, its influence on rising economies and the Global South will persist and grow, with an undoubtedly positive impact on the economic dynamism in these economies.

China will continue energetically pursuing its primary strategic goals via its foreign policy. Fulfilled economic goals provide the CCP and the PRC with domestic security, seeing as the Chinese population has, so far, expressed a preference for economic rise and material benefits above other issues, including privacy protection. China's foreign policy goals will focus on realising the external elements of the China Dream goals, including the Belt and Road Initiative. Realising these economic goals will provide China with international security and boost its influence by creating an extreme structural power that makes its effect ever more pronounced. They will also give China the ability to offer financial assistance to numerous states and spread its economic and political impact. A technologically advanced and resilient economy that dominates the global economy in multiple areas is critical to ensuring CPC's survival at home, and to providing it with a solid foundation upon which to build China's military and political role globally.

China will achieve all of these with a regained self-confidence built on its status as the only growth-achieving major economy in 2020, and on its realisation of the first of the Two Centenaries goals – the elimination of absolute poverty by 2021. Additionally, the strategic win provided by the 'last-minute' signing of the CAI with the EU, the previous successful agreement on the RCEP, and the addition of two valuable new African participants to the BRI, achieved in early 2021, all helped in securing China's confident position. At the same time, at home, China was presented and seen as victorious, which provided a basis for further national cohesion building.

Confident in their upper-hand position, China's leaders will continue to present to the world a poetic vision of "the initiative of jointly building a community with a shared future for mankind and an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity..." (Le, 2019). The two-pronged foreign policy, which proved highly successful even during the pandemic, will continue, cemented by China's newly acquired high self-confidence, which will incite future discussions on China's foreign policy during COVID-19, its mode and roots in domestic political dynamism, and its further course.

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КИНЕСКА „СПОЉНА ПОЛИТИКА ЗА НОВО ДОБА” У УСЛОВИМА ПАНДЕМИЈЕ КОВИД-19

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Резиме

Пандемија Ковид-19 деловала је као катализатор за већ напете односе између Народне Републике Кине и њених најважнијих партнера са Запада. Истовремено, она је отворила простор за кинеску „дипломатију вукова-ратника“ и „дипломатију (заштитних) маски“, као два истовремено испољена лица њене спољне политике. Ова анализа је фокусирана на функционисање кинеског спољно-политичког апарата за време пандемије Ковид-19, и на то како је њен учинак повратно утицао на кинеске домаће, али и спољно-економске и политичке планове. Полазећи од претпоставке да робусна спољна политика Кине извире из домаћег политичког динамизма, ова анализа показује да су повратни ефекти спољних дешавања на домаће били умерени. Кинеско спољно-политичко постављање наставиће да буде отпорно на реакције из окружења докле год успешно служи остваривању унутрашњих политичких циљева стабилности и безбедности.

У многим Западним престоницама Кина је оптужена да је покушала да укради прилику и током пандемије се стави на чело глобалне борбе против Ковида-19 користећи „дипломатију маски и вакцина“, тј. делећи и продајући медицинску опрему и вакцине. Оптужбе се посебно односе на то да је НР Кина настојала да

покаже како је њен политички систем ефикаснији у борби са пандемијом, и потенцијално било којим изазовом, од „опадајућих“ западних демократија. На ове критике, Кина је одговорила оштро преко својих „дипломата вукова-ратника“, кроз кампању на друштвеним мрежама, преко државне медијске групе и кроз иступе званичника, што је продубило неразумевање између ње и Запада. Са друге стране, достигнућа Кине на домаћем, али и спољашњем плану, остварена током пандемијске кризе и упркос озбиљним препрекама, учврстила су већ веома јаке позиције њених лидера, будући да су потврда њихове способности да ефектним управљањем остваре циљеве домаће стабилности и безбедности.

Међутим, глобални економски ангажман НР Кине брементит је низом посебних проблема који усложњавају и компликују спољну политику Кине. Последњих година су учестале притужбе у вези кинеских економских иницијатива везане за питања кинеских кредита и повећања задужености земаља које су их узимале, утицаја пројеката које реализују кинеске корпорације на локалне заједнице, и начина на који се Кина односила према овим примедбама и страховима. Иако Кина даје велику важност сарадњи „Југ-Југ“, у порасту су критике које је оптужују да користи ове и сличне платформе сарадње за самопромоцију и постизање унилатералних циљева на рачун земаља Југа. Упркос томе, утицај Кине на растуће економије и Глобални Југ ће расти и остати трајан, што је показао и период пандемије, током кога су настављени пројекти у оквиру „Иницијативе појас и пут“, уз прикључивање још неких афричких земаља.

Очекујемо да Кина настави да енергично остварује своје стратешке циљеве, почев од економских, користећи своју спољну политику. Остварени економски циљеви обезбеђују Комунистичкој партији Кине и НР Кине унутрашњу безбедност, будући да је кинеско становништво показало да више вреднује економски успон и добар животни стандард, као и растући утицај и моћ своје државе, од других циљева, укључујући и заштиту приватности.

Кина је и током пандемије наставила да спроводи своје стратешке планове и циљеве са ојачаним самопоуздањем, заснованим на статусу једине велике економије која је остварила раст у 2020. години, и постизању првог од два „циља стогодишњих јубилеја“, односно на искорењивању апсолутног сиромаштва до 2021. године. Циљеви спољно-политичког наступања Кине усмерени су на остварење Кинеског сна, односно његових елемената који зависе од окружења, укључујући „Иницијативу појас и пут“, што се потврдило и током пандемије. Остварујући ове економске циљеве Кина у великој мери обезбеђује своју спољну безбедност и јача свој утицај кроз растућу структурну моћ. Кроз финансијску помоћ бројним државама, која се наставила и током пандемије, Кина шири свој економски и политички утицај. Уверена у своју моћ и глобални утицај, Кина је наставила да примењује двоструки приступ у својој спољној политици и у доба пандемије. Повратно, овакав учинак допринео је томе да доносиоци одлука у партијском врху КП Кине учврсте своју власт, као и своје уверење да је такав курс спољне политике користан и ефикасан, те да потпомаже остварењу стратешких циљева Партије.