

EastAsiaWatch

Can China arrest a free fall in ties with the US?

How it responds to the challenges posed by an increasingly hostile America will also shape its standing among other nations



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For The Straits Times

The relationship between China and the United States is in free fall.

In recent months, the impact of Covid-19 has added to the areas of friction. Among them is the push by the US and its Western allies for a probe into the origins of the coronavirus; with the presumption of Chinese guilt, there is also the move by some governments and lawyers to seek compensation from Beijing – sometimes to the tune of trillions of dollars – for the spread of Covid-19.

The US has also used Taiwan as a pressure point by seeking the restoration of its observer status at the World Health Assembly (WHA). From 2009 to 2016, Taiwan was invited to the WHA as an observer, but that stopped when the island elected a president that Beijing deemed unfriendly to its interests. Over the weekend, Hong Kong flared up again as a source of tension after Beijing moved to directly enforce a controversial national security law in the territory.

As China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted on Sunday, a "political virus" is spreading in the US, causing politicians there to take every opportunity to attack and discredit China, pushing both countries to "the brink of a new Cold War".

American sentiments towards China are indeed souring. On May 13, the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation released the results of a survey done in partnership with YouGov pollsters. It showed that over two-thirds of

Americans (69 per cent) view the Chinese government as either "somewhat" or "very responsible" for the spread of the coronavirus; 51 per cent support the Chinese government paying compensation to countries affected by the pandemic; 67 per cent view China as either a competitor or enemy in the light of the outbreak; 43 per cent have a more unfavourable opinion about the Chinese government as a result of Covid-19; and a whopping 71 per cent believe that China should be "penalised" for the pandemic.

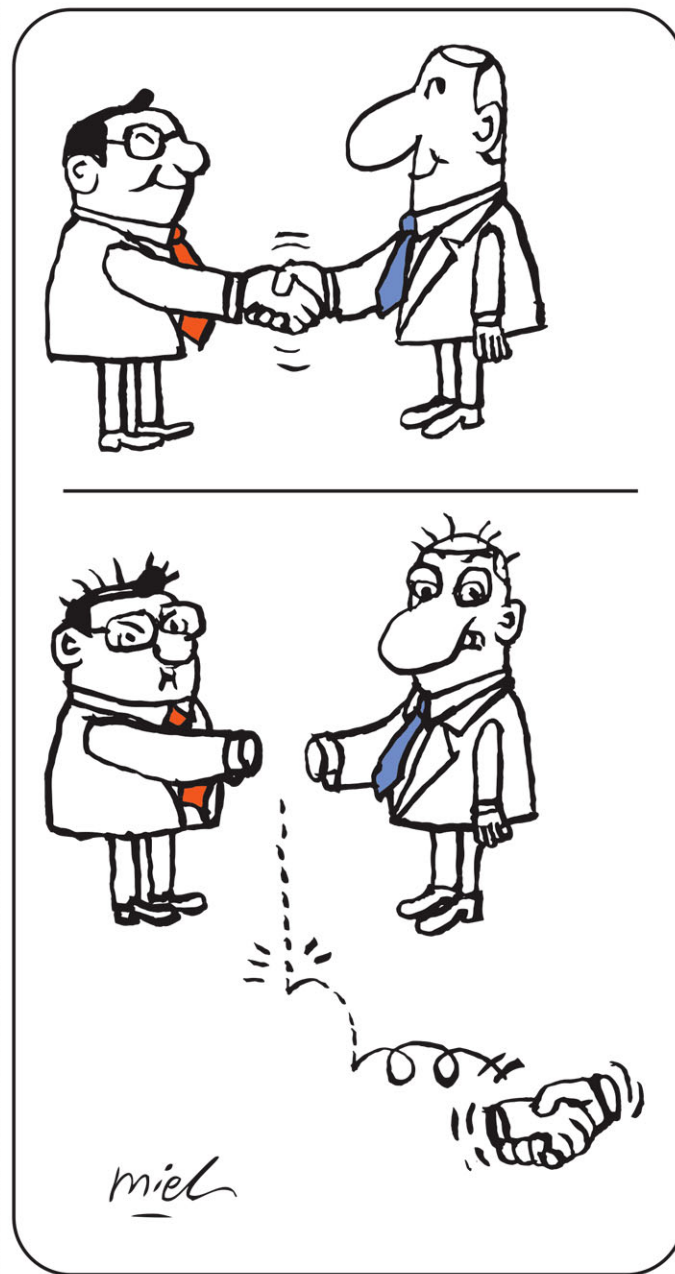
A Pew survey, released on April 21, also showed that roughly two-thirds of Americans now have a negative opinion of China, the highest percentage recorded since the Pew Research Centre began asking the question in 2005.

The Chinese side is also becoming increasingly antagonistic towards the US. This was particularly noticeable in the combative Foreign Ministry responses to accusations by US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Covid-19 originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology's P4 laboratory and their pointed references to the Sars-CoV-2 virus as the "Chinese virus".

The much more muscular response – now commonly referred to as "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy – comes amid a new wave of nationalistic sentiments in China, much like the one that accompanied the 2008 Olympic Games. These tend to break out every time the Chinese feel their country's contributions to the world are not getting their due recognition.

HYBRID NATIONALISM

Chinese nationalism today is a hybrid – it is in part the older generation's sense of historic grievance over the 100 years of humiliation inflicted by foreign powers; it is also the growing sense of national pride among the young



in China's prosperity; it is also what can be termed "commercial nationalism", pushed by the media, particularly social media, and also by some business sectors which benefit from promoting nationalism.

Whatever its roots, nationalistic sentiments have reached all corners of Chinese society and found expression in different forms. Hawkish voices call for a re-evaluation of China's phase one trade deal with the US. Advisers close to the talks have suggested that Chinese officials consider invalidating the trade pact and negotiate a new one to tilt the scales more to the Chinese side. The *Global Times*' editor Hu Xijin suggests that China acquire more nuclear warheads to deal with the US. While all these are not official positions, they tend to provoke strong reactions from Americans.

The outlook for a more positive direction on the foreign policy front is bleak when diplomats from both sides behave like rival politicians, exchanging blow for blow and resorting to blame games rather than searching for a feasible policy for problem-solving. The free fall in Sino-US ties is gaining momentum, no thanks to the efforts from both sides. As it accelerates, the danger is that it is headed in the direction of Professor Graham Allison's *Thucydides's Trap*, in which a rising China and a dominant US end up in a violent collision that no one wants.

SLOWING THE DESCENT

Can anything be done to arrest the dangerous trajectory of this relationship?

It will be unrealistic to expect that the US will soften its policy towards China in the near future. The conditions for doing so are simply not there. Mr Trump is in campaign mode for re-election with an economy devastated by Covid-19 and jobless figures at historic highs. Given the increasingly negative attitudes of American voters towards China, it is not surprising that the Republicans see demonising China for the economic pains America is suffering as their best bet to victory in November. The voters' mood and the campaign messaging that Mr Joe Biden is soft on China also mean that the Democrats cannot be seen to be too compromising towards Beijing either.

What about China then? Given that China is not caught up in the throes of election-year politics, it is more likely to be able to take initiatives to stabilise this relationship. President Xi Jinping's recent speech at the WHA was a positive step in this regard. Avoiding the pugnacious tone taken by some of his bureaucrats, Mr Xi did not blame anyone and any country; instead, he emphasised what China can do by way of humanitarian diplomacy. In his speech, he promised that

- Provide US\$2 billion (S\$2.85

billion) over two years to help with the Covid-19 response, especially in affected developing countries.

- Work with the United Nations to set up a global humanitarian response depot and hub in China, ensure the smooth operation of anti-epidemic supply chains and foster "green corridors" for fast-track transportation and Customs clearance.
- Establish a cooperation mechanism for its hospitals to pair up with 30 African hospitals and accelerate the building of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters to help the continent ramp up its disease preparedness and control capacity.
- Make a Chinese-produced Covid-19 vaccine, when available, a global public good. This will help ensure vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries.
- Work with other Group of 20 members to implement the debt service suspension initiative for the poorest countries.

All these offers of help are commendable and would certainly provide relief to a world sorely stricken by the pandemic. But they are not enough if China's aim is to improve its global standing, if not smoothen ties with the US.

WISDOM NEEDED, NOT 'WOLF WARRIOR' DIPLOMACY

A better way to go about it is to consider why China's swift sharing of the virus' genetic code with foreign scientists was so well received; its offer of medical expertise and equipment to other countries struggling to contain the pandemic was also in itself a creditable act. But all the good that these positive acts have achieved has been undone by the words and actions of its more belligerent diplomats, propagandists and media spokesmen.

What China needs is confidence and wisdom, not "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy and chest-thumping nationalism. Acts of generosity do not engender goodwill when they come with demands for acknowledgement and praise.

The purpose of diplomacy is to further the national interest; it should not be equated solely with out-shouting the opponent. Restraint properly exercised can work better in influencing other nations; excessive nationalistic rhetoric – by bureaucrats or official media – may whip up the home crowd, but does it really help China secure true respect on the international stage? For a great power, it is also not wise to make use of the coronavirus as an opportunity to push one's advantage over others in matters of dispute such as the South China Sea claims.

The call for restraint is not to deny the roots of China's deep-seated fear of a concerted attempt by a US-led West to contain it or to deny its legitimate right to have its say as a rising power. What is being argued here is that assertiveness in the national interest is not the same thing as aggressiveness, which has the counterproductive effect of unifying Western and other countries against China.

Excessive nationalism in the conduct of foreign policy also runs the risk of China not seeing its potential strengths in the realm of

power politics. For instance, the Trump administration's cuts in funding for the World Health Organisation (WHO) may in part be directed at China, but China is not alone in opposing the US action. Major European powers are also against Washington's actions against the WHO, even if they are critical of China's initial response to Covid-19. In other words, it would be wrong to assume there is a monolithic US-led united front of Western countries against China. European countries do not see eye to eye with the Trump administration on many issues and there are self-interested reasons for them to maintain good relations with China.

Failure to discern these differences does China no good.

In the search for the origins of the Covid-19 virus, it is far better for China to adopt a cool-headed, rational and scientific approach. It is one that actually works in China's favour as the international scientific community is not enamoured with Trumpian political finger-pointing. Indeed, Chinese researchers and doctors have been working closely with their counterparts in other countries since the very beginning of the outbreak and their joint efforts would not have been possible if they were not agreed on a science-based search for the truth.

Mr Xi has agreed to having an international investigation of the origins of the virus. A thorough investigation is the correct path forward but it should be for the right reasons – not for pinning blame and exacting reparations, but to help scientists determine the evolutionary course of the disease in order to better protect humanity against this and future outbreaks. As long as the virus is not man-made and spread intentionally, even if the virus had its origins in China, it is not a sin as a virus can originate in any country. What China needs is a scientific conclusion, not a political one.

OPPORTUNITY FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

A country that is self-confident neither fears a rational, self-correcting decision-making process nor gets led astray by loud nationalistic voices. While nationalism is a fact and can provide a sense of solidarity, excessive nationalism is ultimately self-destructive. Ever since the May Fourth Movement, Chinese nationalism has been a double-edged sword; the risk is that while it starts off by agitating against foreigners, it could easily turn its fury against its own government.

The world is becoming increasingly chaotic. Covid-19 has been extremely damaging to the US and its claim to global leadership. China has suffered too but it also has an opportunity to play a more important role in global affairs. It can do so by undertaking initiatives that serve the greater good of humanity. It will be judged by its deeds, not words articulated in the growing heat of US-China rivalry.

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