



CHINA'S INOPPORTUNE PANDEMIC ASSERTIVENESS

BY JOEL WUTHNOW

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For a state just beginning to recover from Covid-19, China has been remarkably active in pressing its sovereignty claims. Chinese forces have been involved in a spate of incidents around its borders, most recently a series of [tense encounters](#) with India. Foreign media have seized on this as another example of [Chinese opportunism](#), in which Beijing shamelessly presses its territorial agenda against weaker rivals still in the throes of the disease. However, China's actions also constitute a strategic blunder, sacrificing the propaganda value of its contributions to regional pandemic responses and weakening its long-running attempts to dilute US influence. This gives Washington a second chance at drawing a contrast with China and demonstrating concrete leadership for a region still reeling from Covid-19's effects.

Untimely Bellicosity

In [February](#), Chinese jets crossed the mid-line of the Taiwan Strait, forcing Taiwan to scramble interceptors, and People's Liberation Army troops carried out live-fire [combat drills](#) in the vicinity. In March, a Chinese fishing boat—possibly belonging to the paramilitary maritime militia—[collided with](#) a Japanese destroyer in the East China Sea, damaging the latter ship. In April, Beijing declared [new administrative districts](#) in the Paracel and Spratly islands, the latest step in China's bid to legitimize effective control over these areas. The same month, a

Chinese coast guard ship [sank](#) a Vietnamese fishing boat in the South China Sea. In May, Chinese and Indian troops were involved in a [confrontation](#) along the disputed Himalayan border, though Indian officials suggested both sides bore some responsibility. And, over several months, Chinese ships [repeatedly entered](#) Japan's claimed territorial waters near the Senkakus.

China has recently taken steps to defuse some of these problems, such as [ending a standoff](#) with Malaysia related to energy exploration in the South China Sea and [convening a dialogue](#) with Indian military leaders. There is also nothing fundamentally new about this recent brashness; in 2019 alone, China was involved in tense episodes with most of these countries (save India). Those caveats aside, the key takeaway about China's regional diplomacy in the first half of 2020 was a willingness to confront so many regional rivals in such a short timeframe, at a time when conventional wisdom suggested Beijing would scale back external provocations to focus on disease control at home.

A Missed Opportunity

A consequence of this recent burst of assertive actions is that China missed a strategic opportunity to undercut US influence at a time of intensifying competition. As I document in a [recent National Defense University study](#), Chinese strategists view the Trump administration's "[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#)" strategy as simply the latest iteration of a US containment plot, based on denser ties between Washington, its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue partners (Japan, Australia, and India), and other democracies. They almost universally prescribe stronger outreach to China's neighbors, through economic carrots and an attractive message, to weaken the connective tissue between the United States and its regional supporters.

During the first half of 2020, the conditions for a Chinese "soft power" victory were ripe: Washington has been widely [criticized](#) for its early focus on the Iran nuclear issue, conspiracy theories, competition with allies over personal protective equipment, and obsession with phrases like the "Wuhan virus." US [relief aid to Asia](#) in the first few months of the outbreak consisted of relatively minor outlays to a

small group of states, such as India, the Philippines, and Thailand. The opportunity to burnish its own reputation was not lost on China: Beijing used “[mask diplomacy](#)” and [deployment of military doctors](#) to places like Cambodia and Myanmar to position itself as partner of choice.

The problem is that China tarnished its soft power by allowing a series of disparate incidents to congeal into widespread complaints about Chinese policies during a pandemic. The results are exactly what Chinese strategists wanted to avoid, including driving the Philippines and Vietnam together [to jointly lambast](#) China’s heavy-handed territorial actions; prompting Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte to [cancel plans](#) to scrap the visiting forces agreement with the United States; creating unnecessary friction in relations with [Japan](#) and [India](#), both of whom Xi Jinping has courted in recent years; and pushing Taipei even closer to the US, which has shown its support through recent US naval [Taiwan Strait transits](#). At minimum, China’s actions blurred the weak US response to Covid-19 within the Indo-Pacific; at worst, they increased the demand for US leadership, stoking fears that Beijing cannot be trusted.

Why did Beijing lose this opportunity? One explanation is that the gains from opportunism in regional disputes outweighed the anticipated regional repercussions. Perhaps Beijing assessed a window to consolidate its influence in the South China Sea, intending to shift back towards a conciliatory posture once initial criticisms have subsided. Another possibility is that party leaders concluded that the domestic political gains of diverting attention from Beijing’s poor early handling of the Covid-19 outbreak and playing to a nationalist audience would justify the international blowback. In either case, myopic calculations have at least temporarily trumped the advice of Chinese analysts to prioritize the long-term accumulation of power over the near-term temptation to ratchet up tensions with multiple neighbors.

A Second Chance for Washington

A hardening of regional opinion against China raises doubts about Beijing’s ability to rapidly restructure the international order, as discussed by some [foreign](#)

[observers](#), at least within the Indo-Pacific region, where China’s temptation to resort to coercion is strongest. Instead, China’s actions provide another opportunity for US diplomats to promote sustained US leadership. In April, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo shrewdly grouped a number of Chinese provocations in the South China Sea into a narrative of Chinese “[bullying](#),” in contrast with the US’ emphasis on protecting the sovereignty of smaller states. That message, far more than allusions to the “Wuhan virus,” can resonate for a region already wary about China’s rise.

To remain a credible leader, however, Washington needs to match a persuasive message with concrete actions. An increase in foreign aid to those hit hardest by Covid-19 would be a start. Over the last month, Washington has expanded assistance to a larger group of Asian nations, though the amounts generally [remain small](#) (less than \$5 million). The State Department should issue a new statement providing explicit and quantifiable details on how Washington is contributing to relief efforts, beyond the vague [list of accomplishments](#) released last month.

Continued US military presence in contested areas would also help reassure states that US willingness to step up when needed has not been affected. US naval Taiwan Strait transits and the [recent dispatch](#) of two US warships to back up Malaysia in the South China Sea suggest that Washington is willing to bear risks on behalf of its allies and partners, but more could be done, starting with the [passage](#) of a \$6 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative. Over the longer term, US leaders need to return to the region at the earliest opportunity: President Trump [skipped the last several regional summits](#). Visible, costly signals of its own regional commitments would ensure that Washington can seize the opportunity to advance its own strategic long game.

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