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The consequences of COVID-19 on the geo-economic capacities of the People's Republic of China

LARIS GAISER

Laris Gaiser is assistant professor of security studies. He graduated, after a period of study at Anglia Polytechnic University of Cambridge, in Law at the University of Verona in 2002 with a final dissertation on “The consequences of the devolution of power in United Kingdom and the new role of the State in public economy”. He earned his Master's degree in International Affairs and Diplomacy from the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) of Milano and after a specialization in crisis management and humanitarian action at UN Staff College he obtained a Ph.D. in Geopolitical Economy at University Guglielmo Marconi of Rome. His area of specialization are Economy Intelligence, Strategic Studies, and Geoeconomy. From 2012 until 2014 he was Vice President acting as President of Euro Mediterranean University – EMUNI, serving at the same time as a member of the Strategic Council at Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Laris is involved in political and business advising, writes as a columnist for several European newspapers and is a visiting lecturer at Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (Austria). He is member of the Paneuropean Union presidency in Strasbourg.

Abstract

La Repubblica Popolare di Cina rappresenta oggi uno dei grandi attori geopolitici mondiali. A tale posizione è potuta assurgere grazie alla cooptazione, in chiave anti Sovietica, effettuata negli anni Settanta del Novecento da parte degli Stati Uniti. Al termine della Guerra fredda Pechino ha optato per una politica di sviluppo che la portasse a primeggiare tanto nel settore economico, quanto in quello diplomatico e militare con lo scopo d'assurgere a potenza mondiale di riferimento. In tal modo il regime comunista cinese ha sfidato la logica della strategia che insegna a rifuggire dal perseguimento di un avanzamento di potenza contemporaneo nei tre settori, pena la creazione di un eccessivo attrito con gli altri Stati. La crisi del COVID-19 ha esasperato tale contrasto e sta portando gli Stati antagonisti a ridurre le capacità d'influenza economica di Pechino sfruttando anche gli evidenti contraccolpi alla capacità produttiva apportati dallo scoppio della pandemia.

Today, the People's Republic of China represents one of the most important geopolitical players in the world. It was able to rise to this position thanks to the co-optation, in an anti-Soviet approach, carried out in the 1970s by the United States. At the end of the Cold War, Beijing opted for a development policy that would lead it to excel in the economic, diplomatic, and military sectors to assume its status as a world power. In this way, the Chinese Communist regime has challenged the strategic logic that teaches that it is important to shy away from the pursuit of a simultaneous advancement of power in these three sectors, on pain of creating excessive friction with other states. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated this competition and

is leading the antagonistic states to reduce Beijing's capacity for economic influence, as well as exploiting the evident repercussions to production capacity brought about by the outbreak of the pandemic.

Keywords

China, COVID-19, geo-economy, strategy, crisis

1. The geo-economic development of Communist China

The People's Republic of China, as we know it today, is a product of the West, or the United States of America and related dependent economic realities linked to the North Atlantic world. Had it not been for the geopolitical needs linked to the containment of the Soviet Union, the state, led by Beijing, would have had a radically different development. It is thanks to Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon that for some decades now the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have been able to imagine a future in which they would supplant the US in its role as the leading world power (Kissinger 2011). Kissinger's real-political opening to communist China in 1972 was aimed at exploiting the discontent between Moscow and Beijing to implement a policy of containment.

Despite broader American expectations, Communist China did not decrease its support for North Vietnam, which had been waging a prolonged war against American troops in South Vietnam since the early 1960s. During the Cold War, Communist China clearly demonstrated its hawkish intentions during the wars in Indochina, Korea, and Vietnam, by supporting militarily and economically pro-communist regimes in the struggle against Western countries or coalitions (EGE 2020). However, the Western world, and the United States of America in particular, efficiently exploited the Sino-Soviet schism.

Following the end of the Cold War, Communist China was able to count on the passive benevolence of the West, and on the Clinton administration's belief that it too was destined to convert Communist China into a democracy and market economic system over time.

The failure of the USSR in its attempt to defeat capitalism led the leaders of the "free world" to hastily conclude that the Chinese Communist regime was going to follow an identical path towards self-destruction. Based on this logical premise, Beijing, without any request for compensation in political, social, or economic terms, was admitted to the WTO (Pelanda 2007).

The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 could have alerted Western governments to the will of the Chinese Communist Party to remain in power by any means possible.

As explained in the past by Benedetto Croce (1921), Communist China has shown that the market economy can easily coexist with authoritarian political systems. In fact, for years, Beijing has officially oriented itself towards a market system within which it can take advantage of its development gap vis-à-vis Western countries by providing low-cost work, supporting state-owned companies, carrying out global dumping and exploiting the relocation of American and European companies to grow mainly based on exports.

Since 1999, China has benefited from continuous growth in exports, rising from \$194.9 billion in 1960 to over \$2.3 trillion expected by the end of this year (CIA 2020). Despite the sharp decline recorded in January, February and March, Chinese exports have been boosted by record shipments of medical supplies and robust demand for electronic products.

From the mid-first decade of 2000, Beijing used the Bush administration's distraction from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to expand its influence in Africa and South America. In 2009, the Obama administration offered China a G2 co-management of the world disguised as a G20 due to the concrete need to activate the Chinese locomotive to drive global demand, given that the US and European ones were blocked by the financial crisis of 2008 (Pelanda 2020).

Beijing was not only asked to collaborate in productive growth but also to open its own internal market. However, Beijing mistook the offer of collaboration as a sign of Washington's weakness, and China's modalities of collaboration, as a power, convinced Obama of the need to change course before the situation could become even more difficult to manage. In 2013, the Obama administration launched the project to create two separate economic areas, one in the Pacific (TPP) and one in the Atlantic (TTPI) that put the United States at the centre while excluding China. A highly exclusive economic containment aimed at blocking Beijing's expansionism.

Xi Jinping's response was one of direct confrontation, both on military and diplomatic grounds.

In his book *The China Dream*, Liu Mingfu (2010), then a colonel in the People's Liberation Army, wrote that China's dream for a century was to become the world's leading nation. Such a sentence, published by an institutional representative of a regime that obviously had previously approved the publication of the book, also implied the fact that to achieve this goal it was necessary to oust someone from the current leader's pedestal. It was a statement of defiance towards the US. A declaration of geopolitical war. In fact, after taking over as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party

in 2012, Xi Jinping echoed the book's language. This dream, he said, would be realized by 2049, a century after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Consequently, he radically changed the nature of the Republic's armed forces in **two specific instances**. First in 2013, with the publication of the new *Science of Military Strategy*, an official military handbook published by the Academy of Military Sciences, through which the central government explained China's overall national security strategy, **the five-dimensional nature of war**, and China's major geopolitical challenges for the new century. The second big transformation occurred in 2015 with the issue of China's 10th *Military Strategy White Paper*. In this document, the previous "local war under informatized conditions" was changed into "winning informatized local wars". However, the underpinning idea behind this principle was that **China was now ready to expand its military efforts beyond its national boundaries**: the inauguration of the first Chinese military base abroad – in Djibouti – in 2017 was a case in point.

The issue of the new White Paper was followed, a couple of months later, by one of the **biggest military reforms** ever embraced by Communist China with the final objective to make the PLA a professional, modern army with the introduction, at a national strategic level, of the Military-Civil Fusion programme intertwined with the *Made in China* (2015) and *New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan* (2017) technological programmes. The latter even conceives another type of fusion, between people and machines, and the **progressive intelligentization of warfare**.

The shaping of a significantly aggressive military policy also coincided with a geopolitical vision that was also very expansive. Xi Jinping wanted to project his country globally on a diplomatic and economic level by launching the *One Belt and Road Initiative* in 2013, as a way to undermine internationally pre-established geopolitical and economic alliances. According to Elizabeth C. Economy (2018), under Xi, China actively seeks to shape international norms and institutions and forcefully assert its presence on the global stage.

The New Silk Road is one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever conceived. The vast collection of development and investment initiatives would stretch from East Asia to Europe, significantly expanding China's economic and political influence. Xi's vision includes creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward and southward. Such a network would also be preparatory to expanding the international use of the Chinese currency, the renminbi, and break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity. (Chatzy, McBride 2020).

Challenging the international system while simultaneously increasing its military, economic and diplomatic development at a stage in which China was already attested as an influential player in global relations was an unforgivable mistake for a political leader. It could only logically provoke a response from antagonists, especially the United States.

2. The Crisis of the Tianxia presumption

The COVID-19 pandemic, through its beginnings in China and subsequent mismanagement, has created a landslide of destabilization of such force that it increases the danger to a regime that, while concentrating on its primary task of survival in an inefficient political system, has struggled to effectively administer itself through a crisis that it found itself having to fight. Just like the Soviet Union of the 1980s, the political system, constitutionally based on the pursuit of the supreme welfare of the Communist Party rather than the Country, also demonstrates a system unable to manage crises that could damage the image of the main governing body in China.

Beijing's acts of cover-up, lies and disinformation operations go beyond the level of the annoyance of a communist elite that refuses to be singled out by outsiders. They reflect the aggressiveness of a system that does not want to question its own finality. The initial refusal of the CCP leadership to assume its responsibilities to its people and the international community legitimizes the action of designating Communist China as a potentially dangerous peacetime power (EGE 2020).

The whole situation has inevitably created the conditions necessary for an exponential increase in the dynamics of geopolitical containment of Communist China and the policy of commercial decoupling by the United States. But China's international posture was destined to increase international friction and explode into a genuine confrontation.

Since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China's economy has been growing constantly. Gross domestic product increases have even exceeded, in the last decade, 9 per cent annually. It is twice the maximum sustainable growth rate of the US economy and almost three times as much as the equivalent rate of historically stabilized European economies. In 2019, the Chinese economy ranked second largest in the world by nominal GDP and 73rd by GDP per capita. Given the still-high rate of people unemployed in traditional agriculture, the lowest rung of commerce and humble personal services, China maintains an enormous potential for continuing the expansion of its economic growth into the future (Luttwak 2012).

However, as Edward Luttwak has already noted in 2012 in his book *The Rise of China vs The Logic of Strategy*, that if China's economic and military

growth will persist at a rapid pace, and the Chinese global influence will also increase in kind, that it will generate a widespread expectation that the country is bound to emerge as the world's predominant power in the foreseeable future, but this would collide with the very logic of strategy in a world of diverse states, each jealous of their own autonomy.

This strategic logic teaches that no country can claim to become a leader by pursuing, at the same time, successfully, an increase in military, economic and political strength, since the resistance it will inevitably create will be such as to push other states to counteract the moment.

The three-sided growth of China's economy, military strength and political standing was perfectly complementary in the 1980s and 1990s because the country was not yet rich, strong, or influential by American standards.

The strategic error brought forward by China in recent years, and specifically by Xi, can be traced back to an interpretation of the world and the relationships to which the Chinese world still seems to be anchored. It is an interpretation based on hierarchical superiority and on the tributary system of the foreign relations of Imperial China, which persisted for almost two millennia, instead of formal equality between states of differing power. According to the *Tianxia* (All under heaven) interpretation of the world, the tributes were confirming the ethical as well as the political supremacy of the emperor by their deferential obeisance. The highest benefit extended by the empire to its subjected tributary neighbours was their inclusion within its political sphere. Unlike what was accepted by other parts of the world, the inequality of the parties was the starting point of Chinese political interpretations.

Such an interpretation is still valid today, and officially it is suggested as a legitimate alternative propagated by Confucius Institute activities.¹

Considering itself the bearer of superior value, contemporary China has been defining its fate for years, one consisting of frictions that will prohibit its linear progress due to a strategic mistake already committed in the past by others. While wishing to demonstrate that it is able to create a spurious

¹ As reported in Luttwak, E. (2012), *The Rise of China Vs. The Logic of Power*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pag.35: in May 2011 the Confucius Institute cosponsored an event at Stanford University under the title *A Tanxia Workshop Culture, International Relations and World History. Rethinking Chinese Perceptions of World Order*. The accompanying description made clear the cultural axioms: "The practical value of traditional Chinese vision of world order, or *Tanxia*...(is that)...this vision anchors a universal authority in the moral, ritualistic, and aesthetic framework of a secular high culture, while providing social and moral criteria for assessing fair, humanitarian governance and proper social relations. Varied discourses indebted to *Tanxia* have resurfaced in modern China in quest of moral and cultural ways of relating to and articulating an international society. We believe that the Chinese vision may prove productive in the tension ridden yet interconnected world.

economic model that allows the regime to survive, and impose a vision of geopolitics different from the Western one, the Communist Party of Beijing omits the fact of being immersed in an economic and international system; one that has its own rules allowing it to function and which a majority of the actors accept.

COVID-19 could heavily undermine the deep-rooted presumption of the Tianxia vision.

3. The position of China in a post-COVID-19 economy

It is precisely from this international point of view that the COVID-19 crisis has proved the vulnerabilities in the production system based upon Western companies relocating to countries not only characterized by low labour costs but also by a deficient institutional system. The inability to manage crises potentially harmful to the image of autocratic political structures is a constant factor in the contemporary history of international relations. If this is combined with a persistent lack of the rule of law and a judicial framework unable to guarantee the fluidity of business continuity, it is possible to foresee a phase of redefinition of the logistic and production chains developed in China in the coming months. The epidemic crisis has highlighted the gaps in the production system based on the specialization of production and just-in-time logistics supply. It is therefore conceivable that in the phase of resetting the activities there is an accentuation of the phenomenon of back and near-shoring or the return of production to the homeland or neighbouring regions.

Back-shoring consists of the relocation of value creation tasks from offshore to geographically closer locations irrespective of the ownership mode” (Foerstl et al., 2016). From a geographical point of view, this concept can be further broken down into back-shoring (Foerstl et al., 2016) or back-reshoring (Fratocchi et al., 2016), i.e., the relocation back to the home country of the firm, and nearshoring (Foerstl et al., 2016) or near-reshoring (Fratocchi et al., 2016), i.e., the relocation to a location closer to (but not within) the home country.

These redefinitions of the production chain will allow greater resilience and management flexibility in the event of future market stress events and, at the same time, reduce the exposure of companies to the phenomena of social and political instability to which fragile or autocratic state entities will most likely be subjected to at the end of the current negative situation (Gaiser 2020c).

An extremely accentuated case of back-shoring would have grave consequences for Chinese economic and social development with strong repercus-

sions on employment policy, fiscal and economic planning, market development and the competitive capacity of the entire system.

China would be in serious trouble without the global market, far more trouble than the global market would be in without China. In the coming months, Beijing will have a hard time rebalancing the stimulus of supply and demand, having growth based extensively upon public infrastructure investments and on an inefficient and corrupt production sector owned purely by the state. The public sector amounts to about 30 trillion dollars, absorbs 80% of bank loans, but only represents 25% of the gross domestic product. This system is highly vulnerable, whose sterility could prove disruptive.

Accordingly, to the above described macroeconomic approach, fixed asset investment fell a less-than-expected 3.1% in the first half from the same period in 2019, moderating from a 6.3% decline in the first five months, while real estate investment growth also quickened to 8.5% in June, thanks to the credit boost (WEF 2020).

The Institute of International Finance estimates China's total debt rose to 317% of the gross domestic product in the first quarter of 2020, up from 300% in late 2019 and the largest quarterly increase on record (IIF 2020).

Despite having the largest domestic market in the world, the Chinese Communist Party has never opened it for fear of creating an independent middle class with political claims that are irreconcilable with the regime. Economic development is forcibly based on exports and relocation, as Beijing does not know how to otherwise manage the effects of the market economy and the resulting social revolution.

However, as US pressure for decoupling of the world's two largest economies rises, China is beginning to plan a shift toward its own vast domestic market. A new strategy named *dual circulation* should become the pivot of the 14th five-year plan becoming the next phase of economic development in which China will rely mainly on "domestic circulation", an internal cycle of production, distribution, and consumption.

Despite the expected decision, there will most assuredly be difficulties to make it work, given that China faces numerous obstacles before it can establish a sustainable consumer market and cut its reliance on exports and state-led investment for growth. According to Richardson (2020), China's consumption power is far below its production capabilities; ordinary Chinese people are unable to consume more because they are burdened by mortgage payments as well as an uncertain job and income outlook. Were China's export-oriented factories to shift towards servicing the domestic market it would significantly intensify competition, leading to price cuts and the closure of weak companies that could, in turn, spur unemployment. China's wealth gap

is already among the widest in the world, with the bulk of its population still struggling to make ends meet.

On the international level, the hardest blow that will seriously jeopardize the future development of Chinese global prospects has been suffered by the Belt and Road Initiative, given that so many projects of the BRI had to be postponed or halted. Mainly due to Chinese workers being unable to travel to the BRI countries to continue infrastructure construction and many BRI countries, facing economic difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, also struggling to repay the debt they owe to China.

Si Zefu, Chairman and Party Secretary of Harbin Electric Group (one of the world's largest construction companies for energy infrastructure) told the CPPCC that due to the global economic downturn, Chinese companies are facing difficulties in implementing projects or developing new projects. He also worried about the ability of projects to be paid on time or at all.

The difficulties abroad combined with the fact that Beijing will have to focus economically on an internal revival if it does not want to implode, and therefore support for the colossal BRI project will inevitably decrease, has led institutions to admit they are in trouble and call upon the diaspora for help. Zhu Yilong, Member of the CPPCC and Group Chairman of the China Federation of Overseas Chinese said that overseas Chinese have the advantages of integrating with the outside world and are an important force in the development of the "One Belt and One Road. Therefore, he suggested to utilize overseas Chinese associations in border areas, strengthen people-to-people exchanges, and actively integrate them to serve "One Belt and One Road" development (Wang 2020).

4. Conclusions

Originally presented as an influenza epidemic confined to a Chinese city, COVID-19 quickly developed into a deadly pandemic. While it is true that with every crisis comes its own designated share of culpability, it is undeniable that in the last one China's role has been of pivotal importance in preventing prudent, timely management of the crisis globally.

It is not the first pandemic that China has been unable to manage (EGE 2020, p.31), but it is the one that has risked doing the most damage globally, as it was capable of striking in a generalized manner and, above all, it has arrived at a concomitant moment capable of multiplying the adverse effects of Chinese strategic mistakes on its international expansion.

The self-referentiality of the regime, whose main task is to preserve itself per the constitution of the PRC, which places the good of the Communist Party above any other national interest, has prevented an effective, and inter-

nationally coordinated management of the crisis. The economic consequences of this approach have been devastating for several countries but, above all, they have created a generalized attitude of distrust towards the communist regime that could in the medium-long term lead to the *Chernobyl trap* (Gaiser 2020a). A catastrophic event of international significance demonstrating the operational inability of a regime that will be forced to reform to survive but risking losing control of events due to the loss of international benevolence and an internal economic lack of stable foundations.

COVID-19 is a temporal and qualitative multiplier of the inevitable effects with which the Chinese political leadership would have had, soon or later, to deal with, especially since Xi Jinping had taken over leadership of the Communist party. In past decades, the proponents of the globalist discourse on the predominance of the market and the domination of finance contributed in a decisive way to give a reassuring image of China, but the continuous, ostentatious increase in its military, economic and political power combined with its global rise was destined, on the logical basis of the strategy, to clash with the survival interests of other international subjects.

The rising tensions with the United States and the pandemic have added to structural issues that China has been facing for years, including demographic changes, over-investment, low industrial productivity, and high debt levels. The pressure of decoupling, internationally led by the US, the multiplying phenomena of back-shoring and the internal economic consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will certainly force China to focus more on itself, to open up its internal market and to manage the social upheavals that will inevitably ensue, and that, at the moment, a communist regime could hardly manage, as history has shown. Furthermore, an extremely adverse impact on China's future geo-economic projection could be anticipated. BRI, a central project, will be crippled for some time both due to the economic crisis that will grip many of the states involved in the project and due to the necessary economic disengagement of China, whose main focus will be stability and internal economic recovery. The internal market will suffer from the drainage of major investments that have been opting to back-shore for years, the decrease in foreign investment and internal competition, boosted by the new domestic circulation strategy that could lead to high levels of unemployment in a system whose family-based welfare for hundreds of years has been flaking due to massive urbanization at the expense of the countryside. Moreover, it would be challenging for Beijing to grow domestic demand if it refuses to give up its traditional development model of maintaining a priority on infrastructure spending, the old playbook of state-led investment that has been successful for Beijing in the past but it is hardly a recipe for healthy economic development and a dynamic society. Within a scenario of government

stimulus-led recovery, which is very much focused on the industrial side, the consumer remains extremely cautious. Despite all the scenario changes in May 2020, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China published *Speeding Up the Perfection of the Socialist Market Economic System in the New Era*. The landslide and destabilization created by the pandemic have increased understanding of the danger facing a regime which, focused on the primary task of the survival of its inefficient political system, struggles to effectively manage crises and understand international dynamics.

The effort to centrally control the development of its internal market, and the management of the social pressure that this will direct towards a one-party regime, will be one of a much greater intensity than was necessary in the past when it based GDP growth by betting on internationalization and gradual management of internal dynamics.

China, eager to supplant the United States, was, until yesterday, making the exact same mistakes as Bismarck's Germany, which had designs to surpass Britain, the then leading global power. When this so-called strategic paradox occurs, the country, instead of accumulating power, will have less and less power due to the constant increase in international opposition. Strategic incompetence leaves no way out, even if it is disguised as a peaceful economic rise, and thus makes the Country's stability highly vulnerable and will hardly make the CCP out to be the protagonist in its celebrations for the hundred years of communism in 2049. Authoritarian regimes always erode themselves.

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