The COVID-19 Effect: US-China Narratives and Realities

Min Ye


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1893513

Published online: 23 Mar 2021.
The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated geopolitical tensions between the United States and China while restricting policy dialogues, amplifying extreme sentiments, and sidestepping rational observations. The outcomes are extremist and divided narratives, emphasizing China’s triumphalism on one hand and inherent weaknesses on the other. Under such narratives, China’s policy voices and actions in combatting the pandemic and economic fallout were under-studied and discounted, with harmful impacts on the US response to the virus, economic recession, and shifting globalization. This paper studies China’s official statements, research reports, and scholarly opinion networks in 2020 and finds that, though there were various policy discussions, the general argument was for expanding China’s globalism during and after the pandemic. Meanwhile, China’s policy actors—national agencies, local governments, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—strive to continue globalization and adapt to new realities after COVID-19.

Undoubtedly, during the pandemic, China has had vocal “wolf warriors” that have loudly rejected any external criticism of China and argued for making coercive moves overstretching its power internally and internationally. These hawkish and nationalist tendencies have become outsiders’ main characterization of China, indicating Beijing’s triumphalism or internal fragility, and have

Min Ye is Associate Professor of International Relations for the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University, where she previously served as the Director of East Asian Studies and Director of Undergraduate Studies. She holds a BA from Beijing University, an MA from South Carolina, and a PhD from Princeton. Her most recent book is The Belt, Road, and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China 1998–2018 (Cambridge University Press, 2020). She can be reached at ye@bu.edu.
intensified geopolitical tensions between China and the United States. In reality, pragmatic globalists have largely shaped China’s policy choices and activities in 2020. By ignoring them, the United States risks exaggerating the geopolitical threat from China on one hand and underestimating China’s ability to expand regional and global influence on the other.

This article first discusses the effect of COVID-19 on US-China relations, focusing on the gap between narratives and realities. It then synthesizes the US narratives on China in 2020, highlighting their extreme and divided nature. Third, it introduces China’s geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic discourses that underscore expanding globalization to address COVID-19’s geostrategic and economic effects. The fourth section shows that China’s policy actors seek to maintain and expand China’s engagement in globalization after the virus outbreak. Finally, the paper discusses sources of globalism in China and implications for US-China competition beyond the pandemic.

COVID-19 Exacerbates US-China Competition

The United States and China’s great-power rivalry started long before the COVID-19 pandemic.1 For years, Washington has debated how to cope with China’s rise and its increasing global ambition.2 Geo-strategists pointed out the failure of “engagement policy” and called for active decoupling from China; area specialists, though disappointed by the authoritarian turn in Beijing’s leadership, preserved the faith in dialogues and exchange.3 In the Trump administration, hawkish strategists were ascendant, and long-term area scholars were defensive.

Nevertheless, before the pandemic, US-China competition involved diverse interests and issues, leading to an interactive and evolving process of dialogues and adjustment. For example, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was the focal point of geopolitical competition after its launch in 2013, yet it also significantly boosted US study of China’s outbound investment and lending in BRI countries and beyond.4 To manage the rivalry and watch out for dangerous ramifications, policy and professional dialogues between China and the United States were frequent and reasonably influential. In 2019, exchange and interactions among bureaucrats, think tank scholars, and business groups in the two countries and others helped shape the BRI strategy toward moderation and soft institution building.5

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly broke out in China, then sped to other Asian countries, and finally engulfed numerous advanced democracies in America and Europe, with raging effects still felt in many countries today. The deadly and infectious virus has profoundly aggravated geopolitical contexts in
the world and caused much of the bilateral and regional interactions between 
China and the United States to stop. Without active policy networks and area 
scholars’ work, the US narratives on China have become hostile and extreme, 
making it easy for geostrategic tension to erupt and difficult for common interest 
to emerge.

In March 2020, while China curbed the pandemic within its borders, the 
United States saw rampant COVID infections spread across the country. The 
ensuing months were a significant political, economic, and social blow to the 
United States, China, and other countries. Concerned about domestic repercus-
cussions, the Trump administration intensified its blame on China for the 
infections. Worried about international repercussions, China’s Ministry of 
Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Zhao Lijian started a Twitter post 
blaming the origin of China’s coronavirus on the US military. The MFA 
further pursued so-called “wolf-warrior diplomacy,” celebrating China’s 
success in combating COVID-19 internally and giving aid to other countries 
to extract gratitude. A new Cold War was on the horizon, and countries 
dependent on both China and the United States were torn between the 
superpowers.

The rhetorical rivalry has dominated the US coverage of China, discount-
ing main policy discussions and activities in Beijing and China’s localities. 
On one hand, the US narratives highlight China’s triumphalism and exagger-
ate economic, security, and value attacks from Beijing. On the other hand, 
the narratives underscore China’s internal fragility and the external predica-
ment Beijing faced after the COVID-19 outbreak. In reality, China’s dis-
courses and activities were complex and demonstrated continuity across the 
pandemic cycles. Specifically, Chinese discourse comprises pessimistic strate-
gists who advocate for stable globalization as a counterforce to escalation 
of the great-power rivalry; optimistic expansionists who promote Beijing’s lea-
dership in technology, health, and multilateralism; and pragmatic profes-
sionals who argue for China’s global participation to save the national 
economy—all generally support globalization, though for different purposes.
Chinese actions in 2020 show that Beijing’s economic priorities are to main-
tain foreign trade and investment while launching new initiatives to stimu-
late the domestic market. Externally, China’s actions emphasize defending 
globalization and multilateral cooperation to cope with challenges in the 
post-COVID world.

By ignoring such complex policy trends in China, Washington is prone to be 
overly aggressive on one hand, resisting China even in innocuous areas like 
private business and educational exchange, or easily dismissive on the other, 
downplaying Chinese actions as toothless rhetoric in multilateral settings. 
Such tendencies are counterproductive. Even when US coercion manages to
hurt the PRC’s economy and diplomacy, it also hurts global efforts to fight the pandemic, recover from depression, and rebuild a stable and healthy environment for future globalization. More importantly, ignoring China’s pragmatic globalists, the United States underestimates China’s ability and willingness to lead post-COVID reconstruction and concedes the leadership opportunity to Beijing in critical areas such as global health and sustainable development. With Beijing at the helm, post-COVID globalization is likely to enhance authoritarianism at the expense of the liberal order. In this scenario, China’s moderates lose, too.

Extreme Divisions Dominate US-China Narratives

In 2020, absent bilateral travels and exchange, the US observations on China and COVID have revolved around rhetoric by individual leaders, nationalist diplomats, and populists, overlooking broader views by Chinese policy communities and activities on the ground. The outcome has been partial and divided views of Chinese behavior and growing hostility against China, profoundly shaping policy choices in America.10

Emphasizing China’s triumphalism, the narratives point to its authoritarian domestic system and aggressive external behavior. Such narratives reached new heights after China contained the pandemic within its borders in March 2020, while the advanced American and European democracies were engulfed by virus infections.11 Political observers suggest that Xi Jinping’s “centralized command, compared to democratic practices in the United States and Europe, is more effective at curbing virus infections.”12 China’s local organizations and virus control methods were praised to help the state contain the pandemic and stabilize household supplies across China.13 Externally, foreign policy observers find that China has become “considerably more assertive, demanding, unyielding, confrontational, and punitive in its international postures.”14 Washington politicians, leveraging China’s aggression and triumphalism, have reached a broad consensus to confront and coerce China on a wide range of issues.

Emphasizing China’s vulnerabilities, the narratives focus on China’s internal fragility and the limits to its international influence. Here, many reports underscore the fragility of Communist rule in China and observe signs of internal implosion in the aftermath of COVID-19.15 Other observers from a foreign policy perspective find that few countries are buying the Chinese model or
messages from Beijing. Or, they argue that China’s soft power campaign has been ineffective before COVID-19 and will continue to face challenges after. Regarding China’s outbound investment, they also find that China’s cash reserves could not deliver international promises before COVID-19, and now Beijing is less likely to keep up with its ambition after the pandemic.

Such prevalent narratives outside China, however, only capture segments of Chinese voices and behavior, missing mainstream policy patterns based on Chinese writings and activities in 2020. Chinese-language materials show that neither triumphalism nor imminent implosion capture the COVID-era realities in China. Instead, China’s discourses have dominantly observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has been the gravest challenge to China and the world, with optimists, pessimists, and pragmatists alike emphasizing the virus as the main factor shaping China’s engagement with the rest of the world in the coming months and years. The activities by Chinese policy actors, in particular, demonstrate an earnest effort to maintain and expand globalization after COVID-19 while adapting to new circumstances after the pandemic.

**China’s Three Schools of Thought**

Chinese policy thinkers argue that the country should both save itself and help other countries recover. Furthermore, activities by Chinese central and local agencies during the initial outbreak and after have aligned with pragmatic globalization and focused on expanding foreign investment and trade in the country. Reflecting such discourses and activities, Beijing passed essential planning documents in late 2020 and provided guidelines that such policy trends are to be continued in the future.

Contrary to external perceptions of a monolithic and totalitarian system, China has vibrant policy communities that showcase different coalitional interests and policy ideas. They are most vocal in a crisis and while a significant policy is being considered before it is adopted. During China’s COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Chinese policy communities can be grouped into three subsets: strategists (or pessimists), expansionists (or optimists), and professionals (or pragmatists). Each of them speaks to different issues and challenges facing China. Yet, they all show an emphasis on *pragmatic globalism*—the idea that China should...
maintain robust globalization for the sake of its strategic, diplomatic, and economic imperatives.

Strategists in Beijing are long-term specialists and policy advisors in US-China relations, and their views have been pessimistic during the COVID-19 cycle. They argue that the US-China rivalry is on an “irreversible” downward turn and that there will be a whole-scale confrontation in information, technology, industry, military, and diplomacy during and after the pandemic.21 Furthermore, because US-China cooperation is vital to the stable functioning of international institutions, strategic observers also fear that the existing global order is not going to work under intense US-China rivalry.22 In this scenario, they pessimistically predict an extended global recession and volatile geopolitics in many world regions.23 Since China’s domestic economy and continual rise rests on a stable external environment and a working relationship with the United States, the US-China rivalry and global turmoil mean that China’s future trajectory is uncertain.24 But China has to try its best to meet challenges from the breakdown of great-power politics.

Despite China’s strategic thinkers being well-known internationally, during COVID-19, their views have been paid little external attention. In China, in 2020, they continued to have large followings in online news, social media, and broadcasts, shaping policy and popular discussions in the country. They are gloomy about US-China relations due to COVID-19 geopolitics, emphasizing hostile official rhetoric and popular sentiments in the two countries. They remain convinced that globalization and China’s active participation in the world serve the country’s short- and long-term interests. They thus welcome efforts to maintain globalization under the BRI and other forms, including diplomacy and aid in Africa and central Asia, renewed investment negotiation with European economies, and close cooperation with Asian neighbors.

Expansionists in China tend to be younger and based at active think tanks in Beijing and elsewhere. They frequently express their views in their institutions’ policy briefs and online state media such as China Daily and People’s Daily.25 Their optimistic views, which gained salience in China as the country curbed the pandemic in March 2020, center on the following: China has demonstrated great strengths in public health, technology, and crisis management and should exert active leadership roles in regional and global institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the BRI, and the World Health Organization (WHO).26 These optimists believe China’s aid to other countries fighting
the virus will boost China’s national image and strengthen its diplomatic ties globally.27

As 2020 proceeded, expansionists seemed to gain more strength in Beijing, driven by the US withdrawal from the global system and China’s return to normal political-economic life. Yet, they remain practical. In collections published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), these scholars map out future scenarios globally and how China should respond in each. The message is clear: the recent US “deglobalization” presents China with opportunities to expand its roles in the global arena. They argue that China should pursue the BRI—boosting collaboration with developing countries—and work with advanced economies to provide “convenient, resilient, and smart” global supply chains.28 They underscore the salience of trade in services, technology, and digital globalization, addressing backlash from COVID-19 and concerns with supply chains. Under this view, China has to step up its technology capability, and the world needs to construct new coordination and risk management systems in fighting global economic and health crises. Finally, the CASS collection concludes that COVID-19 challenged the existent international order and accelerated de-globalization. After the pandemic, however, there will be new demand and opportunity for global governance, in which China can play stronger parts.29

Among China’s policy discussions, neither pessimists nor optimists are as abundant as pragmatists, particularly from non-state news outlets and venues. Pragmatists focus on China’s economic wellbeing and diplomatic reputation following COVID-19. They predict that China will face hurdles in Eurasian diplomacy as COVID-19 has swept those countries. Yet, they also recognize that China’s rapid containment of the infections and proactive assistance to other countries helped regain some soft power and diplomatic advantages in the world.30 Unlike the optimists, they do not believe that China has gained enough leverage from COVID-19 to achieve regional and global leadership in the foreseeable future. Pragmatists in the economy view COVID-19 as the worst challenge facing the world since the 1930s and expect that China will have a lengthy and challenging process of recovery from the recession. And China’s recovery cannot be successful without the revival of significant export and import markets in the world.31

In short, pragmatists underscore the severe economic and diplomatic challenges that China will face after the pandemic.32 For one thing, China’s economic recovery cannot succeed without the global economy’s adequate recovery. In addition, China will face more significant diplomatic challenges after COVID-19, particularly with advanced societies, making an economic recovery in China and the world even more difficult. Hence, pragmatic policy actors argue that China should conduct robust multilateral efforts to fight the
pandemic and help other countries when it can. In the pragmatists’ views, staying global and staying multilateral are needed for China to revive the economy from recession and rebuild diplomatic space abroad. Thus, similar to both other groups, pragmatists advocate global engagement, but view the path as likely to be difficult and the outcome uncertain.

**China’s Actions to Save Globalization**

While different schools of thought were building a policy consensus that China had to maintain and strengthen global ties for its recovery, different levels of Chinese government and SOEs already sprang into action to do just that. In early 2020, after its initial mishandling and negligence, China’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak was swift. Rapidly, the political leadership mobilized grassroots organizations and companies to test, trace, and control the virus’s spread across the country.33 Beijing and local governments focused on saving the economy, stabilizing international business operations, and keeping foreign investment in the localities. SOEs strived to manage the pandemic while addressing the economic fallout, saving international projects as much as possible. To Chinese economic actors, fighting virus infections and fighting economic recession are both important tasks. One has to accompany the other, and both are essential to maintain globalization during and after the pandemic.

This section presents measures adopted by Chinese entities to maintain globalization following the virus outbreak. Together, these measures help China’s economic actors maintain growth and adapt to post-COVID-19 globalization. If successful, they are likely to increase China’s roles in the international economy, especially as countries recover from the pandemic and a new round of reconstruction begins in the world.

**Local Governments**

China’s localities are important players in the national economy and globalization. Among them, Jiangsu province had been involved in high-profile overseas economic zones, i.e., preferential sites constructed by Chinese companies to facilitate manufacturing and exports.34 When the virus broke out in early 2020, the province and its special zones were quick to act and respond. The provincial government sent officials and experts to help combat the virus on site.
The Sihanoukville Port Industrial Zone in Cambodia, with the Jiangsu team’s help, quickly set up protocols and checkpoints of detection and prevention. In May, as China’s COVID-19 cycle was winding down, Jiangsu province upgraded its commitment in the Sihanoukville zone, expanding investment to connect this zone more closely with ports and export industries in Jiangsu and other locations. In Guangdong, another province with prominent export economies, local governments worked with business associations and large companies individually to help them survive the virus and maintain their international purchasing orders.

Local governments also sought to maintain and stabilize globalization in their jurisdictions, particularly regarding inbound foreign direct investment. In Shanghai, the government set up a special task force to help address foreign investors’ needs in the city, ensure existing projects, and attract new ones if possible. In Zhejiang, the provincial government established a special office for foreign investment, designating one official to liaise for one major foreign project in the province. Surveys of American companies in China show that, in 2020, China improved in intellectual property protection, technology transfer, and access to digital networks (VPN), major concerns of American companies operating in China’s localities in the past. The onslaught of COVID-19 and the US-China trade war, on the other hand, have damaged their businesses in China.35

**State-Owned Enterprises**

SOEs are the main body of Chinese investors abroad, and they have built extensive supply networks with subsidiaries in China and abroad over the years. When COVID-19 broke out, their priority was to ensure the operation of global supply chains and stabilize international trade and capacity cooperation —the central government’s mandate too.36 Among the SOEs, China Merchants’ Group recovered, to the extent possible, production in overseas projects and tried to maintain its 2019 volume. China Railways Heavy Manufacturing continued its production schedule in China. It ensured its shipment of heavy machinery to Turkey to fulfill its parent company’s tunnel projects in Turkey and Russia. China Chemical’s subsidiaries are essential exporters of chemical products used in agriculture, medicine, textile, and fertilizers in many countries. To continue their delivery, they kept their production schedule throughout the virus outbreak. To ensure supplies for China Energy Engineering Corporation’s Poland project, Huaye Steel retained 150 employees to work overtime while meeting the COVID-19 capacity limit.37
Companies with less pressure to fulfill supplies to other SOEs had more relaxed production schedules during the virus outbreak. Companies like China Metallurgical Group extended the delivery time and reduced their personnel in overseas operations. Some SOEs do not have full control over overseas projects and paused their project completion during the pandemic. China Railways, for example, paused its US$6 billion speed rail construction in Indonesia, resuming in late 2020.

Finally, recipient countries have changed priorities following the pandemic strike. For example, Myanmar used to focus on hard infrastructure from China and now asks for technology and health-centered projects instead. As a whole, with shifting financial and social conditions in the recipients, China’s SOEs are likely to adjust, scale back, and renegotiate their operations in the post-COVID-19 world. Costly and large-scale infrastructure is likely to be less desirable, while digital and health-related projects, with less financial and environmental burden, are likely to grow.

Large-scale infrastructure is less likely, while digital and health projects are likely to grow post-COVID-19

National Agencies

China’s national agencies have sought to stabilize and expand overseas business links. In addition to various incentives, loans, and online logistics, their primary efforts in 2020 are three-fold: expand cross-border trade through e-commerce, stimulate new growth to attract foreign capital to stay, and help the global recovery to stabilize the world economy.

First, in international e-commerce, China has experienced exponential growth due to low operating costs and generous tax and tariff incentives compared to conventional international trade. In 2015, Beijing approved five cities for e-commerce experiment zones, which grew to 59 in 2019. The e-commerce trade was growing at 49 percent annually in the four years. Following the pandemic, the State Council approved an additional 46 zones in 2020, covering most cities in China, and expected that e-commerce would make up for the steep decline in processing trade.38

Second, the New Infrastructure Plan—different from traditional infrastructure such as power plants, railways, and ports—was in consideration before COVID-19. Facing the pandemic recession, Beijing rolled out the plan swiftly in April 2020 and mobilized local governments as well as financial institutions to develop localized proposals and projects employing information technology, digital networks, big data, and artificial intelligence. In Zhejiang, for example, the provincial government enhanced its support for the cloud-based economy and facilitated small
and medium-size companies’ internet-enabled business. In Chengdu, a supercomputer and data-processing center was completed to fully cover western China, enabling the digital economy and information technology.³⁹

Third, on global commitment, China received a lot of external criticism due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As countries in the West besieged China, pressing to investigate its handling (or cover-up) of the virus in the early weeks, Beijing was defensive, rejected external calls for investigation, spread the conspiracy theory about the US military origins of the virus throughout China, and conducted its “wolf warrior” diplomacy.⁴⁰

Behind the combative facade, however, the pragmatic and globalist approach has prevailed.⁴¹ Initially, China received foreign aid and medical supplies to assist its pandemic combat, then was proactive in providing medical and financial assistance to other pandemic-stricken countries.⁴² In the G-20 framework, China agreed to pause debt repayment of virus-struck economies for extended periods. Following the US halt in funding, China announced additional donations to the WHO, bringing its total cash donation to the organization to US$50 million. At the 73rd World Health Assembly in 2020, President Xi Jinping announced that “China will provide $2 billion over two years to help with COVID-19 response and with the economic and social development in affected countries, especially developing countries.”⁴³

In mid-2020, as China held the nation’s top political event—known as Two Sessions [lianghui], announcing government policies and reshuffling personnel—Beijing affirmed its goal and whole-government efforts to expand overseas activities, especially in the BRI regions. It pledged to focus on 1) a network of free trade zones along the BRI routes, 2) BRI projects in the health sector and digital economy, and 3) “soft” and social cooperation between China and the BRI countries, emphasizing institutional and non-governmental cooperation and projects.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the ministers of National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Commerce, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs—representing domestic industry, international commerce, and diplomacy—all pledged that China would promote the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road construction with BRI countries.⁴⁵

International Skepticism

China’s “wolf warriors” are very much alive. With a growing economy, its foreign policy is likely to remain assertive. Understandably, there remains uncertainty and suspicion about China’s intention and behavior internationally regarding its roles in the ongoing fight against the pandemic and the post-COVID-19 recession. Some doubt China’s real commitment to global efforts, and some fear China’s opportunistic expansion in the international arenas.⁴⁶ Such concerns are justified,
but China is more complex than the pandemic narratives show. China’s policy communities, as demonstrated in different schools of thought and policy actions, still predominantly support pragmatic globalism in China during and after COVID-19.

In 2020, while China’s leadership pledged actions and financial commitment to globalization, considerable flexibility was left to the bureaucracy to work out the details. Given the policy discussions and actions, allocation of aid and funds are likely to be tied to Chinese SOEs and local governments. In other words, operating under pragmatic globalism, China will be an active player in post-COVID-19 global affairs, but its actions seek to serve Chinese actors and Chinese interests. These actors are not geopolitically motivated per se, nor are they likely to impose strategic conditions on the recipients, such as military access, resource monopoly, or diplomatic dependence. Instead, pragmatic globalists are diverse, and their interests underscore market integration, industrial collaborations, and overall international influence.47

Thinking Beyond COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented destruction to human life and the global economy. And instead of working together to lessen the blow, the world’s two largest powers have opted to fight each other. The United States has been permeated with extreme and divided narratives, adopting hawkish postures and policies against the PRC. The cost has been dear. While focused on fighting Beijing, Washington had belated, and even ill-advised, responses to the pandemic, economic recession, and international obligations. In 2020, China also witnessed its own nationalist rhetoric and aggressive behavior, damaging its external reputation and relationships with many countries. In short, the US-China competition was intense before 2020, and the pandemic—or, more importantly, how the two countries reacted to it—has dramatically exacerbated their confrontational relationship, with lasting damage to public health, social well-being, and geostrategic stability of the world as well as themselves and each other.

In the United States, both the extreme narratives—China’s triumphalism or internal fragility—failed to capture the policy discourses and activities in the PRC. Specifically, China’s strategic thinkers have maintained conviction in the values of multilateral institutions and global cooperation. Economists have argued that China’s economic revival cannot succeed without the world’s
recovery, so China and other countries need to work together. Finally, Chinese diplomats and government think tanks, facing worsening external relations on one hand and growing domestic ambition to expand global leadership on the other, have advocated for China’s proactive roles in global health, crisis management, and scientific cooperation. In terms of activities, China has focused on domestic development and pursued economic globalization to ensure internal growth. The central agencies, local governments, and SOEs were eager to keep their business and investment projects in China and abroad from the outset.

Moving beyond COVID-19, it is essential to understand that, first, despite radical rhetoric and tightening in Beijing’s top politics, moderate ideas and groups are prevalent in China. They include strategic scholars, diplomatic professionals, and economic agencies and actors. They argue for and epitomize “pragmatic globalism,” which has mostly guided China’s development and foreign policy in recent decades. The moderates are not in minority or obscurity; their views often command wide attention and readership among Chinese bureaucrats, business, and scholarly communities.

Furthermore, China’s moderates often have past experiences in exchange with foreign institutions. Prominent strategic scholars, for example, have received doctoral degrees or lengthy visiting posts in preeminent US universities and served at prestigious universities and policy research positions in China. The expansionists consist of younger researchers who also either have overseas education or have frequently exchanged with foreign counterparts. To be sure, these exchanges were not limited to exposure to the West, nor did they shift these actors’ pursuit of Chinese interest and influence. However, their global experiences have made China more willing to stay engaged globally and more capable of steering challenges and opportunities in the worldwide system.

Second, underneath the political and strategic rhetoric, particularly the headline-grabbing antics of the wolf warriors, this paper has shown that China’s main actions to fight COVID-19 and its associated economic recession were conducted by professional agencies, economic actors, and societal groups that are mostly pragmatic and globalist. Chinese companies and local governments remain the chief players in China’s global business and domestic development. Their top priority is to overcome the recession and stabilize domestic and international businesses. For that, they work hard to keep international purchasing orders filled and attract foreign investments and joint projects. The national agencies are obliged by economic priorities on the ground. Through e-commerce liberalization and new infrastructure planning, they incentivize local projects and programs that facilitate local governments and enterprises’ interests. Beijing’s moves
to facilitate multilateral collaboration in pandemic assistance and debt relief are arguably motivated to secure a stable external environment for China’s business interests.

Finally, US-China competition is likely to continue and intensify after the pandemic in bilateral settings and global arenas. Extreme rhetoric and hawkish policies will thus continue, shaping the context of the great-power rivalry in the foreseeable future. This paper’s findings can hopefully help correct divided and partial narratives, as well as caution against the unwise bilateral competition to the detriment of public health and economic well-being.

In 2020, the US focus on fighting China has been counterproductive to combating the COVID-19 pandemic. With China as a target, US withdrawal from global institutions and international obligations was particularly ill-advised. Unintentionally, the United States has created vacuums in global leadership for Beijing to fill, leaving China to shape the post-COVID-19 global construction and revival. If Beijing continues to operate at the helm, the international order is likely to be lopsided, hurting hard-earned liberal values and moderate interests across the globe.

Notes


33. Minzner, “Quarantine the Sick in New York’s Hotels.”


