While the world’s health continues to suffer from COVID-19, on pace to be the deadliest pandemic since the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s, great-power competition is alive and well. It is, quite literally as the British say, in rude health. The COVID-19 crisis has injected an already-inflamed US-China relationship with new levels of ill will as each side blames the other for the disease’s spread and struggles to spin global opinion in their favor. The stakes grow ever higher as the blame game further aggravates US-China competition over matters of governance, values, and ideals.

Beijing has certainly ramped up its efforts in the narrative battle. Some observers have framed the ongoing war of words as a “soft power struggle” and China’s COVID messaging offensive as “a soft power tool” to win hearts and minds and overtake the United States as a global leader. Others have gone so far as to say that China will win not only the narrative battle over which country handled COVID-19 best, but also the longer-term strategic rivalry with the United States, especially if Washington continues to botch its domestic and global response to the pandemic.

All of these propositions demand closer scrutiny. First, Beijing’s current attempt at soft power messaging and COVID diplomacy should be seen in the context of the Chinese Communist Party’s far larger ambition to “tell China’s story well,” a
project that has been underway for more than a decade but that has gathered speed in the past three to five years. Today, Beijing has taken the COVID-19 crisis as a golden opportunity to kick its well-oiled propaganda and influence machine into overdrive with an international media blitz that may well be a sign of things to come.

Secondly, in spite of the revved-up performance, China’s external propaganda and influence efforts face profoundly difficult challenges, and not only regarding its COVID-19 narrative. China’s international image was already facing difficulties well before the epidemic struck, and Beijing’s missteps since are not going to improve matters, its current charm offensive and “facemask diplomacy” notwithstanding.

Perhaps most importantly, what often passes for Chinese soft power abroad is not soft power at all. According to Joseph Nye, soft power is the ability to get others to do what you would like through attraction, shared values, and a sense of legitimacy, rather than through hard power inducements, threats, and coercion. Chinese leaders certainly seek greater influence and respect in world affairs, and they believe that telling China’s story more forcefully is one way to achieve those aims. Thus far, however, Beijing’s success in this quest has much more to do with hard power inducements and threats than soft power attraction and legitimacy. It is also important to remember that China’s official messaging abroad often has a dual purpose: bolster the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party) at home while also seeking to persuade international audiences. To be sure, the former objective is paramount.

**Telling China’s Story Well**

From photo-ops with oversized cardboard checks for $100,000 in development aid, to baseless assertions that the US military brought the COVID-19 virus to China, to telling the US secretary of state to “stop lying through your teeth!,” the official propaganda machine of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has gone on the offensive to define the pandemic and the country’s response on its terms. This harder-edged propaganda push has been dubbed “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, eponymous with the blockbuster patriotic action films featuring the heroics of PRC special operations forces. While this information onslaught has been extensive and, at times, startlingly brazen, we should not be surprised that it is happening. Nor should we overplay its meaning or ultimate success.
In fact, the COVID-19 propaganda offensive coming out of China is a relatively small, but now very high profile, part of a much larger ambition initiated by the CCP as far back as the mid-1990s to reshape the way the world sees it and, more importantly, how the Party sees itself.\(^7\) As I noted with Ben Schreer in these pages in 2018, the CCP’s overseas propaganda and influence activities, at their heart, aim to promote the legitimacy and ultimately the longevity of the Party’s rule.\(^8\) They do so by protecting and burnishing the Party’s image, including countering negative criticisms and touting accomplishments of the Party. In the best of circumstances, the Party hopes a successful campaign will make foreign audiences more inclined to accept Beijing’s policy preferences and foster a strategic environment more conducive to CCP values and interests, but that is not necessarily the primary goal. Instead, much of this propaganda principally targets China’s domestic audience: both its more than 1.4 billion citizens and, in many ways more importantly, the more than 90 million members of the CCP.\(^9\)

Such propaganda and influence activities—both at home and abroad—have been a fundamentally important Party function since its founding nearly a century ago. But its relative importance to other core Party and state functions has waxed and waned over those decades. Today, China analysts widely agree that Party propaganda and image-building activities overseas have seen a significant resurgence under Xi Jinping, China’s paramount leader.\(^10\) This branding is part of a larger undertaking under his watch to reinvigorate the Party, firmly establish its leadership in the pursuit of the “China Dream” and “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” and garner greater international respect and acceptance of the CCP.\(^11\)

Once installed as Party chief, Xi wasted little time in prioritizing overseas propaganda work. Several months after taking power, he delivered a major address in August 2013 to the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideology. In this speech, Xi called on Party members, and especially those involved in propaganda work, to repulse Western attacks on China’s system of governance, economic circumstances, human rights situation, public order, and corruption by prioritizing external propaganda. Propaganda work must “balance” against those attacks, he said, and because “[t]he Internet has become [one of] the main battlefields for the public opinion struggle…we must make online public opinion work” for the Party.\(^12\)

According to Xi, carrying out this work required new research, strategies, and tactics to “deeply analyze the characteristics and laws of online struggles and meticulously organize online struggle forces.” He added that the Party must “adapt to the new circumstances of the continued progress in social informatization, accelerate the converged development of traditional media and new media, fully utilize new technologies and new applications to innovate media and communications forms, and occupy the commanding heights of information and communication.”\(^13\)
In doing so, Xi concluded, the Party must “tell China’s story well, spread China’s voice, and strengthen [China’s] narrative power internationally.”\textsuperscript{14} Xi has since regularly returned to these themes, and they have been taken up across the Party’s propaganda apparatus to guide and expand its overseas activities.\textsuperscript{15} As Nadège Rolland, a senior fellow with the National Bureau of Asian Research, carefully documents, Xi’s call to arms marked a “turning point” in the Party’s determination to bolster and amplify its “discourse power.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Going Viral**

In addition to unambiguously elevating the importance of international propaganda and influence activities, Xi also expanded the resources and organizational mandate available to the Party to conduct these “narrative struggles” abroad. As part of a sweeping reorganization of Party and state bureaucracies announced at the 2018 National People’s Congress, organs engaged in international propaganda and influence-projection were consolidated under CCP control. No single body is responsible for all of China’s overseas propaganda and influence activities, but several of the core organizations involved in this work were elevated in political status, while entirely new international media conglomerates were established, all under tighter Party oversight.\textsuperscript{17}

The 2018 reorganization established a sprawling new media empire under the control of the Central Propaganda Department. Echoing Xi’s speech in August 2013, the new conglomerate is called “Voice of China” and brings together China Central Television and its international division, China Global Television Network (CGTN) as well as China National Radio and China Radio International. Combined with the Xinhua News Agency, which is also a formal part of the Party’s propaganda apparatus, these traditional media outlets have a massive international presence.

In the years following Xi’s August 2013 speech, PRC government agencies, diplomats, and state-run media outlets began ramping up their use of social media accounts such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—platforms that are banned inside China—in order to reach a larger audience abroad.\textsuperscript{18} Starting slowly at first, the number of new Twitter accounts opened by PRC government individuals and organizations was between two and ten per year from 2013 to 2018. But the number jumped to 65 for 2019, a six-fold increase over the previous year. The number for 2020 is on track to be over 100.\textsuperscript{19} By mid- to late 2019, Twitter had become a widely used tool for PRC diplomats and was often wielded in a far more combative way.\textsuperscript{20} ProPublica and others also documented the increasing use of fake Twitter accounts by PRC and CCP organs, especially since 2019, to generate an illusion of widespread support for their policies.\textsuperscript{21}
Among Chinese officials, one of the most prolific tweeters is Zhao Lijian, who became a spokesperson for the PRC Ministry for Foreign Affairs in August 2019. He is perhaps best known for his tweet in mid-March 2020 that asserted “[i]t might be the US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan.” Zhao continues to serve in his post and has seen an upsurge in his Twitter followers, now numbering well over 600,000. Tens of millions more follow the Twitter accounts of such outlets as the Global Times, China Daily, Xinhua, People’s Daily, and CGTN. In addition, digital platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat, on which content is monitored and censored by PRC authorities, are accessed by hundreds of millions of active users in China and abroad for news and information. Beyond these media platforms and information channels are numerous other CCP and state-run organizations whose work involves international propaganda and influence activities. These would include the Central United Front Work Department, the Central International Liaison Department, the China Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the PRC diplomatic corps, and many others.

All of these elements were in place to “tell China’s story well” and had already begun to employ more assertive public diplomacy tactics around the world before the coronavirus struck in 2020. However, the COVID-19 crisis has proven to be an unprecedented opportunity for the newly empowered CCP overseas propaganda system. As the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis—both at home and abroad—on the Party’s reputation became clear, that system kicked into high gear. As just one indicator, in the first four months of 2020, PRC government and state-run media Twitter accounts issued some 144,000 tweets, nearly four times as many as in the preceding four months.

The flood of official messaging coming out of China sought first and foremost to cast the Party and its leadership in the best possible light. At first, in early to mid-January, this meant downplaying the severity of the coronavirus outbreak and decrying whistleblowers who rang early alarm bells—such as doctors Ai Fen and Li Wenliang—for “spreading false rumors” and “disrupting social order.” By early February, as the epidemic mounted in Wuhan, Xi Jinping declared a “people’s war” against COVID-19, and the narrative shifted to lauding the government’s efforts to contain the virus at home, while highlighting endorsements from foreign leaders and international organizations for the work China was doing to counter the disease. By March, with the epidemic subsiding in China and beginning to spread worldwide, the messaging shifted again to deflect blame away from Beijing, tout its success in defeating the virus at home, and publicize China’s
contributions to combat COVID-19 around the globe. Official PRC messaging also became increasingly critical of the United States, favorably comparing the Party’s COVID-19 response to Washington’s missteps and pushing back hard on US criticisms aimed at China.

Is China’s Campaign Working?

It is clear that China has pulled out all the stops under Xi Jinping to unleash a massive and well-resourced campaign to tell China’s side of the story. But has it done this well? Has all the investment in overseas propaganda and influence projection—including the extensive diplomatic and media response to COVID-19—amounted to a soft power coup for China? Thus far, the answer has to be no.

But have Chinese leaders gained more influence in world affairs and with it some greater confidence in their system of governance? Here the answer appears to be yes, for now. The reasons behind these different answers have to do with the definition of soft power on the one hand and understanding the primary target of the Party’s overseas messaging on the other.

Recalling Nye’s definition of soft power, China was already faring poorly on indices of attractiveness and other soft power attributes well before the COVID-19 outbreak. According to international polling, China’s image has arguably declined over the past several years. For example, in surveys across dozens of countries around the world, the Pew Research Center has found that China’s favorability rating has steadily waned. In 2013, in Xi’s first full year as China’s top leader, 52 percent of those polled had a favorable view toward China. That rating worsened over the following years to 43 percent in 2019. Across China’s immediate neighborhood, in the Indo-Pacific, other polls likewise show that trust, confidence, and favorability toward China have all declined in recent years.

With regard to Xi Jinping himself, global confidence in him has not budged since he assumed office, with only about 30 to 31 percent of respondents expressing confidence that he would “do the right thing regarding world affairs.” Similarly, Gallup has shown the median global approval of China’s leadership has been in the range of 29 to 31 percent for most of Xi’s tenure; it bumped up to 34 percent, slightly better than the United States’, in 2018. In four annual publications since 2016, the Soft Power 30 report has consistently ranked China near the bottom of the list for its soft power appeal (it was ranked 27th out of 30 in 2019).
Time will tell, but it does not seem likely these ratings will improve in the wake of the global COVID-19 crisis. The basic facts are well-established and damning. The virus broke out into the general population in Wuhan, and both Chinese national and local governments reacted slowly at first, suppressed early warning signs, and delayed imposing a lockdown in Wuhan. Xi Jinping apparently knew about the outbreak in Wuhan as early as January 7, but no alerts or restrictions on people’s movements were released for another two weeks. In the meantime, with the lunar new year set to begin on January 25, millions of Wuhan residents left the city for the holiday, crisscrossing China. Tens of thousands more from Wuhan flew overseas, spreading the virus globally.33

China’s subsequent disinformation campaign to sow doubt about the original source of the virus does not reflect well on Beijing, either. In other bad news for China’s preferred narrative, the Group of African Ambassadors in Beijing wrote a letter to the PRC foreign minister in protest against the “forceful testing and quarantine and maltreatment of African Nationals in China in general,” especially in Guangzhou.34 PRC public diplomacy will suffer further should the virus have a devastating impact in Africa and throughout the developing world, areas Beijing has sought to cultivate since the early 2000s. Elsewhere, the US state of Missouri filed suit against the CCP and a number of other Chinese government bodies, seeking “recovery for the enormous loss of life, human suffering, and economic turmoil experienced by all Missourians from the COVID-19 pandemic” owing to “[a]n appalling campaign of deceit, concealment, misfeasance, and inaction by Chinese authorities ….”35 More calls for reparations will follow.

At times, Beijing’s official ham-handedness—such as lobbying the Wisconsin state legislature to pass a resolution in praise of China’s COVID-19 response or openly denigrating French health care workers for leaving their patients “to die of hunger and disease”—only exacerbated growing mistrust toward China.36 Numerous other controversial tweets and statements surfaced from Chinese envoys in Brazil, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Europe, and the United States. Even some of China’s goodwill gestures have generated skepticism, ranging from reports of defective Chinese medical donations to warnings from the European Union’s top diplomat of a “global battle of narratives … including a struggle for influence through spinning and the ‘politics of generosity.’”37 In the meantime, US views toward the PRC and Xi Jinping have hit historic lows during the pandemic, with two-thirds of Americans expressing an unfavorable opinion toward China and 71 percent saying they lack confidence in Xi to do the right thing in world affairs.38 Around China’s periphery in the Indo-Pacific, the COVID-19 crisis has not improved the PRC’s image and in many cases has generated greater skepticism and mistrust toward Beijing.39

With mounting COVID-19 costs to lives and livelihoods in countries around the world, pressures have increased on China to be more transparent, allow for
an international investigation of causes behind the epidemic, and accept greater responsibility for its outbreak and spread. As Britain’s foreign secretary and (at the time) acting prime minister Dominic Rabb said, the situation calls for a “very, very deep dive” into what happened in China, saying “we can’t have business as usual after this crisis, and we’ll have to ask the hard questions [about] how it came about and how it couldn’t [sic] have been stopped earlier.” In short, in spite of its best efforts to shape the COVID-19 narrative in its favor, the CCP has a major international image problem that looks set to worsen in the near term and will be extremely difficult to deflect or resolve. \(^41\) Internal PRC assessments appear to concur. A report produced by the Ministry of State Security think tank and the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) that was leaked to foreign journalists likens the current backlash against China to the international response to Beijing’s Tiananmen crackdown in June 1989. \(^42\)

And those are just the problems arising from the epidemic outbreak in early 2020. Even before COVID-19 struck, Beijing was facing deterioration in a number of its key relationships. Capitals around the world—and not only Washington—were already discussing ways to reduce their economic dependency on China. Such attempts at diversification are often easier said than done, but the coronavirus crisis has certainly reignited this kind of thinking in many of China’s markets. A prominent case in point: Japan announced in April 2020 a US$2.2 billion fund to assist Japanese firms that wish to move production facilities out of China. \(^43\) In many respects, an inadvertent “partial disengagement” \(^44\) has already taken place as supply chains have been disrupted and China’s major export markets—in Asia, North America, and Europe—slide into serious economic downturns. China’s domestic economy will also suffer from the crisis: it actually shrank for the first time in 44 years in the first quarter of 2020 and was predicted to grow at only 1.2 percent for the year. \(^45\) At a minimum, none of these developments will help Beijing’s international image and ability to project influence abroad, especially as economic leverage has historically been its strong suit.

Pre-existing concerns with the CCP’s one-party rule and abuse of political rights were already well-established prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Many aspects of Beijing’s epidemic response have only further underscored those concerns. In addition to the early cases of punishing medical professionals who sounded the alarm, independent journalists and activists reporting on the epidemic have been detained and have disappeared. In March 2020, Beijing
announced it would expel American journalists working for the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post. Ren Zhiqiang, a CCP member, well-known real estate magnate, and prominent critic of the Chinese regime, was detained in April 2020 and is now under investigation for “serious violations of discipline and law” following his release of a scathing essay blasting Xi Jinping and the Party’s response to COVID-19.46

Limits on the internet have also further tightened as authorities cracked down on “spreading rumors” about the virus, even though China’s online controls were already considered among the most restrictive in the world.47 Moreover, some reporting indicates that the intrusive surveillance already in place across China was further stepped up as a public health measure during the epidemic but could remain in place to enforce public order even more stringently. Such controls on people and information even extend to the fight against COVID-19: PRC authorities apparently now require a central government review of any COVID-19 research intended for public release.48 Intended to stifle bad news, this policy hampers international cooperation and impedes the global response to the disease. These and many other Party-imposed controls will always be problematic features of the Chinese political system, especially in the eyes of more open societies, regardless of CCP narratives to the contrary.

China’s Soft Power Shortfall

All of this is not to say that China does not try to exercise soft power. China’s information campaigns try to emphasize potentially appealing aspects of the country. For example, the CCP’s narrative increasingly points to ancient China’s remarkable historical achievements and numerous cultural contributions to mankind. PRC leaders stress the country’s spectacular development of the past 40 years and call for “building a community of shared future for mankind.”49 During the COVID-19 pandemic, they have highlighted China’s state capacity to mobilize and suppress the virus at home, while shipping life-saving supplies to those in need around the world.

As Fu Ying, a prominent former PRC diplomat, wrote in an English-language editorial for the China Daily, “Based on the profound and enduring values of the Chinese culture, we should adhere to the spirit of humility, inclusiveness and learning from others, and employ a plain, down-to-earth narrative style to convey what is happening in China, and make objective judgments on what is happening outside China.”50 For some, these attributes can be appealing and attractive and could represent forms of Chinese soft power—or at least that is what CCP propagandists seem to believe.

In the end, however, China’s leaders and propaganda authorities still struggle with the core aim of soft power: getting others to accept your preferences
without buying or bullying your way to that outcome. China would like to generate more in the way of soft power with international audiences, but it still falls short. This shortfall arises from three built-in, structural problems with Beijing’s approach to soft power. These problems have to do with the ultimate purpose of PRC information operations, the primary intended audience of such efforts, and a misunderstanding of what soft power actually is. Taken together, these problems define China’s soft power deficit.

The first problem concerns the ultimate objective of PRC overseas information and influence efforts. All of the resources that have been mobilized to “tell China’s story well” have at their heart the aim of praising, defending, and legitimizing the CCP. This aim is accomplished through increasingly sophisticated information campaigns that defend the Party against criticism abroad and try to generate approbation for its rule and alignment with its preferred interests.

To begin with, this approach is transparent and fundamentally unappealing to anyone who objects to authoritarian political systems. Even if one can look past the nature of the PRC political system, its messaging is further undermined by a lack of objectivity, debate, and independent critical scrutiny within China. Such messaging is propaganda in its most negative sense. When consumers of such information understand that fact, the messages’ credibility and soft-power appeal is immediately undermined. At best, such information could be readily dismissed; at worst, it could be seen as deliberately deceitful.

A second, related problem has to do with who PRC propaganda is primarily aiming to reach. Rather than seeking to appeal to foreign audiences through soft power, Chinese international efforts to cast China—and, more specifically, to cast the CCP—in a more appealing light are predominantly aimed at China’s domestic audience and, most importantly, a critical subset of that domestic audience: the Party itself. Under Xi Jinping, the Party has become increasingly self-possessed and self-regarding, concerned with its image, legitimacy, and ability to rule. In fact, Xi Jinping was selected by the CCP hierarchy precisely to reinvigorate Party ranks, reinstate confidence in its leadership, regain its sense of legitimacy and purpose, and ensure its long-term survival.

As such, presenting itself in positive terms abroad (and at home) helps bolster confidence in and appeal of the Party among its own membership and is, in turn, a principal requirement for external propaganda work. As Xi Jinping has instructed China’s diplomatic corps, they must above all “uphold the authority of the CPC Central Committee as the overarching principle and strengthen the centralized,
unified leadership of the Party on external work.” Recognizing this as “the point of departure” for Chinese foreign policy, University of London scholar Steve Tsang argues that the principal characteristic defining China’s relations with the outside world is, “first and foremost, putting the interests, in particular the survival, of the Communist Party at the core of China’s national interest calculation.”

This fundamental interest helps explain why Chinese diplomats often say things that clearly undermine China’s standing and credibility on the world stage, such as claiming the US military spread the coronavirus in China or publicly issuing veiled economic threats to dissuade Australia from pursuing an international investigation into the causes of the pandemic. Such words are not intended primarily to favorably influence foreign views but instead have Party interests in mind (not to mention benefitting the careers of Party members who disseminate such statements). Technically speaking, this could be called soft power. After all, it is not unusual for organizations and their leaders to seek soft power appeal among their own people in order to bring them along in support of the organization’s goals. But because the principal target of CCP soft power is the Party itself, such efforts are quite different from—and even disinterested in—generating attraction and emulation among foreign audiences, which is the defining characteristic of global soft power.

This distinction leads to a third built-in problem for the CCP’s approach to information and influence operations overseas: what many would call PRC soft power abroad is not really soft power at all. By Nye’s definition of soft and hard power, China principally exercises the latter. That is, Beijing mostly builds influence abroad by buying it through economic carrots and sticks—business opportunities, trade, Chinese investment, infrastructure development, economic assistance, checkbook diplomacy, threatening or implementing boycotts—and the expectations, benefits, and political leverage they create within foreign countries. This flags one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of hard power: it is not a synonym for military power. As defined earlier, influence gained through leveraging economic power, such as through inducements or coercion, is also considered hard power. The PRC also employs other forms of hard power—such as political pressures or military threats—to gain its preferred outcomes with others.

When it comes to foreign audiences, the CCP is far more adept at seeking influence and respect through hard power, which may be preferable to CCP leaders anyway. They probably understand their brand is already well-established in most foreigners’ minds and that changing hearts and minds about the political legitimacy of the Party is an uphill slog. In any event, generating genuine and lasting soft power would likely require loosening Party controls in so many ways it is simply considered too risky. As a recent international Pew poll found, “while majorities in most countries agree China’s influence on the world stage...
has grown markedly, this has not necessarily translated into favorable views of the country.”53 For now, the Party seems comfortable with that state of affairs.

The Competition Ahead

The PRC’s current and future approach to propaganda and influence-projection has important implications for the future of US-China competition in the realm of image, influence, and ideals.

Relative Gains

While Beijing attempts to enhance its image abroad, a perception persists that China is winning in the soft power stakes with America, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. This perception appears to arise primarily from two important factors, neither of which are China’s doing (but both of which Beijing is more than willing to exploit).

The first is that America’s overall soft power has waned in recent years, especially since the advent of the Trump administration. Since 2016, polling internationally has shown lower favorability ratings for the United States overall and toward Donald Trump in particular.54 This decline is true almost universally, even among—and sometimes especially among—US allies and friends. While China also does poorly in such polling, it has gained relative to America’s diminished standing in the world.

The second is that the disastrous US response to COVID-19, both domestically and internationally, has given Beijing more than enough room to position itself in a more favorable light. As two former senior US government officials, Michael Green and Evan Medeiros, have written, Washington should “use the pandemic as an opportunity to remind the world of what American leadership looks like.”55 This reminder may be happening, but unfortunately not in the way these authors intended, as the White House often seems to willfully abstain from international leadership. Any resulting Chinese gains in soft power and international influence at American expense cannot be blamed on China but rest squarely with Washington.

Opportunities for leadership

Looking ahead, the US-China rivalry for narrative influence will be shaped by how both countries constructively respond over the long term to the devastating human and economic toll of the pandemic, rather than how well they can shift
blame to the other. Neither should be satisfied, because both have misplayed their responses to the pandemic. Germany’s foreign minister, Heiko Maas, spoke for many world leaders when he noted that China took “very authoritarian measures, while in the US the virus was played down for a long time . . . . These are two extremes, neither of which can be a model for Europe.”

However, discounting China’s soft power does not mean it has none, and it certainly does not mean that China has no geopolitical influence. And importantly, it does not mean that China’s influence should be dismissed as somehow illegitimate. China’s economic heft as a market and source of exports, investment, infrastructure, and technology brings real benefit to governments and societies around the world, and it will not be easily dealt away or supplanted.

Should America continue to falter and fail to put forward and lead a coherent international recovery strategy, many in the world—especially those hard-hit by the crisis—will turn elsewhere for leadership and solutions. Beijing could benefit as a result, as some will seek the economic benefits of trade, investment, and assistance it can provide, and potentially do so in admiration for China’s state capacity, mobilization of resources and public goods, and willingness to act. Gaining that kind of leadership and influence will not be easy for the PRC, in spite of its many economic strengths. As a result, America should not so readily cede the field. Rather, it is up to Washington to rebuild and reclaim its leadership and soft power appeal.

**Important Lessons**

Finally, we can expect the CCP to draw some important lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has chosen to respond. Foreign audiences have become more sophisticated in interpreting PRC messages, forcing adaptation on China’s part. With time, PRC propaganda authorities will learn how to become even more sophisticated and adroit in their choice of media, type of messaging, and when, where, and how they choose to shape the views of foreign audiences.

In another learning moment, it appears for now that China’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy has been reined in somewhat as the Party comes to understand it has overreached with many audiences around the world, not least in the United States. In what could be interpreted as a call to tone down the harsh rhetoric and look to one’s own backyard, the former Chinese diplomat, Fu Ying, wrote in the People’s Daily that “[a] China that is constantly reforming, innovating, expanding and opening, a China that is determined that all Chinese people will have a happy life, and a China which has made great contributions to world
peace and development need not worry about having a poor international reputation.”

Some drawdown in the heated language would be consistent with past Chinese episodes of overzealous public diplomacy—such as spinning up anti-Japanese nationalism in the early 2000s and early 2010s—that abated when PRC leaders realized it had become counterproductive.

But we should expect this one step back to become two steps forward before long. With Xi Jinping at its helm, the Party has invested enormous financial, political, and reputational resources into “telling China’s story well.” In the Party’s calculation, the COVID-19 propaganda campaign has been largely a success. By all current indications, the Party has emerged from the COVID-19 crisis relatively well at home, with the Party apparently intact, which is what matters most to Beijing. For the most part, Chinese citizens are glad to be returning to normal, especially when watching how the pandemic has so badly affected Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

To the extent China continues to face anger abroad, the Party propaganda apparatus will aim to manipulate that criticism to its advantage by spinning it as anti-China, rather than anti-CCP, or putting pressure on would-be critics—such as it has done with the European Union, Australia, and others—to curb the disparagement. In any event, China has little choice politically but to double down on a more forceful international propaganda and influence effort on the Party’s behalf and for the Party’s benefit. The United States and the entire international community should be prepared for it.

Looking ahead, it is possible an authentic, appealing, and internationally effective form of Chinese soft power will emerge with time. But it seems unlikely as long as the Party is in charge. The old adage that holds the key to soft power—"the best propaganda is no propaganda at all"—is not one the CCP is going to adopt.

Notes


5. “China Provided 100,000 USD Donation to Vanuatu for COVID-19 Prevention and Control,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China to the Republic of Vanuatu, March 26, 2020, http://vu.china-embassy.org/eng/sxw/t1761478.htm; Lijian Zhao (@zlj517), “2/2 CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in the US?,” Twitter, March 12, 2020, 10:37 a.m., https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823; Hua Chunying (@SpokespersonCHN), “#Pompeo said to Fox News ‘China has allowed hundreds of thousands of people to leave Wuhan to go to places like Italy that’s now suffering so badly. Stop lying through your teeth!’,” Twitter, March 21, 2020, 9:36 a.m., https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1240995658904944640.


12. “Xi Jinping’s 19 August Speech Revealed? (Translation).”
13. “Xi Jinping’s 19 August Speech Revealed? (Translation).”


16. Rolland, China’s Vision for a New World Order, 7–11; the terms “narrative power” or “discourse power” derive from the Chinese “话语权 (huayuquan).


22. Zhao, “2/2 CDC was caught on the spot.”


30. Pew, “Global Indicators Database.”


