



Issue Brief # IB-15-2020

May 18, 2020

The hotting-up of the Sino-American spat: Most dangerous side-effect of Covid-19?

Dr. Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury

The hotting-up of the Sino-American spat: Most dangerous side-effect of Covid-19?

By Dr. Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury

When the United States and China signed the First-Phase of their Trade Agreement in January this year, President Donald Trump called it a “momentous step”, and the world believed they had stepped back from a dangerous brink. But, alas, to cite an idiom that is so current today, it was but a ‘false positive’. As the globe reels from the surging COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that the rapid deterioration of US-China relationship can become one of the worst side-effects of this raging virus.

In this election year, things had looked good for Trump in January. His domestic support base was solid. The economy was doing well. The Democrats were on a bit of a disarray. Trump had lowered the temperature in relations with North Korea. Now, with the deal with China, his re-election seemed a shoo-in. Then came the pandemic. The US economy took a nose-dive. Unemployment soared, anxious to return to early normalcy, the White House took measures that deepened confusion. One way out for Trumps was to assume the role of a wartime-President. An enemy was needed. Initially, it was the ‘virus’, but it was too invisible’ to be useful. Something more tangible was required, China fitted the bill.

What made it easier was that as the pandemic spread many in the world did not see China as quite the Caesar’s wife. It was accused of concealing some critical early developments with regard to it. The pathogen first spread from Wuhan in China. The prevalent political system aided suppression of some facts. This was a cause for umbrage to many, including the Europeans who suffered greatly. But the Europeans had no reason to politicize it. To many analysts, Trump and his team did. It would help rally their cohorts. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, China’s popularity in the US was low. And, of course, there could be nothing unfair in love and war.

So, Trump and the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo led a chorus of anti-Chinese tirade. They accused China of hiding the enormity of the virus threat. They also alleged, without seeing the need to produce evidence, that the pathogen originated in a Wuhan laboratory. The Chinese originally responded that these things were better left to scientists than to, “Politicians who lie for their own domestic political ends”. Later they issued a lengthy rebuttal of what they said were “preposterous allegations” by some leading US politicians. To make it appealing to ordinary Americans, the Chinese, rather adroitly began their briefings on the 30-page 11000-word article by invoking the American Republican hero, President Abraham Lincoln.

Lashing out at the World Health Organization which had been generous in its praise of China’s handling of the Coronavirus crisis. Trump withdrew its funding calling it a “Puppet of China”. Thereafter, the US sent a missive to 60 countries asking for support for Taiwan’s participation in the organization, to broaden all efforts to fight the pandemic (Taiwan is being praised as a success-story in this regard). At the same time, the US stopped a draft-text from being voted upon

in the United Nations Secretary Council calling for a ‘cease-fire’ in various global conflicts to help troubled countries to better combat the COVID.

Because of the situation, China was running far behind the pace needed to meet the first year’s goal of purchase of American goods, which was to have been a US\$ 77 billion increase over 2017 levels- according to the January Phase One deal. The Chinese asked for renegotiation. Trump has declared he was ‘not interested’. He accused his predecessors in the White House for alluring China to “take advantage of the US for many, many years”, doubtless in livid rage at former President Barrack Obama’s recent criticism of his handling the current crisis. Not only that. There are now hints that Trump may default paying the US\$ 1.08 trillion debt owed to China, and even seize the latter’s assets! Thus would have a huge impact on the global market economy and the US-China economic relations would lie in tatters!

On the military front the clouds are also darkening. A guided-missile American destroyer “USS Barry” passed through the Taiwan strait twice in April. Another US naval vessel, the “USS America” recently conducted exercise in the East China Seas and the South China Sea. In March, Trump signed into law the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, following which the Chinese Media warned Taiwan against its allowing the US to town the island into a powder keg.

China has its own legislation about Taiwan. The anti-secession law passed by China’s Parliament in 2005 mandates Beijing to declare war if Taiwan formally declares independence. Taiwan therefore, maintains the most studious “red-line” on China’s foreign and security policy.

In all fairness, the US security establishment recognizes that. Hopefully, the US institutional mechanism can restrain the onslaught of a war for overt political gains of one segment of the polity that could devastate the entire nation. At the same time the Chinese would. it is assumed, have the good sense not to self-destruct themselves by initiating something drastic and foolish like seeking to attack Taiwan with the US engrossed in battling the virus. Both sides, the Americans and the Chinese, have recently been relentlessly citing the Greek historian Thucydides, who warned against miscalculations leading to when he observed “when Athens grew strong, there was great fear in Sparta”. Let us hope both sides, the Americans and the Chinese, pay heed to their own perceived forebodings!

Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at ISAS, National University of Singapore, former Foreign Advisor and President of Cosmos Foundation Bangladesh.