

Xi Jinping's Assertive Diplomatic Strategy amidst the Pandemic

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Throughout its 70 years of history, the People's Republic of China constantly questioned the meaning of its existence and place "under the sun." In contrast with extremely tumultuous times during Mao Zedong's rule, Deng Xiaoping shifted the country's path towards stability and order. With regard to China's foreign relations, Deng formulated a highly successful diplomatic strategy of *Tàoguāng Yǎnghuì*, and its principles were adhered to by successive leaderships up until Xi Jinping came to power. A new generation of Chinese leadership formulated a diplomatic strategy of *Fēnfā Yōuwèi* that resulted in a much more assertive diplomatic behaviour abroad. Amidst the global pandemic, the international community has witnessed China's transformed diplomatic strategy and unique diplomatic tactics such as "Wolf-Warrior diplomacy" and "Mask and Vaccine diplomacy" that were used by Beijing to safeguard and expand its influence. Firstly, the paper analyses the historical context and the main triggering factors for the transformation of China's diplomatic strategy throughout its post-Mao era. Then, the effects of Xi's diplomatic strategy and its assertiveness are assessed in the context of an ongoing global pandemic. Lastly, a case study of Serbia is used to analyse how Xi's China has managed to make use of the global pandemic to enhance its presence in the Western Balkans. This can be interpreted as a significant short-term diplomatic achievement, although its long-term impact on the region remains to be seen.

Keywords: Chinese diplomatic strategy, Xi Jinping, diplomatic assertiveness, COVID-19 pandemic, global ambitions, Serbia.

Introduction

Since Mao Zedong's proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the country's leadership was in search of the most suitable foreign strategy for the "New China". After failed experiments with China's identity that began with the country being a staunch supporter of utopian so-

cialist ideals in the early stages of development, the PRC has managed to adapt and merge itself into the existing international order that led to its remarkable economic and political progress. China's "Reform and Opening Up", kickstarted by Deng Xiaoping, was guided by a more robust and practical diplomatic strategy of "hide one's capabilities and bide one's time" (in China,

it is known as *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì* 韬光养晦). Deng's strategy can be characterised as a low-key behaviour that prioritises maximisation of economic gains, developmental progress and cooperation with the outside world. *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì* was upheld by successive leaderships without any significant recalculations up until Xi Jinping was elected as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, and the president of PRC a year later.

In this paper, the author defines diplomatic strategy as a set of principles, objectives and rules of engagement with the foreign countries in which protection of own interests is a starting point. This strategy is the main plan of action that guides a certain country's diplomatic interactions with the rest of the world. Even though the terms "grand strategy" and "diplomatic strategy" are interlinked, there are fundamental differences with regard to their defined scope, depth and means of action. "Grand strategy" is a much broader concept that involves management of all state's resources (such as military, economic) toward defending and expanding its interests. "Diplomatic strategy", on the other hand, is a component of an overall "grand strategy". Guided by their "diplomatic strategy", states employ various exclusively non-military tools and tactics that are used as a means of achieving particular diplomatic objectives. In this paper, a conceptual distinction between PRC's diplomatic strategies and their more specific tactics (such as "Wolf-Warrior" diplomacy) to achieve short-to-mid-term political gains is proposed and applied for analysis.

1 Zhu, 2010.

Xi emerged as a reformist of China's traditional "low key" diplomatic approach and initiated his fundamentally distinct vision of "forging ahead" (originally called as *Fèn fā Yǒu wéi* 奋发有为)². According to Xi, his new vision of assertive diplomacy is the main guiding strategy needed for the fulfilment of China's grand goals such as "China Dream", "Belt and Road Initiative", "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" etc. Firstly, the paper analyses the post-Mao historical context and the main triggering factors for the transformation of China's diplomatic strategy throughout history. Then, the effects and challenges of Xi's diplomatic assertiveness are assessed in the context of an ongoing global pandemic. Ultimately, the article provides an analysis of the Serbian case, and how the pandemic served Chinese interests to enhance its influence and presence in the Western Balkans.

The Fundamental Transformation of Chinese Diplomatic Strategy

In terms of Chinese economic and societal development, *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì* proved to be an effective strategy that managed to remain relevant over the years. While maintaining its relative passiveness in international affairs, PRC enhanced its economic cooperation that led to its integration into the world economic system. As argued by Chinese academics Li³ and Zhao⁴, China's decision to refrain from active engagement in international affairs (as clearly evident in China's relatively passive behaviour in the

2 Xinhua News, 2018.

3 Li, 2018.

4 Zhao, 2015.

international security sphere), *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì* helped to maintain a favourable international environment that resulted in a huge increase in China's comprehensive power. Even throughout Hu Jintao's leadership (that was later succeeded by Xi Jinping), Deng's traditional strategy was positively viewed and adhered to by both the leadership and academic circles. President Hu emphasised the necessity that China's diplomacy must remain "modest and prudent" to preserve a favourable environment for "peaceful economic development"⁵. In 2010, Dai Bingguo, a prominent member of the State Council (China's cabinet) at that time, published an article⁶ that expressed his support for the continuation of the current diplomatic strategy. Dai warned that in case China abandons its *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì* path, a favourable international environment would destabilise and, as a result, peaceful economic development will be fundamentally affected over time. Dai's commentary mirrored a view held by Chinese scholars who maintained the position that China's rise is a long-term process, and a more assertive diplomatic behaviour would be counter-productive given China's weaker global influence and inability to compete with the United States (US) in terms of its political, economic, military power. However, throughout Hu's rule a rather minor but continuously growing group of a younger generation of Chinese officials began to question the insistence on continuation of such low-key international behaviour. Since Xi Jinping came to power,

5 He, 2019.

6 Dai, 2010.

his leadership openly challenged such diplomatic vision that was viewed as "outdated" and "irrelevant to the changing world":

"The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation has become the biggest dream of Chinese people. Despite more than 170 years of continuous struggle and numerous setbacks, we, with the spirit of fighting till the end, must battle our enemies with the determination to recover what was taken from us to realise this *Great Dream*." (Xi Jinping) [translation from Chinese by the author]

The new generation of leadership insisted that the growth of China's economic strength and comprehensive influence is not compatible with Deng's traditional views, therefore, fundamental recalculations were necessary to facilitate "The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation".

Xi's Vision of a New Era: *Fèn fā Yǒuwèi* Diplomatic Strategy

In the past decade, the international community has witnessed a conceptual shift in China's diplomatic behaviour and assertiveness in economic, political and security dimensions. Through internal power struggles and a nationwide anti-corruption campaign to crack down on "tigers and flies", Xi Jinping has managed to accumulate full control of the CCP and the country's armed forces. Xi has notably departed from the practice of collective leadership that was upheld by his post-Mao predecessors. Shortly after Xi's consolidation of power, the abolishment of the term limitations and incorporation of his political thoughts into

7 CCTV News, 2020.

the party and state constitutions have made Xi comparable to “Chinese strongmen” such as Deng or even Mao.

In 2013, Xi Jinping introduced for the first time his vision of a new strategy that would pave a novel path towards transformation of China’s global identity.⁸ The main reason for the adoption of a new diplomatic strategy is based on the current Chinese leadership’s perception that China’s growing economic might and global influence is not adequately represented by the former strategy of *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì*. As stated by Chinese scholar Li Zhiyong, such rational change is guided by three variables: China’s growing capabilities, legitimisation of actions (both domestically and overseas with the aim to expand PRC’s network of strategic partners that is beneficial to China’s rise and peaceful development), and the need to project its influence abroad⁹. However, even though the growth of the country’s domestic capabilities and potential to exercise its influence abroad had a direct impact on Beijing’s push for recalibration of its diplomatic strategy, the importance of the international environment during the first decade of the 21st century is often overlooked and dismissed as a crucial variable.

Prominent Chinese scholars such as Yan Xuetong have repeatedly emphasised the significance of outside pressures and heavy criticisms that came from the international community due to China’s relative passiveness and inaction abroad. China’s lack of response in managing global security issues was especially emphasised. For instance,

amidst the boiling point of the North Korean nuclear crisis in the 2000s, even though China initiated the “Six-Party Talks”, rather than becoming actively involved in defusing the crisis, it remained a mere spectator. Historically, China was more focused on its neighbourhood, however, rapid deterioration of the Sino-Japanese ties and intensified maritime disputes in the South China Sea gave an early warning that China’s traditional diplomatic behaviour was failing to safeguard a favourable international environment. A major trigger point was Barack Obama’s “recalibration” of the Sino-US relations and the “Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy”. For the current Chinese leadership, Beijing’s “low-profile” diplomatic approach proved to be unsuitable despite previous leadership’s attempts to preserve its relevance by focusing on economic objectives.

“Crossing the river by feeling the stones” (摸着石头过河, *mō zhe shítou guò hé*) is a well-known Chinese saying popularised by Deng Xiaoping that reflects his cautious diplomatic vision by emphasising the importance of precise calculations for China’s behaviour overseas. Deng paid particular attention to the importance of refraining from the escalation of tensions with China’s neighbours as a necessity for maintaining a stable political and economic environment. While both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin emphasised the importance of the institutionalised process of collective leadership, Xi has distanced himself from such tradition and accumulated the power in his own hands. At the beginning of Xi’s rule, China’s behaviour remained relatively cautious and unchanged. For instance, amidst the dangerous escalation

8 Xinhua News, 2013.

9 Li, 2018.

of territorial disputes in the South China Sea in 2015, China chose to de-escalate the crisis and instead shifted its intention to the enhancement of regional cooperation. Despite Chinese leadership's emphasis that it is merely "a defender of the current international order" and does not want to challenge the existing rules, practices and structures, the emergence of noticeably more assertive diplomacy significantly attracted the world's attention with regards to its true global intentions. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly heightened the Sino-Western confrontation. As a result, Beijing employed various tools to preserve its global status and influence. Its assertiveness and the use of a range of diplomatic tools amidst the pandemic has revealed a new face of China's diplomacy under Xi Jinping.

China's Assertive Behaviour and Opportunism amidst the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has given the whole world tremendous challenges not seen in decades. The global epidemiological disaster has destabilised economies, societies and shook political landscapes across the globe. Public opinion, especially within (but not limited to) the Western world, believe that the virus originated from Wuhan, PRC, and that China, to some extent, bears responsibility for the global outbreak of the coronavirus. For PRC, the pandemic significantly affected its global image. However, the ongoing chaos has also provided China with new opportunities. The international community has witnessed significantly more assertive China that used various tactics such as "Mask and

Vaccine diplomacy" and "Wolf-Warrior¹⁰ diplomacy" that are in accordance with Xi's new diplomatic strategy.

Unforeseen public health challenges, as well as international criticisms that China faced at the beginning of 2020, led to Beijing's decision to employ a wide range of tools under Xi's new approach that would be beneficial to China both domestically and internationally. In the early stages of the pandemic, the Chinese government employed often excessive lockdown measures to stop the spread of the virus that significantly restrained society's freedoms. With the closure of its borders and imposition of draconian lockdown measures, China has managed to contain the spread of the virus. However, public health crisis and chaos continued abroad. Beijing used this opportunity as a means of distraction: to divert society's attention from China's inability to effectively handle the COVID-19 crisis in the early stages towards reliance on fuelling of domestic nationalist sentiments to counter and downplay international criticisms. On the 8th of September, 2020, during the grandiose ceremony in Beijing, Xi Jinping declared China's victory over the coronavirus pandemic. The Chinese president emphasised that this battle "revealed a clear superiority of both the CCP's leadership and the Chinese socialist system"¹¹. After the stabilisation of the country's epidemiological situation, China has shifted its attention to

¹⁰ This term originates from an extremely patriotic Chinese action movie and is used to explain a recent shift in Chinese diplomats' rhetoric and actions that are, in contrast with their past diplomatic conduct, much more assertive and uncompromising.

¹¹ The National People's Congress of the PRC, 2020.

the ongoing deterioration of the situation abroad and potential gains from it. Even though China's association with the virus has greatly affected its international image and influence overseas, especially in the Western world, Beijing also saw numerous opportunities to extend its influence and global reach.

Chinese diplomats' assertive conduct, now commonly known as "Wolf-Warrior diplomacy", best symbolises Beijing's current strategy. A shift in Chinese diplomatic behaviour is evident in its changed rhetoric and diplomatic style. Harsh pandemic-era statements by Chinese diplomats, mainly those who reside in the West, are a direct response to Xi's calls in 2019 for the whole Chinese Foreign Affairs apparatus to promote the country's interests abroad with a "fighting spirit"¹². Amid mounting criticisms regarding China's handling of the virus, diplomats fully employed the use of Twitter and other Western social media platforms to counter those criticisms by releasing statements with offensive rhetoric, and often, by openly flexing China's economic and military muscles as a clear warning message. The current Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department Zhao Lijian is probably one of the most well-known leaders of a new generation of China's "Wolf-Warrior" diplomats. During the virus pandemic, he became well known for his Twitter messages openly criticising the US and popularising various conspiracy theories such as that the US military imported the virus into China, stating explicitly: "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to

Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! The US owe us an explanation!"¹³ Later on, he continuously retweeted and shared with his audience various articles and reports regarding conspiracy theories that the virus originated in the US.

Another example of "Wolf-Warrior" diplomatic tactics with the hint of potential economic consequences is reflected in the rhetoric of Wu Ken, Chinese ambassador to Germany, who warned that "If Germany were to make a decision that led to Huawei's exclusion from the German market, there will be consequences"¹⁴. Australia, a vocal supporter of a full and independent inquiry into the early stages of coronavirus pandemic, was also affected by similar pursuits. Cheng Jingye, Chinese ambassador to Canberra, warned that such support for an inquiry could spark Chinese consumers' boycott of students and tourists visiting Australia as well as a boycott of sales of popular Australian exports of beef and wine¹⁵. Shortly after, from May 19 onwards, China announced imposing tariffs on Australian barley imports which is a significant blow to Australia of which China was the largest market until economic ties were severed.¹⁶ Furthermore, European Union (EU) officials, who were responsible for the drafting of the EU report on Chinese and Russian disinformation campaigns on the coronavirus pandemic, received pressure from the Chinese diplomatic mission to the EU to soften the tone with regards to the accusations toward China. In the final

12 CCP News, 2019.

13 Li Jianzhao's Twitter Account, 2020.

14 Benhold and Ewing, 2020.

15 Tillett, 2020.

16 Patton and Packham, 2020.

version of the report, the references to the Chinese government running a disinformation campaign globally were watered down and France's negative reaction to pressure from China was omitted. These examples of Chinese diplomats' rhetoric and threat to take actions indicate that economic and political coercion is now more commonly employed by the government to safeguard and promote its political interests abroad.

As a part of Xi's *Fèn fā Yōu wèi* approach, by initiating its "Mask and Vaccine diplomacy", China aimed at enhancing its status as a responsible superpower and expanding its network of partnerships in the world that would better serve Chinese interests (not only economic) in the context of Sino-US rivalry for the global dominance and, to some extent, in the effort to remodel the existing world order. As a result of the vacuum left by the US inability/unwillingness to lead the world's efforts in fighting the spread of the virus, the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic was seized as a potential opportunity for China. This "charm offensive" produced mixed results. However, countries, such as Thailand, Cambodia and, perhaps most curiously, Hungary and Serbia, that received a "full package" of Chinese aid and military doctors' assistance, already show signs that they might be drifting apart from closer cooperation with both the EU and the US and its allies in their respective regions toward strengthening ties with China due to its quick response in assisting affected countries at the peak of the pandemic.

China's Diplomatic Victory in Serbia?

China's relatively close ties with Serbia have

a long history. Over time, the ties steadily improved and China has gradually become one of the most important foreign policy partners of Serbia. Even though Serbia is the official EU candidate, the country's relationship with the EU is historically complicated mainly due to Serbia's close relationship with Russia and Belgrade's active diplomatic support for China (for instance, in 2019, Serbia was one of the countries that signed a joint statement in the United Nations that commended China's actions in the Xinjiang region)¹⁷. While international media quickly concluded that China's "Mask diplomacy" failed to provide tangible results, the EU's failure to effectively manage the fight against the pandemic and its inability to provide essential aid to non-EU partners such as Serbia has created an opportunity for China to boost its bilateral relations with Serbia and enhance its presence in the Balkans¹⁸. China quickly seized the opportunity and actively engaged itself in Serbia's "rescue" by sending medical supplies and a team of Chinese medical experts. Chinese planes were welcomed with pompous ceremonies attended by the Serbian president, who kissed the Chinese flag during the live TV broadcast¹⁹.

Following Serbian government's cry for assistance, in May 2020, China built a state-of-the-art medical lab in Belgrade which is the first such Chinese project in Europe. A second Chinese-built lab (the Fire Eye COVID-19 testing lab) in the south-eastern city of Nis was opened in July. Both Serb and Chinese leaders have since held frequent phone conversations and high-level

17 Taiwan News, 2019.

18 Vladislavjević, 2020.

19 South China Morning Post, 2020.

meetings. This clearly shows how important this pandemic-era opportunity and transformation of Sino-Serbian relations is for China's ambitions in Europe. China's vaccine diplomacy was also highly successful in Serbia. On the 16th of January, 2021, Serbia received 1 million doses of Chinese Sinopharm vaccine making it the first European country to accept Chinese made COVID-19 vaccines²⁰. Interestingly, Serbia's balancing between the West and China has allowed it to accumulate a sizable stockpile of vaccines. As a result, Belgrade was able to launch Serbia's own "vaccine diplomacy" that even had some positive effect on its global image. As reported by Mikovic, Serbia has recently become a regional hub for vaccinations that allows foreigners to receive a vaccine of their choice (Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Sputnik V) in Serbia. It is reported that "at the end of March, thousands of residents from neighbouring countries, including North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, among others, travelled to Serbia to get a COVID-19 shot."²¹

A boost in Sino-Serbian ties was not limited to the fight against COVID-19. Cooperation in other spheres was also expanded. Besides the existing Sino-Serbian cooperation in the public security field, the Chinese arms deal with Serbia must have triggered warning lights to the whole Europe and particularly North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Serbia's partner under the "Partnership for Peace" programme. Nine units of CH-92A armed reconnaissance drones and eighteen FT-8C

air-to-ground missiles along with Chinese training were received by Serbia on the 9th of July, 2020²². This is the first time that a European country has deployed Chinese unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the region. Shortly after, international media has reported that Serbia plans to acquire a Chinese FK-3 missile defence system. On the 27th of March, 2021, during a visit to Serbia, Chinese State Councillor and Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic agreed to strengthen their military cooperation. President Vucic also voiced his country's support for China's position on issues of Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong. For the EU and NATO, the more-than-ever closer Sino-Serbian ties is a worrisome sign of deepening cooperation that already caught a considerable attention²³. In the short-term, China has undoubtedly achieved a significant diplomatic success that strengthened its influence in already eastward-looking region, however in the long-term, it remains to be seen whether China would solidify its presence in the Balkans.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic is an ongoing multi-dimensional challenge to the world. The solidarity and unity of different political entities, such as the EU, as well as their ties with regional partners are being tested. China's late response to the crisis, deterioration of its international image and heavy criticisms from the West have led to a

²⁰ Reuters, 2021.

²¹ Mikovic, 2021.

²² Allison, 2020.

²³ CGTN News, 2021.

much more assertive and incomparable with the past Beijing's diplomatic behaviour that is clearly evident in its "Wolf-Warrior" and "Mask and Vaccine" diplomatic tactics. Deng Xiaoping, the father of reform era China, has formulated a highly successful diplomatic strategy of *Tāoguāng Yǎnghuì*, and its principles were adhered to by successive leaderships up until Xi Jinping came to power.

A new generation of Chinese leadership formulated a diplomatic strategy of *Fèn fā Yǒu wèi* that resulted in a much more assertive diplomatic behaviour abroad. Both Deng's and Xi's diplomatic strategies have structural differences: while Deng's vision supports "low-key" behaviour, stability and focus on forging economic ties, *Fèn fā Yǒu wèi* is a more politically-oriented vision that aims to aggressively push for accumulation of global prestige and reputation necessary for Beijing's global ambitions. As a result, China's behaviour amidst the pandemic is not surprising. It perfectly fits Xi Jinping's new diplomatic strategy of

Fèn fā Yǒu wèi. While China's diplomatic campaigns in the West were not successful, several important victories, especially in the Balkans, are treated as significant achievements that serve China's international (regional) and domestic interests. Without a doubt, the pandemic served Chinese interests to enhance its influence and presence in the Balkans. It is clearly a significant setback for the EU in its efforts to stabilise and incorporate this historically unstable region into the Western world.

Xi's *Fèn fā Yǒu wèi* assertive diplomacy is the "new normal" and remains in accordance with China's global ambitions. The EU must learn from its significant setback in Serbia if it wants to strengthen solidarity and stability in Europe to counter growing Chinese influence. The world has witnessed a new face of Chinese assertive diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis, but, given China's growing assertiveness since Xi Jinping came to power, it was not at all unexpected.

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