



28 May 2020

**‘CHINA’S ‘BIG TWO’ HAVE DOMESTIC DISCONTENT AND US-CHINA TENSION
AS BACKDROP:
INDIA FINDS MENTION IN US-CHINA EXCHANGE’**

by JAYADEVA RANADE

Domestic discontent and US-China relations are among the Chinese leadership’s two top concerns. To the discomfiture of China’s leadership both issues surfaced on May 21, 2020, the opening day in Beijing of the ‘Big Two’, as the plenary sessions of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) -- China’s top advisory body -- and the 13th National People’s Congress (NPC) plenum -- China’s version of a parliament -- are known. Xu Zhangrun, former Professor of Law at Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University and who has near iconic status among China’s academics and intellectuals, penned an over 2000-character essay advising NPC Deputies on twelve things they should do. The essay was published in the Hongkong magazine ‘Mainland China’ on May 21. Xu Zhangrun has, incidentally, been banned from writing and using the social media! The White House also, apparently coincidentally timed for release with China’s NPC Plenum, issued a 16-page document titled ‘The United States Strategic Approach to China’, which effectively restricts engagement with China as US policy.

2. In his ‘advice’ to the NPC, Xu Zhangrun stated that the outbreak of the Coronavirus and its rapid spread across the world had isolated China globally and for this blamed “The Axlerod [that is, Xi Jinping] and the cabal”! His first advice to the NPC Deputies was to comply with the people’s demand for a State Council White Paper which should include a timeline detailing the actions taken by the central and the local governments during the initial stages of the outbreak and especially between January 3 and 7. It was in this period that China’s National Health Commission issued a notice about biological samples and hazard reduction and ordered

the destruction of samples held by unregistered bodies. He insisted too that those held responsible must be punished regardless of seniority in the hierarchy. Second was the release of all citizen journalists, such as Chen Qiushi and Fang Binbin in Wuhan, Rights Lawyers, the leaders of faith communities, dissidents, and all innocent Chinese citizens. He demanded an end to the “persecution” of University Professors who dare to speak out and recalled that ten Wuhan University professors had spoken out in February alone.

3. Xu Zhangrun made other far-reaching recommendations. These included: immediately banning the “abhorrent” practice of Internet policing used to shut down the WeChat and WeiBo accounts of individuals and stopping the intimidation of teachers, medical personnel and writers accused of ‘thought crimes’. He demanded that the government institute a “Sunshine Policy” requiring officials to publicly disclose their assets; remove Communist Party cells from all academic and educational institutions, particularly tertiary, secondary and primary schools; enshrine the protection of private property in the constitution and return the right of ownership to the people themselves; and eliminate the state-sanctioned monopoly exercised by the Communist Party as China’s sole landlord.

4. In addition, he listed symbolic measures such as a “Wailing Wall” listing the names of all who died in the national disaster and a sculpture in memory of the men and women who warned others and acted as whistle-blowers, like Dr Ai Fen, and known as the ‘Eight Righteous People’. He called for gazetting a ‘Dr Li Wenliang Day’ as ‘an annual reminder of the importance of free speech as guaranteed by the Chinese constitution’.

5. Earlier on May 1, after dates for the ‘Big Two’ had been announced, an open letter written in Chinese and addressed to the representatives of the CPPCC and NPC circulated widely on the Internet. Unlike Xu Zhangrun’s essay, this letter posed 15 specific questions, which while targeting Chinese President Xi Jinping did not name him. Some of the issues overlapped with those raised by Xu Zhangrun, but this May 1 letter appeared to have been authored by someone with ‘inside’ information. Among the more interesting questions it raised were: responsibility should be fixed for the deterioration in China-US relations; responsibility should be fixed to ascertain who allowed the turmoil in Hongkong for so long which has “destroyed the ‘one country, two systems’”; how the Belt and Road Initiative was authorised without approval of the NPC and “now this program is about to be aborted. Who should bear the responsibility?”; and ‘who authorised sending military police to provide “special protection” to retired senior

comrades and current high-ranking officials of the party, government, and military to actually restrict their communications, freedom of movement, and visitors and prevent the retired senior comrades from proposing a collective motion to call for an expanded Chinese Communist party (CCP) Politburo meeting’.

6. Issued in the midst of rapidly escalating US-China tensions on a number of fronts, ‘The United States Strategic Approach to China’, outlined the Trump Administration’s assessment of China’s objectives and policies. Declaring that the US sees “no value in engaging with Beijing for symbolism and pageantry; we instead demand tangible results and constructive outcomes”, it said the “US responds to PRC’s actions rather than its stated commercial threats”. The document seemed to be careful to distinguish between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and left ways open for discussions where necessary.

7. Among its highlights is the assertion that “Beijing openly acknowledges that it seeks to transform this international order to align with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s interests and ideology.” It said that the CCP’s expanding use of economic, political and military power are “harming vital American interests.” Probably to assuage concerns of the larger Chinese population, the document emphasised that the “Approach is not premised on determining a particular end state for China”. The document explained that the US’ “competitive” approach to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has two objectives: to improve the resilience of US institutions, alliances and partnerships and “prevail against the challenges the PRC presents”; and “to compel Beijing to cease or reduce actions harmful to the US’ vital, national interests and that of our allies and partners”. In this context it said “The United States is working in concert with mutually aligned visions and approaches such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nation’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, Japan’s free and open Indo-Pacific vision, India’s Security and Growth for All in the Region policy, Australia’s Indo-Pacific concept, the Republic of Korea’s New Southern Policy, and Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy”.

8. It detailed the challenges under the subheads ‘Economic’, ‘Challenges to Our Values’ and ‘Security’. Listing the ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR) under economic challenges, it said, it is “designed to reshape international norms and standards and networks to advance Beijing’s global interests and vision, while also serving China’s domestic economic requirements”. It averred that Beijing will convert OBOR projects “into undue political influence and military access”. Discussing ‘Challenges to Our Values’, the document focussed on the CCP and its

“compellance of ideological conformity at home”. It listed the persecution of ethnic minorities like Tibetans, Uyghurs etc. Referring to Security challenges the document stated: *“Beijing contradicts its rhetoric and flouts its commitments to its neighbors by engaging in provocative and coercive military and paramilitary activities in the Yellow Sea, the East and South China Seas, the Taiwan Strait, and Sino-Indian border areas”*.

9. Appearing to give the rationale, it said the document rethinks the policies of the last two decades and is guided by “principled realism”. It said the US is responding to the “CCP’s direct challenge by acknowledging that we are in a strategic competition and protecting our interests appropriately”. The “US does not and will not accommodate Beijing’s actions that weaken a free, open and rules-based international order.” It asserted “we will continue to refute the CCP’s narrative that the US is in strategic retreat or will shirk our international security commitments.” The US’ new ‘Strategic Approach to China’ warned also that “the negative trend lines of Beijing’s policies and practices threaten the legacy of the Chinese people and their future position in the world”.

10. China’s reaction to release of ‘The United States Strategic Approach to China’ was measured and not strident. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi avoided sharp criticism of the US at his press conference on the side-lines of the NPC on May 24. He said “China has no intention to change, still less replace, the United States” and “It’s time for the United States to give up its wishful thinking of changing China and stopping 1.4 billion people in their historic march toward modernization.” Pointing to US President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Wang Yi said American politicians “are taking China-U.S. relations hostage and pushing our two countries to the brink of a new Cold War.”

11. The CCP-owned Global Times (May 23) noted that the document claimed that previous hopes for a "fundamental economic and political opening" in China have failed and called for the continuation of a whole-of-government approach toward China. The Global Times article was captioned ‘China needs flexible approach as relations with US come to cross-roads’. It interviewed Wei Zongyou, a Professor at the Center for American Studies, Fudan University and Zhang Tengjun, an Assistant Research Fellow at the China Institute of International Studies.

12. Wei Zongyou described the document as “filled with a sheer hegemonic mentality and every single sentence aims to protect US national interests”. He added “the US always hoped to change the world in accordance with its own will” and this “is the same approach with which it deals with China”. Stating “we can sense the US' toughness and even menace”, he said “China must hold its strategic resolve and vision and adopt flexible approaches”. Wei Zongyou said if the “US abandons its stereotypical mind-set regarding China” then “there is room for cooperation on regional and world matters”. He observed “the future trajectory of China-US relations depends on how the two interact... . China can still seek strategic initiatives”. Zhang Tengjun took a more conciliatory stance. Assessing that “China-US relations have entered their darkest phase since the normalization of ties”, he said when the gap is widening and the Thucydides Trap is becoming a reality, China must have a clear understanding of how China-US ties serve its own development. Stating that “a stable China-US relationship is an important goal of China's major power diplomacy”, he asserted “this is not to cater to the US, but to create a favourable external environment for China's peaceful development”.

13. The day after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's press conference, the Global Times (May 25) listed six basic facts as an “objective view” of China-US relations. These were: (i) China is a rising developing country. So far, it has not formed the strength to pose a substantial challenge to the US, nor does China have such a will. (ii) The core of China's foreign relations is development. Chinese actions that can be described as "overseas military expansion" are negligible. China has been somewhat active in areas in which it has territorial disputes with neighbouring countries, but it has kept restraint in general. One proof is that China has not engaged in any military conflicts with its neighbouring countries for over 30 years. (iii) China expands influence through its economic activities to the mutual benefit of the parties involved and China does so under the US-led multilateral trading system. (iv) China has a different political system than the US and other Western countries, which has caused ideological disputes. “But China is generally not a country that exports ideology”. China's “so-called overseas publicity” is only to increase the external world's understanding of China and not subvert the Western system. The West is aggressive while China is defensive in their ideological disputes. (v) the US elites want to “shape” China and are annoyed that China has firmly stayed on its own political path. They worry that the successful Chinese path may affect Western society's confidence. (vi) the Trump administration's trade war against China “is indeed bullying”. The "America First" doctrine has “caused widespread resentment worldwide and China is not the only victim. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Washington has been passing

the buck to Beijing. This is the odious move of the White House and the Republican Party for the sake of the 2020 election. This is typical international hooliganism”.

14. China and the US have both been increasingly critical of each other as the trade war escalated. A Central News Agency report (May 18) claimed that since 2019, data collected by a WeChat account shows that 70 percent of the front-page editorials of the Global Times have been targeting the U.S. It said among the recent 40 daily front page editorials in the Global Times, titles of 29 articles carry the words “the United States.” The proportion is as high as 72.5 percent. The figure was, however, only 18, or 45 percent, out of 40 editorials over the same time period last year. In addition, the People’s Daily virtually each day published a special commentary criticising the U.S.

15. Directly relevant for India is the statement in ‘The United States Strategic Approach to China’ that: “*Beijing contradicts its rhetoric and flouts its commitments to its neighbours by engaging in provocative and coercive military and paramilitary activities in the Yellow Sea, the East and South China Seas, the Taiwan Strait, and Sino-Indian border areas*”. US Assistant Secretary of State Alice Wells echoed this thought in her statement: ‘flare-ups at the border are a reminder that Chinese aggressions aren’t always rhetorical. The border dispute shows that threat China poses to its neighbour’. Pertinent is China’s reaction. The reaction of the spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Delhi was tough and sharper than the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman’s comment at the weekly press conference in Beijing. Chinese Embassy Counsellor Ji Rong said on May 20 evening: “We are firm in determination to oppose separatist activities and safeguard China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity. We are firm in determination to oppose foreign meddling in China’s internal affairs. We are firm in determination to realise final reunification.” The assertive last sentence is particularly relevant in the current context of the multiple intrusions along the LAC.

(The author is a former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is presently President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)