



11 May 2020

‘CHINA’S VIEW OF TIES WITH THE U.S.-- HINTS OF CONCESSIONS?’

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by JAYADEVA RANADE

1. High anxiety is apparent in the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership in Beijing at the present state of China-US relations. There is concern that escalating China-US tensions are at a “dangerous” turn and relations could further deteriorate leading even to conflict. Tensions have been sharply accentuated by the Coronavirus pandemic and consequent worldwide rise in anti-China sentiment, which China’s leadership assesses has been fanned by the US.

2. Three Chinese think-tanks recently analysed different aspects of US-China relations and issued their reports in late April. Affirming China’s need for good ties with the US, two of them recommended measures to try and turn the anti-China sentiment, including in the US, in China’s favour. None suggested any steps that might provoke the US.

3. Curious are the interviews given around the same time by two prominent Chinese in the Hongkong media, a tactic traditionally resorted to by Chinese leaders when a message which could possibly face resistance within the leadership in Beijing needs to be conveyed to the ‘outside’ world. Qiao Liang, a retired Major General of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and co-author of the best seller ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ who is a ‘hawk’ with a huge following inside China, appeared to hint in his interview that reunification of Taiwan with the Mainland need not have a deadline and suggested Beijing should clarify this. The other is a high-level CCP provincial cadre who heads a state-backed think-tank dealing with the South China Sea. He appeared to hint that China would not precipitate matters in this maritime region.

4. The reports do indicate China’s heightened concern at the rapid deterioration in US-China relations and Beijing’s desire not to further annoy Washington. The interviews in the Hongkong media which seemingly offer concessions could, however, suggest the existence of serious differences within the top echelons of China’s leadership on ways to de-escalate tension with the US and the re-orientation of China’s foreign policy.

The Issue Brief is appended.



11 May 2020

‘CHINA’S VIEW OF TIES WITH THE U.S.-- HINTS OF CONCESSIONS?’

by JAYADEVA RANADE

1. High anxiety is apparent in the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership in Beijing at the present state of China-US relations. There is concern that the escalating China-US tensions could further deteriorate relations leading to conflict. Tension in the relationship has been sharply accentuated by the Coronavirus pandemic and consequent worldwide rise in anti-China sentiment. This is explicit in the comments on May 5, of Shi Yinhong, an International Relations Professor at China’s Renmin University and an adviser to China’s State Council – China’s version of a Cabinet. He said “The United States and China are actually in the era of a new Cold War. Different from the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, the new Cold War between the US and China features full competition and a rapid decoupling. The US-China relationship is no longer the same as that of a few years ago, not even the same as that of a few months ago.”

2. A sampling of a few comments made in April/May by informed Chinese and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s authoritative official mouthpiece ‘People’s Daily’ give an idea of how Beijing presently views China-US relations. Zhou Xiaoming, former Deputy Head of China’s mission in Geneva, wrote that the West’s efforts to blame China for the global outbreak is “a carefully coordinated PR campaign initiated by the American government to contain China. It is a new battle ground carved out by the US in its war to contain China’s rise. We must not underestimate it.” The CCP’s official mouthpiece People’s Daily wrote “Facing the epidemic, cooperation is the only correct choice for China and the US. This mentality is unhealthy, unethical and lunatic,” adding that China has been transparent all along and has been aiding others including the Americans. It said that China has been restrained at the smear campaign of the US, but “on the major issues related to our principles we dare to draw the sword, and we will never concede.” Hu Xijin, Editor-in-Chief of Global Times wrote on his

public Weibo account: “Honestly, the America today won’t back off before crippling China. Many people keep saying the situation today is a result of China’s actions. They argue that China should show some goodwill to the US, and make major concessions, so to win back the Americans’ trust so the relations can get back to normal. But I have to say ... they are too naïve ... the biggest drive behind the US shift in attitude toward China is the change of power balance between the two countries. The US won’t accept the possibility that China may become an equal power. That’s the most fundamental.”

3. In April alone at least two major Chinese government think-tanks and one ostensibly private but well connected to the Party hierarchy, issued reports examining different aspects of China-US relations and recommending ways to arrest the slide in the relationship. It is clear that the US continues to be recognised as crucial to China’s rise and the revival of its economy. Interestingly, none recommended yielding concessions to the US, but neither did any of them suggest actions that would provoke the US. Instead, they recommended ways of blunting US propaganda attacks on China and tapping pro-China lobbies in the US and other countries to turn the tide in the relationship and of anti-China sentiment. Two other prominent Chinese who voiced their views in the Hongkong media similarly sought to play down tensions, raising doubts as to whether they represent the views of Chinese President Xi Jinping or another faction in the leadership.

4. On May 4, Reuters reported that the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security (MoSS), presented an ‘internal’ report to President Xi Jinping and top Chinese leaders in early April. The report warned that Beijing faces a rising wave of hostility in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak that could tip relations with the United States into confrontation. It concluded that global anti-China sentiment is at its highest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and could fuel resistance to China's Belt and Road infrastructure investment projects. Washington could also step up financial and military support for regional allies, making the security situation in Asia more volatile. The report said Beijing consequently faces a wave of anti-China sentiment led by the United States in the aftermath of the pandemic and needs to be prepared in a worst-case scenario for armed confrontation between the two global powers. The paper stated that Washington views China's rise as an economic and national security threat and a challenge to Western democracies. The United States, it added, was aiming to undercut the Chinese Communist Party by undermining public confidence.

5. Separately, an article in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily on May 5, 2020, alluding to major powers utilising the difficult global economic situation for gaining overall strategic advantage, cautioned they could use the economic crisis to cause a recession in China and provoke social unrest. Advocating that financial and military preparedness would have to be commensurate, it warned that an economic crisis could, in turn, cause a political crisis.

6. China's biggest government think-tank, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) on April 24, 2020 published a lengthy 3152-character report in its China Social Science Journal analysing US media attacks against China during the Covid-19 pandemic. Published only in Chinese, the report said this had made it difficult for China to cooperate with other countries and fight the pandemic globally. It identified six main characteristics of US media attacks "slandering and denigrating China" and said China not only needed to clamp down on this propaganda, but prepare itself for future propaganda wars against China during major emergencies. The CASS report recommended six basic focus areas for winning "public opinion battles" in other countries. These are:

- i) Prepare for "attacks" from the U.S. and other media by understanding how foreign media works.
- ii) Establish a coordination mechanism for 24-hour monitoring and responding to US media and foreign public opinion. Involve government media, private media, diplomats, enterprises and think tanks to coordinate quick and effective counter-attacks.
- iii) Use supervision of public opinion to increase trust and reduce doubt. ("Don't cover up, scapegoat, or show partiality in proven shortcomings. some deficiencies in the process of foreign aid and epidemic prevention should be reported to govt depts for improvement".)
- iv) Diversify external communications. Strengthen non-mainstream media, support WeChat, Weibo and Tiktok to counterbalance Twitter, FB and YouTube. Mobilise companies, think tanks, foreign scholars and experts who are "China-friendly" to speak and write articles on foreign platforms.
- v) Improve empathic communication to create an image of objective, fair media. Use statistics e.g. Pew survey showing 65% of Americans think Trump's coronavirus response is slow. "Use foreign audiences' favourite expressions & narrative forms to affect them" especially on social media.
- vi) Strengthen and train human talent for foreign communications. Hire and train people to write Op-Eds in foreign languages. Hire or "borrow" think tank experts and foreign

journalists for China's use, e.g. to edit Chinese state media abroad and help it reach native standards.

7. The third think-tank is the 'private' Beijing-based 'Minzhi International Research Institute' headed by Prof. Zhang Weiwei, a former Chinese Foreign Ministry official who has successively worked as a translator for Li Peng, Wan Li, and Deng Xiaoping. He is best known as an advocate of the 'China Model'. It published an article on US-China relations on April 24 authored by Meng Weizhan, Assistant Researcher at the China Research Institute at Fudan University. Asserting "there is no doubt that we can achieve a great renaissance and may even surpass the United States", the article highlighted that US-China relations are at a "dangerous" juncture and claimed that "Senior Chinese officials are also very clear-headed that they must improve Sino-US relations". The article discussed ways of reducing the anti-China influence in the US.

8. Some of its main points are: (i) "Today's China-US relations are rather dangerous"; (ii) "It is an indisputable fact that no country, including the United States, can stop the development of China today"; (iii) "there is no doubt that we can achieve a great renaissance and may even surpass the United States. However, there is a problem of faster and slower development, and there is a problem of higher and lower living standards of the people"; (iii) "In the view of Americans, in the whole non-Western world, China is most likely to be transformed into a Christian country"; (iv) it is necessary to 'win over' America's leftists to improve Sino-US relations; (v) "In another 20 years, we will have no dependence on the United States. But today, we are dependent on the United States. Many people may not understand how serious the consequences will be for China once the United States immediately makes up its mind to "decouple" from China; (vi) "if we want to improve Sino-US relations, we are unlikely to rely on the American rightists. The rightists are mostly strategists, militarists and realists. Most of the leftists are propagandists, thinkers, liberals and literati. Today the gap of interests between China and the United States is too large, there is no overlap, there are no common strategic interests. If we want to improve relations between the two countries through the American right, it means that we must make concessions on the political system and economic model. This will cost us dearly, discount the interests of the country and put the nation in jeopardy. This is impossible for us to accept. However, it is possible to improve relations between the two countries through the American left.; (vii) Now some people in the United States are warning, "China must be contained immediately, or it will be too late!" (viii) Senior Chinese officials

are very clear-headed that they must improve Sino-US relations. "There is no reason to damage Sino-US relations"; (ix) "Sino-US relations are an overall project, and the essence of bilateral relations does not lie simply in foreign policy. The establishment of an exquisite ideological and strategic system plays a more critical role in safeguarding national interests"; (x) Regardless of who becomes US President, the important thing is to ensure that there is a relatively strong force of "China expertise" in the United States. We can win over the leftists, who do less harm to our national interests; (ix) We must improve our ideological strategy and deal with our opponents more flexibly and cleverly in order to safeguard our own fundamental political system and fundamental economic interests; (ix) Unnecessarily magnifying the panic of Americans about China, will lead to further difficulties for China's development and rise and "is very likely to harm our own fundamental interests."

9. Curious was the interview given by retired PLA Major General Qiao Liang, a known 'hawk' and co-author of the best seller 'Unrestricted Warfare', to Hongkong's Zijing Magazine of the Bahunia Group around this same time. His comments suggested there should be no deadline for achieving Taiwan's reunification with the Mainland, or the 'China Dream', and appeared intended to lower temperatures. It is not known whether his comments were authorised and, if so, by whom. Expressing concern at the growing nationalist sentiment in China urging military action for the forcible reunification of Taiwan with the Mainland, he said in a social media post (May 4) that "nationalism appeared to be driving some proposals being raised in China, and that they would harm the country". He cautioned that while an attempt by the PLA to take Taiwan by force may not prompt Washington to declare war, the US could join forces with allies in the region to use their sea and air advantages to cut off Beijing's maritime lifeline in the South China Sea. Other Western countries may also be convinced to impose sanctions on Beijing that would curb China's economic development. He warned that in event of a war over Taiwan, capital will flood out of China forcing many companies to close and said "This would just be a huge price to pay and it would jeopardise China's goal of national rejuvenation." He advised Beijing to clarify that its top priority was not to take Taiwan back but achieve its long-term goal of "national rejuvenation". He explained "The Taiwan issue is actually a key problem between China and the US, even though we have insisted it is China's domestic issue. In other words, the Taiwan issue cannot be completely resolved unless the rivalry between Beijing and Washington is resolved." Qiao Liang noted in conclusion that the Chinese economy was "still heavily reliant on the US dollar".

10. Similarly curious is the article, also published in the Hongkong media around this time, by Wu Shicun, President of China's state-backed National Institute for South China Sea Studies and Chairman of the board of directors of the China-Southeast Asia Research Centre on the South China Sea. Not widely known is that Wu Shicun has been a member of the CCP since 1983 and presently heads the Hainan Provincial Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the Hainan Provincial People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (PAFFC). Wu Shicun could possibly have come to the notice of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin in June 1989, when he was deputy head of the Party branch within the foreign languages department at Nanjing University and the huge student-led protests were suppressed.

11. Emphasising China's sovereignty and security in the South China Sea, Wu Shicun in his article appeared to hint that China would not precipitate matters in this maritime region. In his article published in the South China Morning Post (May 9), Wu Shicun said that though Covid-19 has dealt a "body blow to the United States, including its military combat capabilities and deployment" and "the virus has been found in at least 150 US military bases and on four aircraft carriers", the US military has nevertheless continued its "relentless pursuit of hegemony in the Western Pacific". It has increased the number and frequency of its flight missions in this region and this year itself conducted four types of military activities in the South China Sea. He observed: "From the US perspective, the South China Sea is indispensable to its hegemony in the Western Pacific. It is a vital artery for US-style sea power, and a handy issue to be manipulated amid China's rise and growing maritime power. From China's perspective, its sovereignty, security and development are all at stake in the South China Sea. The sea not only serves as a natural shield for its national security, but also hosts strategic sea lines of communication. Therefore, the US-China competition in the South China Sea is both strategic and structural. The Chinese are not so naive as to believe the US will ease off its competition with China in the South China Sea amid the pandemic. That is why China has calmly dealt with US operations, both in the air and at sea, amid the viral outbreak." He recommended that "In the face of growing US military provocation during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, China needs to focus on enhancing its capacity to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea" and expand the civilian functions over the South China Sea islands. Suggesting that Beijing's maritime forces adapt to the changing mode of military operations at sea, he said they should pursue maritime cooperation with other littoral states in the South China Sea, build more consensus and speed up negotiations on a code of conduct.

12. Pertinent in the context of retired PLA Major General Qiao Liang and Wu Shicun's observations, is that a number of senior Party cadres and officials in Chinese think-tanks have since mid-2018, in private conversations, blamed Chinese President Xi Jinping's aggressive foreign policy for China's growing international isolation, rapidly deteriorating relations with the US and poor international image. They said that China continues to heavily dependent on the US, its technology and market.

13. The reports do indicate China's heightened concern at the rapid deterioration in US-China relations and Beijing's desire not to further annoy Washington. The interviews in the Hongkong media could, however, suggest the existence of serious differences within the top echelons of China's leadership on ways to de-escalate tension with the US and the re-orientation of China's foreign policy.

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