

China Should Not Provoke the United States

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by Conrad Black



In the immense and multifaceted controversy over the coronavirus pandemic, and in the midst of tumultuous pre-electoral events in the United States, the role of the Chinese government in inflicting this economic and public health disaster on the world has been the subject of comparative restraint.

Were it not for these other preoccupations in this American election year, and expert research confirmed official Chinese complicity, by negligence or malice, in the generation of the pandemic, with the complicity of the World Health Organization, there would be some danger of an intemperate response.

I have no standing to make scientific judgments but my canvass of those more knowledgeable on the subject indicates that it is extremely unlikely that this was a naturally occurring

virus; it seems to have emerged, presumably accidentally, from the viral research center in Wuhan.

It is difficult to put an acceptable face on the conduct of the Chinese government in recognizing the gravity of the problem by isolating Wuhan within China while not curtailing extensive direct air contact between Wuhan and many foreign countries, or even disclosing candidly and promptly the gravity of the problems that occurred. Published Chinese figures about the pandemic in China are obviously fictitious.

Being as positive as reasonably possible, it seems that the Chinese were experimenting with a range of dangerous viruses, and that this one escaped unintentionally, and the highest levels of the Chinese government determined to deny what was happening, thereby assuring the infection of much of the world. If this was deliberate Chinese government policy from the start, it was an act of war; though it could not be responded to with outright hostilities.

China's Fatal Overconfidence

It seems a reasonable surmise that the Chinese had succumbed to the frequent habit of those with aggressive ambitions of believing what they wished to believe. Moreover, they appear to have assumed the United States and the West generally would continue to tolerate immense trade deficits, the endless theft of intellectual property, systematic Chinese violations of international law in international waters, the creeping takeover of underdeveloped countries through a corrupt program of loans, and generally the "Belt and Road" program of expanding Chinese hegemony throughout East and South Asia and Africa.

The traditional Chinese posture, even in the periods of Chinese decline and exploitation by foreign powers, was

disparagement of foreigners and a comprehensive lack of interest in them, serene national self-confidence, and the Chinese leadership seems to have assumed that the West would not respond effectively to any provocation.

There has never in the history of the nation-state been anything like the almost simultaneous bifurcation in radically different directions of two leading world powers about 40 years ago. As the Soviet Union relaxed its dictatorship while maintaining its collectivist economy, China maintained its totalitarian dictatorship but transformed its economy to one of state capitalism, albeit with considerable retention of a command economy. In these last 40 years, all the world has seen the Soviet Union quickly disintegrate and the international Communism that had threatened the West in the Cold War die with it, as China has risen to be the most formidable economic rival the United States has had since before World War I. The leaders of China are over-confident.

Whether the coronavirus pandemic was premeditated or of accidental origin but magnified by malice and negligence, it was a very serious strategic error by China. While there has been considerable Democratic congressional support for President Trump's policy of identifying the Chinese threat—as well as requiring the end of practically unlimited trade deficits, theft of industrial and technological intelligence, misuse of the extensive Chinese presence in American universities, bribing and bullying of American industries with threats of ending access to the Chinese market, and a steadily more assertive foreign policy in the Far East and Africa—before coronavirus there was still a broad consensus including almost all of the Democratic Party that the best policy toward China was President Obama's appeasement of Beijing. This was based on the assumption that China eventually would succumb to the temptations of consumerist democracy and grow into a state of rules-based coexistence

with the West. Lately, even Joe Biden, who opened his campaign with bland assurances that China was no danger to the United States, seems (with the help of the polls) to be outgrowing that delusion.

China shows no signs whatever of seeking vast military conquest as Nazi Germany did, nor of using an ideological basis for attempting to undermine the West in the world and build an alliance on ostensibly Marxist principles as the Soviet Union did. China's advance is traditional Han Chinese nationalism enabled and lubricated by what leaders in Beijing imagine to be an original method of using state capitalism to suborn and dominate resource-rich underdeveloped countries and, by focus and discipline, to out-distance and overawe what they have effortlessly convinced themselves is a flabby and irresolute West led by an erratic and hedonistic America. But underestimating America's determination to maintain its position would be a grave mistake (as Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union learned to their regret).

America Has Many Strong Cards to Play

In cooperation with all of the other aggrieved countries (approximately 120 have demanded to know how the pandemic began), the United States must seek and reach a consensus on the level of China's duplicity in propagating this pandemic. Then it must lead the insertion of a military presence in the international waters around China to ensure that Chinese sovereignty is not imposed upon the freedom of the seas in the Far East.

If the existing tariff replacement agreement is ratified and observed by China, the United States must still rigorously enforce the end of the systematic Chinese technological theft. The United States must end Chinese espionage and propagandistic activities around American universities and encourage its allies to do the same and, if appropriate, roll back the number of student visas issued to the Chinese. It must strictly enforce the policy that already officially exists against the acquisition of American commercial interests that could be harmful to the U.S. national interest and must repatriate the manufacture of everything that is strategic either by its essential nature or because of the extent of its commercial significance.

China must be deterred from abusing the international organizations that it has been allowed to join but whose rules it has not observed, and China's neighbors which resent the People's Republic's overbearing influence must be leagued together in defensive arrangements to resist commercial and political aggression. The example of Myanmar (Burma), is indicative of China's propensity to overplay its hand: the Chinese so over-asserted themselves that the country dispensed with the military regime that had indulged Beijing and effectively threw the Chinese out, bag and baggage.

There is no shortage of Americans, especially in Hollywood and the American media, who are eager to salute China as a super-state exposing the corruption and venality of Trumpian America and urging what amounts to a policy of submission to Chinese leadership. Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of Americans, given a clear policy choice, will reject any such cowardly and shameful course.

The United States is a much richer country than China, with a more motivated ethos, comparatively well-functioning institutions, and the advantages of a free society, an enterprise economy, and serious allies.

The president is right to try to preserve the existing trade arrangements and build on them, and he is right to be thorough in determining how this pandemic was unleashed. He is right to make it clear that Chinese conduct is unacceptable and that America and its allies have the ability to discourage and punish it.

As soon as the political fireworks end and the U.S. president for the next four years is identified, a national and international consensus should be built quickly behind all of these objectives. Everyone accepts that China is a great nation and a great development story, but the West and the United States, in particular, should be submissive to no one.

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