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CHINA AFTER THE PANDEMIC

INSECURITY SPILLS OVER TO CONTRADICTIONARY FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS

China has garnered international goodwill by aiding countries hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. China is in a position to show that it takes its ideal of creating a global community with a shared future seriously. However, the country's other actions undermine its soft-power dissemination efforts.

When news of the outbreak of a viral epidemic in the Chinese province of Hubei reached the world in January, the disease was called “Wuhan pneumonia” at first, and China was blamed for creating a pandemic. As the situation worsened in Europe and the US while China gradually began returning to normal, Chinese actions to curb the pandemic – closing entire cities and forcing people into quarantine, initially criticized as excessively harsh – began to win international praise. While President Donald Trump has continued to talk of a “Chinese virus”, China has garnered goodwill by providing Italy and Spain with medical equipment that was un-

available from their fellow European states. In a message of sympathy sent to the Italians, President Xi Jinping said, according to Xinhua news agency, that mankind is a community of shared future.

“Community of shared future”, more literally translated as “community of common destiny”, is China's new foreign policy slogan, which has even found its way into some United Nations resolutions. Thus far, it has been void of concrete content. The ongoing pandemic has presented China with an invaluable opportunity to show the world what the community means and how China is taking responsibility for its creation. Regrettably,

the Chinese Foreign Ministry has recently started spreading fake news about the origin of the virus, putting the blame for the pandemic on the US. The Chinese edition of *Global Times*, a nationalist tabloid-form offshoot of the *People's Daily*, ran an editorial chastising Sweden for its “irresponsible” decisions regarding the fight against the pandemic. Since several other European countries have been following more or less similar policies, it is clear that the attack was purely political in nature, and related to the icy relations between China and Sweden.

From the point of view of China's soft-power dissemination ef-

forts, it seems that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. The Communist Party of China (CPC) appears to have ordered all relevant organs to act in accordance with China's perceived status as a leading great power. This is also in line with the expectations of the Chinese public, fed by an expansive patriotic education. The relevant organs, however, seem to have different ideas of how this should be accomplished. Such confusion is often a sign of internal insecurity and conflict.

It is easy to understand why there might be anxiety within the Party. Mismanagement during the early stages of the viral outbreak in Hubei Province inspired many Chinese netizens to demand freedom of speech, which was seen as the only way to secure the transparency and efficiency of the administration. There was widespread speculation in the foreign media as to whether this was a "Chernobyl moment" in China. The nervousness has been reflected in the expulsion of several US journalists from China, although the move ostensibly appears to be in response to the new restrictions on Chinese media based in the US.

In order to maintain its unchallenged authority, the Party needs to turn the fight against the epidemic in China into a victory for the Party

and its leadership. This will be no mean feat with the economy taking bad hits and given the uncertain future trajectory of the epidemic, including the possibility of a new wave of infections. Next year is the centennial of the establishment of the CPC, and festivities should have got underway this year with the completion of "moderate prosperity", meaning the doubling of GDP per capita from the 2010 figure. Even in the case of the trade war, it was clear that the goal could not be reached in time, and now the epidemic has pushed it even further off course. The Party is duly confronted with an imminent loss of face.

The Party has delegated all power to Xi Jinping, and hence he has all the responsibility. Over the past couple of years, the criticism against Xi has intensified. He is accused of dispersing China's resources too widely outside of the country, and many critics advocate a return to the foreign policy principle of his predecessors since Deng Xiaoping, namely "keeping a low profile and biding one's time". Xi has been calling for proactive diplomacy instead and, accordingly, China has intensified all efforts to step into the role of a superpower.

While it would not be unprecedented for the CPC to sacrifice its top leader and make him a scape-

goat, in reality Xi is almost irreplaceable. His personality cult makes him a larger-than-life leader, and he has no designated successor candidates. It is also likely that Xi has successfully eliminated a great number of his opponents within the Party. As a consequence, the Party has no alternative other than to tighten its grip both internally within the Party and externally in society. Resorting to a hard line in every respect has usually been the Party's response to challenges. Many Party members seem to count on this and act accordingly in order to secure their own positions. This may explain, for instance, the behaviour of the Chinese Ambassador to Sweden, who has been inflicting untold damage on China's image.

Consequently, the internal insecurity of the CPC is spilling over to domestic as well as foreign politics. Toughened rhetoric and unpredictable reactions can be expected to mark China's external policies and actions in the near future even more than usually. This side effect of the current pandemic is arguably an unavoidable result of the one-party rule. In any case, it does not help China in framing "the community of common destiny" in the intended, positive manner.