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COVID-19: ARE WE HEADING TO A WAR WITHOUT GUNS?

By Taoufik Marrakchi

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Summary

The crisis of the new Coronavirus is exacerbating the tensions between the United States and China, thus foreshadowing a war without guns, in which the stakes are neither territorial nor ideological, but economic. Having adopted a vehement attitude towards China, well before this crisis, the tenant of the White House has brandished the threat of economic sanctions against China and is pushing towards its isolation on the international scene in order to contain its influence. In contradiction with Deng Xiao Ping's famous maxim "Hide your strength and bide your time," Xi Jinping's China claims to be a key player on the world chessboard whose quest for supremacy, with its variable geometry, is less and less camouflaged.

In this war, the battlefield is likely to witness the confrontation of two antagonistic strategic alliances: on the one hand, the transatlantic alliance, led by the United States and supported by other allied countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the Gulf States and, on the other hand, a more discreet coalition, but no less present, would be composed of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and all the states, formerly satellites of Russia, nowadays China's affiliates, in central and south-east Asia.

What are the stakes, the actors and the factors of this war? What are the objectives and strategies adopted by each coalition? What is the impact of this confrontation on the Chinese economy and on the future of its political model? This Policy Brief aims precisely to shed light on these questions.

If we fly over our planet, we can see the presence of a strange thick fog, that of fear and dismay caused by a tiny living organism invisible to the naked eye: the new Coronavirus. Biologists and epidemiologists keep contradicting each other about its origin: is it the offshoot of Mother Nature or the result of laboratory manipulation? Are its mutations natural or programmed? Are its effects ephemeral or long-lasting? Does it have a cure, a vaccine, or do we have to live with it?

In this climate of fear and anxiety, a total blackout has set in and human mistrust has naturally reappeared, stirred up by the most skeptical among us. The persistent conspiracy theory is slowly but surely making its way in front of the lack of transparent information about the origin of the Coronavirus.¹ Even rational minds, fed by the media of all sides, have reversed their position and adhered to alarmist theories. What if it were really biological warfare waged by China against the West to bring it down to its knees? At the same time, the West is trying as best it can to torpedo the rise of the Middle Kingdom.

1. Asked about the origin of the Coronavirus by the Financial Times, the French President said: «There are obviously things that have happened that we don't know ».

The mess created by this devious but exterminating virus seems to be just the beginning of a long, dark tunnel. Beyond the deaths reported throughout the world, it is a political, economic, social and psychological coma, which we are witnessing and which will undoubtedly leave deep scars on populations and international relations. The situation that is about to emerge is such that it is compared by some observers to the Great Depression of 1929, or even worse.²

Taken by surprise, governments no longer know where they stand. Their statements are followed by counter-declarations, their decisions are questioned. Internal disputes within the body politic are back on the agenda and international cooperation has gone bankrupt. In the heat of the moment, some Western governments openly accuse China of being guilty of the global disaster and cast discredit on its ability to contain the spread of the virus on its territory. More and more voices are being raised calling for an international investigation on the Chinese soil to determine the origin of the virus. The tenant of the White House, very vocal towards Beijing long before the crisis, is threatening this country with economic sanctions and demanding heavy compensation; the most radical of its Republican supporters³ are pressing for China's isolation on the international scene. Once the fog lifts, other countries that have paid a heavy price in this health crisis will certainly follow the lead of the United States.

While it is hard to believe that China would easily bow to Western injunctions, a fierce battle is expected that would plunge the two belligerents into a war without guns. A war in which the dividing lines would not be as sharp as in the Cold War, because their converging economic systems have made them partners-opponents. A war in which alliances would be redesigned and in which mistrust, espionage and dirty tricks would be the rule. In any case, a conventional war seems far from being on the agenda, the basic issue being neither territorial nor ideological, but economic. This silent, if not invisible, war would break out in four areas: political, economic, technological and psychological. The initiative for the first attack would come from the Western camp, a camp that has become aware that its hegemony is at stake in front of the Chinese dragon that has become increasingly aggressive, forcing international recognition and whose quest for supremacy is less and less masked.

Towards the creation of two antagonistic strategic alliances

In this war, the political battlefield would witness the confrontation of two alliances. The first would be the regenerated transatlantic alliance, which would have much to gain from a new, obvious enemy, deploy new strategies and commit enormous financial resources.

In order to give it the character of a coalition, it would be supported by other US allies, such as Australia, New Zealand and the Gulf countries, which would show a similar level of adherence to the fight against terrorism as has been seen in the aftermath of 11 September. The watchword this time would be the defense of human survival against the

2. "The worst economic consequences since the Great Depression of 1929". This was the gloomy prognosis made by Kristalina Georgieva, Director General of the IMF, regarding the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the world economy, in her speech before the Spring Meetings.

3. Republican Senator Tom Cotton is the leading conservative advocate of the Chinese conspiracy theory.

willful attempts of a country deliberately seeking to create global chaos in order to rule unchallenged.

This transatlantic alliance would be faced with a more discreet but no less present coalition, which would be composed of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and all the formerly satellite states of Russia, now aligned with China, in central and south-east Asia. A more discreet coalition, firstly, because Russia would want to continue to play a double game to preserve its economic and trade relations with Europe, while acting as a partner capable of defusing the most acute crises. More discreet, secondly, because Iran would continue to hope to renegotiate the nuclear agreement and seek the lifting of economic sanctions, which could very well lead to riots that could bring down the Islamic revolution. More discreet, finally, because North Korea would continue to carry out its stalling maneuver vis-à-vis the United States and its neighboring countries in order to bring its ambitious nuclear and ballistic weapons program to a successful conclusion, which is the guarantee of its survival.

The battlefields of this political confrontation would be numerous. Of course, the first of them would be none other than the UN Security Council, which would see the emergence of ad hoc collusion between China and Russia to exercise the right of veto against resolutions threatening their vital interests and those of their allies, as well as those serving the interests of the members of the transatlantic alliance. In accordance with the saying that « the best form of defense is attack », China, now a maritime power with overall projection capabilities and advanced bases in Pakistan (Gwadar) and Djibouti (Dorale), would emerge from its legendary political silence to claim an active role in international relations, through the deployment of its troops outside its territory, taking part in the management of regional crises and conflicts and thus influencing geopolitical decisions.⁴ On the other hand, and in view of the obvious failure of the West to establish an efficient system of cooperation to combat the Covid-19, China would try to establish bilateral political dialogues based on the win-win principle in order to create more division within Atlantic cohesion.

For its part, the Western camp would try to attack China's vital interests in order to weaken it permanently. The first objective, likely to be attacked and which would make Beijing angry, is none other than Taiwan with the refusal to recognize China's sovereignty over this territory whose population is predominantly Chinese. Indeed, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has just severely criticized the U.S. Mission to the UN, which provided clear support for Taipei to join the World Health Organization (WHO) in the fight against Covid-19.⁵ By enacting the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act on 26 March 2020 to support all initiatives aimed at integrating this country into international bodies, the United States intends, more than ever before, to make China's territorial integrity a first-choice political target.

The second major issue at stake in this war is the Asia-Pacific region, where China has already gained ground politically, economically and militarily. Although President Trump often denigrates Obama's decisions and initiatives,⁶ he could instill new life into

4. China is now a maritime power with global projection capabilities and advanced bases in Pakistan (Gwadar) and Djibouti (Dorale).

5. Tweet from the US Mission to the UN to Taipei, dated 1 May 2020.

6. Trump wants to replace the Obamacare which benefits 20 million Americans and has terminated the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement.

the Asia-Pacific pivot strategy⁷ to encircle and contain China in order to reduce its growing influence in East Asia. Far from being limited to simply reaffirming the strategic partnership of the United States with its traditional Asian allies, this strategy should lead to the formation of an aggressive alliance to outpace China. The kick-off point for this strategy would be the renegotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), which accounts for more than 40% of world GDP and which was called into question by Trump in 2017 after he came to power. Such a renegotiated agreement would certainly have to compete with the Asia-Pacific Free Trade Agreement, concluded by Xi Jinping, immediately after this strategic mistake by Trump, which led his Asian partners, who felt abandoned, even betrayed, to throw themselves into China's arms.

Another aspect of the Chinese political system that could be attacked by the United States and its allies is related to human rights. Based on the reports of influential international organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, it would be easy to put China on the spot because of its excessive repression of political opposition; censorship of the mass media, particularly the internet and social networks; restrictions on the freedom of expression, association and worship; arbitrary detention; forced disappearance; and limitations on freedom of movement through mass surveillance by means of facial recognition technology. In this regard, and on the occasion of the presentation of the State Department's annual report on human rights, Mike Pompeo denounced, in March 2020, the Chinese policy in the region of Xinjiang (north-west), where hundreds of thousands of Muslims are reportedly detained in the name of the fight against terrorism. This thorn in the side of the Communist Party is over-exploited in order to put pressure on and discredit the regime internationally and bring it to make political concessions. Chinese leaders guilty of human rights violations could be punished and even be subject to arrest warrants from international judicial bodies.

Finally, the coalition led by the United States would use all its political and military weight to dissuade countries, especially emerging or developing countries, from entering into partnerships or signing trade agreements with China. This « containment » strategy aims to isolate China politically and stifle it economically by depriving it of outlets for its manufactured products and, above all, by depriving it of the raw material resources necessary for its economy. Nevertheless, such an isolation maneuver would be very costly for the transatlantic alliance, since it would require the release of huge financial resources to replace Chinese investments. The alliance would also have to be less demanding in terms of democratic standards than it used to be in its political and economic relations with developing countries accustomed to a China that considers political and economic matters as two separate spheres and refrains from interfering in the internal affairs of states.

From trade conflict to economic war

Some believed that President Trump's trade offensive against China would end with an increase in customs duties on Chinese exports to the United States. But this battle, which resulted in a US victory through the signing of a first trade agreement in January 2020 to reduce its trade deficit,⁸ seems to be the first battle in a long-term war, which

7. Obama's strategy to strengthen the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region and counter China's growing influence.

8. China has committed to purchase an additional \$200 billion worth of US products over the next two years, according to the trade agreement.

is becoming clearer every day, signaling the end of the already fragile and distrustful cooperation between the two powers. The decision to put China's telecommunications flagship (Huawei) on the list of companies with which U.S. economic operators cannot do business without a government license augurs well for the outbreak of a conflict that would not be limited to trade alone but would extend to all sectors of the Chinese economy.

Apparently, for the Americans, the Coronavirus pandemic has come at the right time to give legitimacy to their attacks on China and to rally to their cause the countries that have suffered the greatest economic losses caused by the virus. Throughout the White House statements, the number of accusations has only increased to give rise to charges accusing China of crimes against mankind for knowingly or negligently releasing the virus and, in any case, for deliberately concealing crucial information about its proliferation.

Such an accusation suggests that the scenario, developed in 2002 by George Bush Jr., would be repeated. It should be recalled that the White House tenant at that time was bluntly claiming to international opinion that he had irrefutable evidence of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, which justified the invasion of that country in 2003. This time too, the « You have to take my word for granted » strategy seems to be paying off and augurs well for a crusade against China, a crusade that will primarily seek to deconstruct its supply, production and distribution chains. The aim would be to confine China to the status of an emerging country with limited influence in the East Asian region.

To be successful, this containment strategy should be based on two major pillars: the first consists of a drastic reduction in the investments made in China by Western multinationals and their networks of subcontractors, accompanied by a relocation of manufacturing to other developing or emerging countries benefiting from political stability, offering comparative advantages in terms of cost and technical skills of the workforce, with efficient infrastructures and an effective logistics system.

The second pillar, as important as the first, would be to prohibit the transfer of technology to China that would result in a loss competitiveness and market share in the medium and long term. Indeed, the Americans and Europeans are accusing China of forcing foreign companies seeking to invest on its territory to transfer their technology to it and to grant it property rights, which will make it the sole owner of products made in China. Faced with President Trump's determination to no longer let China benefit illegally from American innovations,⁹ the Chinese government seems to have realized that the time for industrial copy-and-paste is over. Indeed, while visiting China's Silicon-Valley (Zhongguancun), Xi Jinping called for independent innovation by Chinese engineers to create high-tech products instead of just assembling them.

However, it should be mentioned that the Chinese debt is a sword of Damocles hanging over the head of the United States. As such, China was holding, at the end of January 2020, 1170 billion dollars in treasury bonds, making it the first creditor of the United States¹⁰. Will China use it if it feels that the noose is tightening around it? All it would have

9. According to the US government, China was the scene of 80% of intellectual property theft reported by US companies in 2013. Source: <https://startupbrics.com/protection-propriete-intellectuelle-chine-entretien-stephane-grand/>

10. Some American politicians are suggesting to their government to interrupt the repayment of its debt held by China. But according to Dong Dengxin, Director of the Institute of Finance and Securities at Wuhan University of

to do is sell off its stock of US government debt to cause borrowing rates to rise, which will systematically curb US economic growth. Nevertheless, for many economists,¹¹ it is not so certain that China will take action and divest itself of these treasury bills on a massive scale because it could do more damage to its economy than to that of the United States because this would initially lead to a rapid rise in US rates which, following a wind of panic in the market, would lead to a loss in value of the securities still held by the Chinese. In fact, China would think twice before using this double-edged deterrent weapon, which is highly likely to backfire on it, particularly by destabilizing the Yuan to the detriment of its foreign trade., China could certainly stop investing in US debt and turn to tangible assets,¹² but in reality China has no other alternative to US borrowing, as it is by far the largest bond market, especially since China's holdings of US debt are linked to Beijing's trade surplus with Washington, for which they are the counterpart.

And it is precisely thanks to its trade surplus that China today finances its global expansionism, which bears a mythical name, symbolizing the majesty of the Middle Kingdom: the « New Silk Road » or « Belt and Road Initiative » (BRI). This flagship project of Xi Jinping has several objectives. First, to ensure new outlets for its factories, particularly in Europe, secondly, to practice debt diplomacy with a view to subjugating the countries through which it goes; and thirdly, to extend its geostrategic influence by gradually establishing, as in Djibouti, military bases at strategic crossings and communication routes to provide a security cordon to ensure the protection of its supplies and trade. It would not be surprising if, tomorrow, China were to divide the world into military command zones along the lines of the six US regional commands.¹³

However, the complete reversal of certain countries that have understood the Chinese strategy may be in favor of the United States and its allies which see it as the starting point of an organized uprising to challenge this strategic project of the “New Silk Road”, a project that continues to bleed Chinese banks dry. One of these countries is Pakistan, whose Prime Minister, Imran Khan, succeeded in renegotiating the economic corridor project, linking the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea to Kashgar in western China, believing that this project was largely financed with very heavy loans from Beijing, which will, after all, be the biggest beneficiary of the corridor.

Malaysia, through its Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, has also won its case by renegotiating the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) agreement which crosses the Malaysian peninsula from Kota Baru in the East to the Port of Klang on the Straits of Malacca, thus giving China access to a strategic node through which 90% of the hydrocarbons of the States bordering the South China Sea transit. Unlike these two countries, it seems that the United States and Europe would find it difficult to convince Italy, which has become the gateway to Europe on the “New Silk Road”, to abandon its cooperation with China, which was the first country to come to its aid in the midst of the pandemic.

Science and Technology: « The United States may harm itself if it chooses to interrupt the repayment of its foreign debt, as this measure would undermine the credibility of the US dollar ».

11. Economist Denis Ferrand in an interview given on 18 July 2019 on the Atlantico news site.

12. Proposal by Fan Gang, member of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Chinese Central Bank, reported on the Nouvelle Tribune Website.

13. The United States has six military commands to ensure its global military security: AFRICOM (Africa), CENTCOM (Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia), EUCOM (Europe), PACOM (Southeast Asia-Pacific), SOUTHCOM (Central America – South America and the Caribbean) and NORTHCOM (USA).

The Chinese model in the eye of the storm

The Chinese social model, based on two opposed systems: a communist political system and a market economy, is an anachronistic model. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which dominates all areas of life in the country, is perfectly aware that the sustainability of its model, initiated in 1979 by Deng Xiaoping, is due essentially to the country's economic boom, which has made a very strong contribution to improving the Chinese people's standard of living. If this standard of living were to fall, for lack of economic growth, the anachronism of the Chinese model and the authoritarianism of its Party would be challenged. From then on, the tacit contract between the State-Party and the population (decent life against submission) will become null and void and the regime will have big problems to deal with. In other words, Trump's current offensive against China is clearly intended to kill two birds with one stone: weaken China's economy and amplify the discord within the political apparatus which could, in the long term, shift, why not, from a single party to a multiparty system respectful of universal democratic values.

The trade conflict between China and the United States has not only heightened tensions within the Chinese political class, which is no longer as united as it was in the past. There is now a liberal current among the Chinese elite which advocates a gradual evolution of China towards a system similar to that of the West, even if it means incurring the wrath of those who support orthodoxy. In fact, Trump's offensive has put the Chinese regime in such turmoil that some tongues have been unleashed pointing to China's triumphalist posture and its eagerness to give birth to the "Chinese Dream"¹⁴ ahead of schedule, and which has significantly deviated from the path laid out by the father of the country's economic opening, Deng Xiaoping, who advocated ostentatious modesty on the part of China in its international relations¹⁵. Indeed, with his economic power, Xi Jinping no longer hesitates to refer explicitly to the superiority of socialism over capitalism. According to China expert Alice Ekman,¹⁶ the ultimate goal of the Chinese President, which he presented to the members of the CCP Central Committee in 2013, is the victory of socialism over capitalism and the export of the communist ideal to all mankind.¹⁷

Realizing that it is in a real deadlock in front of the United States, which would deploy all its energy to hold it accountable for the global spread of the Coronavirus, the CCP is stalling, making concessions and even trying to seduce the rest of the world in the hope that President Trump would not run for a second term. But China is already present in the US presidential campaign, which should be in full swing after the state of health emergency is lifted. The candidate who would have demonized China the most and promised the most retaliatory measures against it would have the best chance of winning. If Trump won, then China would "tremble" because, surprisingly enough, Trump always keeps his election promises.

Two major events are likely to give a flavor of this war without guns. The first is the

14. The Chinese dream is a political slogan launched by Xi Jinping on 14 March 2013]. It is a tradition among Chinese leaders to sum up in a striking formula the direction they intend to give to the policy they will pursue during their term of office. This is expressed in various contexts, speeches, songs and posters, echoes the "American Dream" from which it seems to be inspired.

15. Den Xiaoping very often recommended to his successors the formula « Hide your talents and bide your time ». A formula attributed to an emperor of the Tang dynasty (7th-10th century).

16. Interview with Alice Ekman on 17 May 2020: « What does the COVID-19 crisis tell us about China and the World? ».

17. This particular vision of history draws its roots in the theses of Marx (1818-1883)

enacting by the US Senate on 21 May 2020 of a law requiring foreign companies listed on the US stock exchange to prove that they are not controlled by a foreign government. Chinese companies are, of course, the first to be covered by this legal norm. The second event is the shocking statement of the Chinese Foreign Minister on 24 May 2020, who simply raised the specter of a new Cold War with the United States if they did not stop attacking and defaming China because of the crisis linked to the new Coronavirus.¹⁸

The war without guns promises to become more and more intense in a deafening silence. Above all, let us not make the mistake of underestimating the fighting spirit of a China which seems to be increasingly favoring, in its counter-attacks, the frontal strategy of the Prussian Clausewitz rather than the cunning strategy of the Chinese Sun Tzu.¹⁹

18. Source: https://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20200524_01477230/chine-et-etats-unis-au-bord-d-une-nouvelle-guerre-froide-avertit-pekín

19. Von Clausewitz is an 18th century Prussian general and theorist, author of a major treatise on military strategy entitled: On War. Sun Tzu is a Chinese general from the 6th century BC, author of the oldest known work of military strategy: The Art of War.

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About the **Policy Center for the New South**

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The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank tasked with the mission of contributing to the improvement of international, economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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