

THE FACADE CRACKS FOR CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The Spring Festival is when the Chinese are at their sprightly best. The spectacular dragon and lion dances, music performances, and people sending out New Year greetings create a festive air. This year, however, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted the revelry, forcing the government to order citizens to be sequestered in their homes. But in the aftermath of the world grappling with the contagion, China seemed to embody Winston Churchill's saying: never let a good crisis go to waste.

Hong Kong became one of the most significant arenas where the Communist Party of China came down with full might. The special administration region, which enjoys autonomy, had been on the boil since June 2019 over a legislation (which was later scrapped) that would allow the local government to extradite criminals to the mainland. Demonstrators had resorted to vandalism over the law, an act that the Communist Party of China saw as a challenge to its writ. The island had witnessed protests earlier in 2014, when demonstrators lay siege to parts of the island seeking reforms to the electoral process. This time round, the reprisals were swift and unflinching. On June 30, 2020, minutes before the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China by the British, China's legislature approved a new national security law for Hong Kong. While critics contend that the law essentially curbs dissent and civil liberties, China insists it will help restoration of stability. Beijing backed up its efforts to bring to heel a recalcitrant opposition by passing another law that empowers the government to expel lawmakers in Hong Kong's Legislative Council without recourse to judicial process. Following this, four legislators were disqualified over national security grounds, and the remaining Opposition resigned in protest.

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Beyond Hong Kong, China also took on Taiwan, challenged India along the Himalayan frontier, escalated tensions in the South and East China Seas, bullied European nations, and flexed its trade muscles vis-à-vis Australia. At a time when global multilateralism has been facing serious challenges, China's manipulation of institutions like the World Health Organization has led to an even greater sense of disenchantment with the multilateral order.

In the domestic sphere, too, there has been a clean-up even among the Party's own ranks. Cai Xia, a former professor at the Communist Party's Central Party School that grooms its top leadership, was expelled in August for calling President Xi Jinping a 'mafia boss'. Ms. Cai, who has been a champion of political reform, is living abroad. Another comrade, Ren Zhiqiang, who obliquely criticised Mr. Xi's management of the pandemic, received an 18-year jail sentence on bribery charges. Mr. Ren's father had served as one of Mao Zedong's vice-ministers; Ms. Cai's parents had taken part in the 1949 Communist Revolution. Financial czar Jack Ma was left red-faced after his Ant Group's \$37 billion IPO was grounded ahead of its debut in November. China's second-richest man had earlier slammed financial regulators at a conclave of bankers, and an expose in 2017 of a politburo member's daughter in a newspaper controlled by Mr. Jack had not gone down well. Red 'Princelings' now know that the Communist Party is in no mood to brook any dissent. Businessmen may be the economy's stars, but the message that the Party is the ship's captain, is clear.

For nearly four decades, China pursued an exports-led growth strategy called 'international circulation', entrenching itself into production networks. The economy is now charting a new course due to factors like bleak economic outlook of nations reeling from the pandemic, the U.S.

imposing restrictions against Chinese technology firms, and its 'decoupling' push. Under the new strategy, China will make domestic consumption a bigger engine of growth, while also relying on international circulation. Mr. Xi announced at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit this year that the new policy will come into effect from 2021.

Comment | [Behind China's wolf warrior diplomacy](#)

During the Bund Summit, a conclave of regulators and bankers held in Shanghai, China signalled that it will improve financial ties with the world. The China Securities Regulatory Commission is building more channels for investors based abroad to put their money into capital markets on the mainland. The fine print of how China plans to execute the shift from an export-led growth strategy to bolstering its domestic market will become clearer once the 14th five-year plan is approved by its legislature in early 2021.

Cinema is a reflection of society — every nation likes to see its imagined persona on screen. The 'Wolf Warrior' series, in which the Chinese assume the onerous responsibility of "saving the world", has undercurrents of the nation's exceptionalism. These movies seem to be having an impact on an unlikely quarter — China's diplomatic corps. Mr. Xi has repeatedly highlighted the need for developing a "fighting spirit" to breach the hurdles facing China. On a state visit to Nepal, Mr. Xi warned that a bid to divide China would end in "smashed bodies and bones ground to powder". This aggressive posturing is far removed from Deng Xiaoping's counsel to 'keep a low profile'. Instead of building goodwill, China's envoys used their official social media handles to push a theory that American military was the cause of COVID-19, and trolled Australia over alleged war crimes committed by its elite soldiers fighting in Afghanistan. Quizzed about the verbal bellicosity of its representatives abroad, Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that they would certainly push back against insults to national honour.

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The Trump Administration also took on China frontally, both bilaterally and in concert with other nations, even as the State Department released a comprehensive report which is being described as a potential blueprint for the U.S.'s response to China's rise as an authoritarian superpower. By escalating a tariff war with China, U.S. President Donald Trump underscored the need for a potential economic decoupling of the world's two major economies. During his election campaign, President-elect Joe Biden, too, took a hard line vis-à-vis China, and it is unlikely that his approach towards China would radically alter the trajectory of America's China policy. And the more pushback Mr. Xi faces globally, the more aggressive his domestic and foreign policy agenda is likely to become.

The muzzling of anti-establishment voices in Hong Kong, 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, and an aggressive pursuit of national interests have hurt China's image. A survey by the Pew Research Center across 14 nations shows that a majority of the respondents have an unfavourable opinion of China. Today's China aspires to be a global power but bristles at criticism, domestic or foreign. Many in China may see this year as one in which the country came into its own as a power dictating the global agenda, but for many around the world, this is also the year when China's vulnerabilities, as well the challenges it poses to the global order, became all too apparent.

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