



PERSPECTIVES

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Coronavirus Could Revolutionize America's China Policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many argue that the coronavirus pandemic will ultimately benefit China more than the rest of the world, especially the US. After all, America is now the worst-hit country on earth in terms of human casualties. But the crisis could in fact help the US reorganize its geopolitical thinking toward the People's Republic, resulting in a radical break in which Washington's political and economic elites are newly unified against a rising Beijing.

Analyses abound on which state or region will benefit the most from the coronavirus crisis. Many believe it will be China, which has (or says it has) sustained many fewer human and economic losses than the US and western European countries. The US and Europe, meanwhile, are experiencing their deepest crises since WWII.

A battle of narratives has arisen on who is to blame for what has happened to the global and national economies. These narratives warrant their own analysis. Suffice it to say here, however, that the pandemic will [accentuate the divide](#) between the West (especially the US) and China.

Though Beijing might well succeed at portraying itself as highly efficient in combating the virus, it could suffer an unexpected consequence: a unifying of the American political and business elites against it.

This process was already in place well before the pandemic struck. Indeed, it can be argued that it predated the rise of Donald Trump. US leaders have been gradually shifting American geopolitical attention away from the Middle East and toward China and Southeast Asia for years. Both the Obama and the Trump administrations made significant moves toward this end.

Still, there has not been a conclusive accord within the American political elite on what kind of threat China poses to US geopolitical interests. The US's deep economic interconnectedness with China has complicated reaching a policy consensus on this question.

Another no less significant factor in the seeming US indecisiveness toward China is the very nature of the US government. It is a huge bureaucratic apparatus with numerous agencies, each with its own vision, and those visions often clash. Contrary to autocratic states where divisions are not seen and decisions are taken without consulting the wider public and often without economic considerations, the democratic US traditionally needs much longer to adjust to new geopolitical realities. This can take years.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the US entered the world stage as a major geopolitical player, the country faced two major rivals: Japan before WWII and the Soviet Union, a rivalry that persisted from 1945-46 through the late 1980s. Analysis of US foreign policy during those periods shows how slowly and at times clumsily Washington came to realize the fundamental nature of the threat Tokyo and Moscow posed to American interests.

These cases show an interesting pattern in US foreign policy. To form a definitive foreign policy stance—that is, to cast a foreign state as an unequivocal geopolitical enemy—the US usually had to experience a deep geopolitical shock that would consolidate its vision of the rival. Take Japan. It took the attack on Pearl Harbor in late 1941 to shake the US political elite out of the last vestiges of isolationism and indecisiveness to view Tokyo as a direct geopolitical threat. The US needed a decade, from 1931 when the Japanese attacked China to the Pearl Harbor strike of 1941, to grasp the extent to which Tokyo's ambitions were fundamentally opposed to American ambitions.

Something similar occurred with the Soviet Union. It took Washington many years to fully comprehend the extent of Soviet opposition to the US. America's peculiar indecisiveness in the later stages of WWII and in its immediate aftermath made it lose precious time that would otherwise have enabled the western world to be better prepared to counter Soviet geopolitical ambitions across Eurasia. The US foreign policy readjustment lasted until the war in Korea, which showed American resolve in thwarting communist ambitions.

The coronavirus, which has hit the US more severely than any other country in the world, could well serve as a defining moment for American foreign policy for the rest of this decade and into the 2030s. The US political elite will

likely become more focused on China and competition with Beijing will become more pronounced. The economic and human losses in the US are of a magnitude that American policymakers will need to explain them to the broader public. Those in the top leadership who were ambivalent, as well as America's allies around the world, will be more inclined to cast China as a competitor and even an enemy.

It is likely that major attempts from the American side will be made to produce a China strategy. This will involve reinvigorating the US military presence among its allies across the Indo-Pacific. India, Japan, and South Korea will play a larger role in Washington's calculus.

There is simply no alternative to this policy as China's military and economic power will not only not dissipate but will increase in the coming decade. And this is not only about American military posturing. Major steps will have to be taken inside the US to bolster innovation, grow the economy, and coordinate among various structures of power.

There will be problems. As the shock of the Pearl Harbor attack and the astoundingly gruesome policies of Stalin in post-1945 eastern Europe helped the US reorganize its economic and military thinking to counter Japan and the Soviet Union, respectively, a reorganization of the entire US state machine to counter China might take time, from months to a few years. Moreover, with Japan and the Soviets, it was easier for the Americans to make a policy shift as those countries were interconnected economically. With the Chinese it is a different story. China and the US engage in trade on a massive scale. Though readjustment of the entire US state apparatus will likely accelerate to produce a viable "China strategy," it will take time to convince the American business community to withdraw from China.

The pandemic will likely sharpen anti-China rhetoric in the US. More than that, US losses should help Washington streamline its China policy. Success is not guaranteed. Imperial Japan and the Soviets had crucial deficiencies the US was able to exploit, and the US will have to identify China's weaknesses. It has not done this very successfully up to this point, but the coronavirus should serve as the kind of crisis that prompts a redefinition of the country's foreign policy by causing political and business elites to reach a common vision about how to combat a geopolitical rival. The pandemic thus has the potential to revolutionize Washington's China policy.

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