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The CCP Politburo Holds Its First Collective Study Session for 2020

By John Dotson

Introduction

On May 29, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo held its first “collective study” (集体学习, *jiti xuexi*) session for the year 2020. It is unusual that the first of these events took place only near the mid-point of the year: in recent years, these Politburo political study sessions have been convened either monthly or on alternate months, with an average occurrence of 8 times per year. [1] Throughout the early months of 2020, the political leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been focused upon the COVID-19 crisis and its attendant problems—which have included a worsening of the country’s economic problems, and the delay of the “Two Sessions” (the annual convening of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) from the usual timeframe of early March to late May ([China Brief](#),

May 26; [China Brief](#), May 29). The delay of the first of the Politburo's study sessions until the end of May is likely a further indication of the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis has absorbed the attention of the senior CCP leadership.

Politburo study sessions are publicized under an overarching official theme: for example, in the previous designated Politburo study session (held on November 29 of last year), the official theme was "Building the Capacity of Our Country's Emergency Management System" (我国应急管理体系和能力建设, *Woguo Yingji Guanli Tixi he Nengli Jianshe*) ([Gongchandang Wang](#), ongoing). In 2019, one theme was so important that it was actually the subject of two separate Politburo study sessions: "Don't Forget [Our] Original Purpose and Firmly Remember the Mission" (不忘初心, 牢记使命 / *Wang Chuxin, Laoji Shiming*), a slogan unveiled in summer 2019 that has been closely associated with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's drive for reinforced ideological orthodoxy within the ruling party ([China Brief](#), July 31, 2019). The first meeting to feature this theme was a study session on June 24 (see *chart below*); the second was the end-of-year Politburo "democratic life meeting" convened on December 26-27 ([China Brief](#), January 29). [2]



Image: The CCP Politburo conducted a collective study session in January 2019 at the headquarters of People's Daily, focused on the theme "The Age of Comprehensive Media and the Development of Media Fusion." (Source: [Xinhua](#), January 25, 2019)

Politburo collective study sessions in recent years have been unabashedly connected to the cult of personality surrounding Xi Jinping, and are part of a broader propaganda effort to portray Xi as a policy expert and great ideological thinker. Official commentary on these meetings always emphasizes Xi's authoritative position, invariably stating that the senior leader "presided over... the collective study and delivered an important speech" (主持...集体学习并发表重要讲话, *zhuchi... jiti xuexi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua*). [3] Official summaries of these meetings begin nearly every paragraph with one of two stock phrases: either "Xi Jinping emphasized that..." (习近平强调, *Xi Jinping qiangdiao*), or "Xi Jinping pointed out that..." (习近平指出, *Xi Jinping zhichu*) ([Xuexi Qiangguo](#), May 29).

CCP Politburo "Collective Study" Sessions Convened in 2019		
Date	Theme (English)	Theme (Chinese)
January 25	"The Age of Comprehensive Media and the Development of Media Fusion"	全媒体时代和媒体融合发展 (<i>Quan Meiti Shidai he Meiti Ronghe Fazhan</i>)
February 22	"Perfecting Financial Services, Guarding Against Financial Risks"	完善金融服务、防范金融风险 (<i>Wanshan Jinrong Fuwu, Fangfan Jinrong Fengxian</i>)
April 19	"The Historical Significance and Contemporary Value of the May Fourth Movement"	五四运动的历史意义和时代价值 (<i>Wu-Si Yundong de Lishi Yiyi he Shidai Jiazhi</i>)
June 24	"Don't Forget [Our] Original Purpose and Firmly Remember the Mission, Advancing the Self-Revolution"	牢记初心使命，推进自我革命 (<i>Laoji Chuxin Shiming, Tuijin Ziwo Geming</i>)
July 30	"Advancing Military Policy System Reform"	推进军事政策制度改革 (<i>Tuijin Junshi Zhengce Zhidu Gaige</i>)
September 24	"The Formation and Development of New China's National System and Legal System"	新中国国家制度和法律制度的形成和发展 (<i>Xin Zhongguo Guojia Zhidu he Falu Zhidu de Xingcheng he Fazhan</i>)
October 24	"Current Conditions and Trends in the Development of Blockchain Technology"	区块链技术发展现状和趋势 (<i>Qukuailian Jishu Fazhan Xianzhuang he Qu</i>)
November 29	"Building the Capacity of Our Country's Emergency Management System"	我国应急管理体系和能力建设 (<i>Woguo Yingji Guanli Tixi he Nengli Jianshe</i>)

(Source: Compiled by the author, from [Xuexi Qiangguo](#))

Themes from the May 29 Politburo Meeting

The official central theme of the May 29 Politburo study session was "Practically Implement the Civil Code" (切实实施民法典, *Qieshi Shishi Minfadian*), stressing the message that more rigorous application of civil law would improve the ability of party and state organs to "better safeguard the people's lawful rights and interests according to law" (依法更好保障人民合法权益, *yifa genghao baozhang renmin hefa quanyi*) ([Xuexi Qiangguo](#), May 29). Much of the official commentary on the session represented a verbose recitation of slogans, rather than a substantive summary of any concrete initiatives under consideration by the Politburo. However, in broad terms, three general themes may be gleaned from the official summary:

The role of civil law in improving the CCP's capacity for effective governance. The phrase “administering the country according to law” (依法治国, *yifa zhiguo*) featured prominently in coverage of the May 29 meeting. This has long been a significant slogan in CCP discourse, but it is one that has achieved particular prominence under Xi. Per the official summary, more effective application of civil law will “raise the importance of using the civil code to uphold the people's rights, resolve contradictions and disputes, and promote our capacity [to uphold] standards for social harmony and stability” ([Xuexi Qiangguo](#), May 29).

Employing the civil law for stricter social control. In conjunction with the theme of more effective governance, in the official account Xi was depicted as calling for the CCP to more strictly apply laws and regulations in order to achieve more efficient social control. Xi reportedly called for stricter “standards in administering permits, administering punishments, administering coercive [actions], administering tax collection, administering the collection of fees, administering inspections, administering rulings, [and] raising up [our] administrative capacity... According to law, deal severely with behaviors and officials that violate the lawful rights of the masses” ([Xuexi Qiangguo](#), May 29).

Touting civil law protections to provide economic reassurance to commercial enterprises. Facing tri-fold economic pressures from the U.S.-China “trade war,” the potential decoupling of foreign businesses from China, and the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has taken recent steps to send a message of reassurance to foreign firms operating or investing in China ([Xinhua](#), May 21; [NPC Work Report](#), May 25). Commentary on the May 29 Politburo session asserted that “the building of our country's civil law and commercial law system is proceeding at an ever-more rapid pace,” and stressed the capacity of PRC law for “property security [and] commercial transaction facilitation.” Party and state organs were advised to “consider civil code regulations, so that they do not infringe upon the lawful civil rights of the masses, including personal security and property rights” ([Xuexi Qiangguo](#), May 29).



Image: A People's Daily graphic, dating from 2014, that publicized collective study sessions of the 18th Politburo (2012-2017). From the early period of Xi's tenure as CCP General Secretary, Xi's authoritative position in Politburo political study sessions has been promoted as another aspect of his cult of personality.

(Source: [People's Daily Online](#), November 5, 2014)

Conclusion

The resumption of the Politburo's periodic "collective study" sessions is likely another sign that the central CCP leadership wishes to project a return to normalcy after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the earlier months of 2020. It is also a further sign that the state propaganda apparatus has returned to its unabashed promotion of Xi's cult of personality—an effort that dimmed temporarily earlier this year, when Xi assumed a less visible posture and other senior CCP officials briefly adopted a more prominent public presence ([China Brief](#), February 5; [China Brief](#), February 13). With the end of the most intense phase of the COVID-19 crisis—at least for now—the top echelon of CCP leadership, and the propaganda apparatus at its command, is returning its attention to many of the policy priorities in place prior to the epidemic.

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Notes

[1] The Politburo held eight collective study sessions in 2019; nine in 2018; eight in 2017; and eight in 2016. See: "Central Politburo Collective Study" (中央政治局集体学习, *Zhongyang Zhengzhiju Jiti Xuexi*), *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国) website (ongoing).

<https://www.xuexi.cn/9bc28239c691139fe0bdbd0f38126f8c/9a3668c13f6e303932b5e0e100fc248b.html>.

[2] Note that the December 26-27, 2019 "democratic life meeting" of the CCP Politburo fell outside the official sequence of the Politburo's "collective study" meetings, and was not counted among the eight study sessions for 2019. However, this traditional end-of-year Politburo meeting is still publicized by PRC state media as an ideological study session for the top CCP leadership.

[3] "Central Politburo Collective Study" (中央政治局集体学习, *Zhongyang Zhengzhiju Jiti Xuexi*), *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国) website (ongoing).

<https://www.xuexi.cn/9bc28239c691139fe0bdbd0f38126f8c/9a3668c13f6e303932b5e0e100fc248b.html>.

**Fighting the Battle for the Narrative:
The PRC White Paper on Its COVID-19 Response**

By April Herlevi

Introduction

On June 7, the People's Republic of China (PRC) State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室, *Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi*) released an official white paper outlining China's response to the COVID-19 crisis ([Xinhua](#), June 7). As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, the document, titled *Fighting COVID-19 – China in Action* (抗击新冠肺炎疫情的中国行动, *Kangji Xinguan Feiyan Yiqing de Zhongguo Xingdong*), is a clear articulation as to how the authorities of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hope to control and shape the narratives surrounding their own role in the state response to the virus. Key themes in the report are unsurprising; however, the timeline articulated by the State Council leaves serious questions about the origin of the virus and its initial beginnings.

Several key themes emerge from *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action* (hereafter, "White Paper"). These include: China's timely sharing of information with international organizations; narratives of "battle" against the virus; China's positive international engagement; and the need for economic stabilization. Each of these themes is inter-related. The purpose of the COVID-19 White Paper is for the PRC to "clarify its ideas on the global battle"—a battle that cannot be "won" without international engagement. This is a version of events that emphasizes the "open, transparent, and responsible manner" that China claims to have undertaken throughout the crisis. Yet, alongside assertions of transparency, the document also emphasizes taking actions "in accordance with the law"—which begs the question as to whether key items of information have been omitted in order to justify measures intended to maintain domestic stability ([SCIO](#), June 7).

Timely Notification or Curious Timelines?

According to the White Paper, the official response began on December 27, 2019. On that day, the "Wuhan city government arranged for experts to look into" the cases of viral pneumonia occurring in the city ([SCIO](#), June 7). However, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission had earlier indicated that initial cases of "an unidentified pneumonia outbreak" (肺炎疫情, *feiyin yiqing*) were identified by December 12, 2019 ([China Brief](#), January 17). The official timeline from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission "reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan" on December 31, 2019, and that "a novel coronavirus was eventually identified." However, the WHO does not specify any other dates or notes for the month of December ([WHO](#), April 27).

The timeline articulated in China's COVID-19 White Paper leaves at least two weeks entirely unaccounted for, which raises questions about the interaction between local, national, and international officials. Action at

the local level was critical for the identification of this new illness, and several doctors working on the front lines in Wuhan—Li Wenliang, Mei Zhongming, and Jiang Xueqing—have died from the disease ([South China Morning Post](#), March 3). A draft resolution introduced at the World Health Assembly in May—spearheaded by Australia, and now supported by over 110 countries—calls for an “impartial, independent, and comprehensive evaluation” of the events associated with the pandemic ([Business Insider](#), May 18). The PRC has resisted all such calls, and the White Paper reveals a continuing determination to deflect criticism of its early handling of the outbreak. The document calls for the international community to “resist scapegoating or other such self-serving artifices, and [to] stand against stigmatization and politicization of the virus” ([SCIO](#), June 7, Section IV).

Publishing the White Paper is one attempt by the PRC to show that it is “open and transparent” and that “China gave timely notification to the international community” ([SCIO](#), June 7). However, in its present form the White Paper raises significant questions about the initial phase of the outbreak and how information was communicated between local, provincial, and national officials: its timeline begins too late to fully answer these questions, which could hamper efforts to learn the origin of the virus and how it spread initially. A clear understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic began will be necessary for the international medical and scientific community to understand the origins and initial spread of the virus. If the initial days and weeks are not articulated, it may be impossible for epidemiologists, scientists, and policymakers to assess what actually occurred at the outset.



Image: The press conference for the official publication of the white paper on China’s COVID-19 response, which was released by the PRC State Council Information Office on June 7, 2020.

(Source: [China Daily](#), June 7)

Narratives of Battle

The White Paper makes clear that one of its key goals is to address the “global battle” against COVID-19. The narrative of battle explains both how the PRC “fought” the virus and how the PRC must continue to maintain its story internationally. In terms of the direct fight, according to the White Paper the “all-out battle” against COVID-19 was fought with “confidence and solidarity, [and] a science-based approach and targeted measures.” As a result, after “approximately three months, a decisive victory was secured in the battle to defend Hubei Province and its capital city of Wuhan” ([SCIO](#), June 7).

The “battleground” narrative does two things: it makes the central government look strong in its fight against the pandemic, and shifts focus to the virus as an enemy. Shifting blame is important, because if there is a perception that the central government knew there was an “enemy” lurking in early or mid-December and did not take action, then there would be questions about the government’s decisiveness. Consistent with the “battle” narrative, the White Paper highlights the role of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), stating that 4,000 military medical personnel were dispatched to respond to the crisis, with the PLA Air Force performing important logistical support. The PRC government has also maintained the narrative that no PLA personnel contracted the virus, despite the heavy concentration of PLA forces located in the vicinity of Wuhan ([China Brief](#), April 13).

International Engagement

While the “battle” on the ground may have been declared “won” in Wuhan, the battle for the international narrative continues. The White Paper argues that “international solidarity” and “multilateralism” were necessary to deal with the crisis, and highlights these efforts in Section IV of the White Paper, titled “Building a Global Community of Health For All.” Consistent with Xi Jinping’s discourse on the “community of common destiny for mankind” (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*), [1] the White Paper describes how “China has fought should to shoulder with the rest of the world” as part of the idea that “the world is a global community of shared future” ([SCIO](#), June 7).

Like many other PRC government reports in the last decade, the measure of success for international engagement has become a numbers game: how many items can be counted up and measured to show “results”? At the highest level of government, “President Xi has personally promoted international cooperation” by having “phone calls or meetings with nearly 50 foreign leaders and heads of international organizations.” At other levels of government, the PRC has “conducted more than 70 exchanges with international and regional organizations including ASEAN, the European Union, the African Union (AU), APEC, the Caribbean Community, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” ([SCIO](#), June 7, Section IV).

In addition to top-level meetings, the White Paper promises “US\$2 billion of international aid over two years” for a “global humanitarian response depot” in China. The document also outlines tools for sharing scientific

information, calls for additional multilateral meetings, and promises assistance for “developing countries with weaker public health systems in Asia, Africa and Latin America – especially Africa” ([SCIO](#), June 7, Section IV).



Image: China’s medical aid (or sales) to other countries have featured as a prominent element of the PRC’s COVID-19 pandemic response propaganda. In this image, a delegation of medical personnel from Hunan Province pose for a photo upon arrival in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea (May 26, 2020).

(Image source: [People’s Daily Online](#), June 7)

Economic Stabilization

International engagement and solidarity are major themes of the White Paper, but Beijing acknowledges that global economic cooperation could be heavily impacted by the crisis. The White Paper argues that economic cooperation must continue, while also noting that “the global spread of the pandemic” is “making a severe global economic recession unavoidable” ([SCIO](#), June 7, Section IV). In a move that generated considerable press attention in the United States and Europe, the CCP chose to do away with gross domestic product (GDP) targets at this year’s National People’s Congress ([BBC](#), May 22; [Reuters](#), May 24). However, PRC media outlets claim work will continue on a variety of “sub-targets” that remain necessary for the “building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects” ([Xinhua](#), May 23).

At the international level, the White Paper makes clear that the PRC remains committed to the global economic system. In particular, “China believes that the international community should proceed with globalization, safeguard the multilateral trading system based on the WTO, cut tariffs, remove barriers, facilitate the flow of trade, and keep international industrial and supply chains secure and smooth.” The PRC argues that “COVID-19 is changing the form but not the general trend of economic globalization.” Despite this seemingly optimistic tone, the economic and political challenges of U.S.-China relations over the past several

years are not ignored. The White Paper calls out the United States by stating that “Decoupling, erecting walls, and deglobalization may divide the world, but will not do any good to those who themselves are engaged in these acts” ([SCIO](#), June 7).

On the domestic front, the State Council argues that economic stabilization must occur in “employment, finance, foreign trade, inbound investment, domestic investment, and market expectations.” In addition to these “six fronts” for stabilization, the White Paper assigns “six priorities” for social and economic order: “jobs, daily living needs, food and energy, industrial and supply chains, the interests of market players, and the smooth functioning of grassroots government” ([SCIO](#), June 7, Section III). Stabilization in trade will be difficult given the drop in exports ([Financial Times](#), June 7), but China still hopes to attract foreign investment. During the National People’s Congress held in late May, NPC Standing Committee Chairman Li Zhanshu (栗战书) noted that further changes had been made with respect to investment: “After adopting the Foreign Investment Law, we completed its integration with relevant laws by revising a package of laws on construction, fire protection, digital signatures, urban and rural planning, vehicle and vessel taxes, trademarks, unfair competition, and administrative approval” ([NPC](#), May 25).

We do not yet know the full economic toll of the COVID-19 crisis for either China or the global economy, but thus far, China is staying the course. The White Paper reiterated many of the same themes as described in the NPC work report issued in May, which highlighted that “supply-side structural reform and high-quality economic development” remain on the agenda for 2020 ([NPC](#), May 25).

Conclusion: Winning the Battle?

China’s White Paper shows Beijing’s imperative to control the COVID-19 narrative. International engagement is highlighted throughout, but the “battle” is also about the timeline. By focusing on the events that transpired in 2020—rather than the events early in the crisis—Beijing has emphasized the measures to stop the spread of the virus, rather than discussing its origins. Yet, the timeline is critical to future examination of the virus and how it spread. China’s unwillingness to articulate the timing of events in December 2019 undermines the narrative of its “open and transparent” reporting in a timely manner.

For economic recovery and stabilization, the origins of the virus may not matter. Yet, for a full accounting of the disease itself, late 2019 is a critical time period and the current explanations are insufficient. For the good of the “global community of shared destiny,” the PRC may want to evaluate whether the current narrative is complete—and consider how a full accounting of the pandemic requires an accurate and complete timeline of events at all levels of the PRC government.

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Notes

[1] For analysis of the “community of shared destiny” concept, see: Liza Tobin, “Xi’s Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, November 2018. <https://tnsr.org/2018/11/xis-vision-for-transforming-global-governance-a-strategic-challenge-for-washington-and-its-allies/>.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Boosts Sino-Russian Cooperation

By Richard Weitz

Introduction

The immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Sino-Russian relations has been to weaken the social and economic ties between the two states. Similar to circumstances in other countries, their cross-border economic exchanges have abruptly shrunk. The pandemic has also exacerbated xenophobic sentiments in both countries, as well as directing their political leadership inwards towards domestic recovery ([China Brief](#), February 28). However, the COVID-19 crisis has reaffirmed both governments' ability to manage these challenges and to limit major damage to their relationship. In the long term, the diverging economic performance of the two countries, with China rebounding much faster than Russia, could further increase Russia's economic dependence on China. Lastly, the crisis has seen a unique convergence of Chinese and Russian narratives, with their reciprocal messaging amplifying their viewpoints. This may foreshadow further cooperation in the information domain between the two countries.



Image: Persons waiting at a border checkpoint at Suifenhe, a town along the border of China's Heilongjiang Province and the Russian province of Primorsky Krai (undated, early-mid April). In April, Suifenhe was placed under quarantine and its port closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Image source: [Global Times](#), April 14)

Managing Frictions

The most visible short-term impact of the virus has been to decrease some economic activity between China and Russia, which has naturally contributed to diminished two-way commerce. Their curtailing of mutual tourism, trade, and transportation has amplified the effect of internal economic contractions. The

Sino-Russian tourism industry essentially evaporated after the Russian government stopped issuing tourist visas to Chinese nationals ([Moscow Times](#), April 24), which has deprived Russia's hospitality industry of the main source of its foreign tourists. Though some corporate exchanges continued via video and other links, important joint infrastructure border projects, such as cross-river bridges, have been suspended.

The fragility of Russian-Chinese popular relations has also been evident in the crisis, despite years of targeted policies by both governments to promote binational social and cultural ties. As news of the virus outbreak in China emerged, Sinophobic sentiment rose in Russia: anti-Chinese racial and xenophobic comments appeared in Russian social media, while Russians surveyed in polls indicated they would avoid contact with Chinese-looking people ([Ipsos MORI](#), February 14). PRC social media commentators complained about the harassment of PRC nationals in Russia and speculated that the Russian government was undercounting the spread of the infection within its territories ([EurasiaNet](#), April 12).

When certain PRC tourists who were deported back to China for allegedly violating quarantine rules were found to be infected with COVID-19, some netizens speculated that Moscow was trying to export virus cases to China ([NPR](#), April 10). Later, the Chinese government, while permitting commercial flights to continue, sealed off all land crossings to people along the Russian border ([FMPRC](#), April 9). The decision came after travelers from Russia—predominantly Chinese nationals—became the largest source of imported COVID cases into China ([CGTN](#), April 8). Frictions then arose about what to do with the large number of Chinese nationals stranded along the border in the Russian Far East, and Chinese social media commentators expressed fears that their compatriots were not receiving adequate protection against being infected ([Global Times](#), April 9).

Notwithstanding these signs of popular dissatisfaction, neither government overtly criticized the other. Whereas the PRC attacked the United States for suspending travel and tourism with China, the government and media shrugged off Russia's own severe travel restrictions and border closures. Afterwards, the Russian government reciprocated by not openly contesting China's own subsequent severance of cross-border exchanges, which began in early April after many PRC nationals returning to China from Russia tested positive for the virus. The two governments also made a show of manifesting symbolic solidarity in combating the virus. In the first few months of 2020, Russia provided medical aid to China; in the following months, when the virus peaked in Russia, China delivered millions of masks and other items of protective equipment to Russia ([Xinhua](#), April 11; [TASS](#), April 4; [CGTN](#), June 11). The Chinese media ran stories of Russian citizens thanking China for donating the medical supplies ([Global Times](#), April 12).

Many of the Sino-Russian economic contractions are reversible. Taking advantage of the fall in world oil prices, China made large purchases of Russian oil in March, which resulted in a 17 percent growth in the value of Russian exports to the PRC in the first quarter of the year, and an overall 3.4% increase in two-way trade even as China's commerce with Japan, the European Union, and the United States fell ([SCMP](#), May 14; [CGTN](#), June 11). As soon as the visa and border restrictions are relaxed, the number of tourists and other

exchanges should also rebound. Noting that before the epidemic the flow of tourism was predominately that of Chinese citizens visiting Russia, Andrei Denisov, the Russian Ambassador to China, has indicated that his government foresaw more balanced tourist exchanges in the future ([TASS](#), June 19).

Biotechnology and related ties will likely expand between the countries in the future, especially in the field of high-tech surveillance hardware and software. Scientists from Russia and China are working together to develop vaccines and other anti-viral medication. In a stroke of good timing, 2020 and 2021 have been designated “Years of Scientific and Technological Innovation in China and Russia” ([China Daily](#), February 26).



Image: On April 11, a team of medical personnel from China's Heilongjiang Province pose for a photo upon arrival in Moscow to assist with COVID-19 relief efforts. (Image source: [CGTN](#), April 11)

Even more opportunistically for Moscow, the Sino-U.S. confrontation over the pandemic came when it seemed that economic tensions between the two countries were de-escalating following their “Phase One” trade deal, which was announced with great fanfare at a White House ceremony on January 15. Nine days later, Russian presidential adviser Maxim Oreshkin called the deal “a big ticking time bomb” that would engender many global trade disputes ([RT](#), January 24). Russian experts had feared that the deal would force Chinese importers to buy more U.S. goods at the expense of Russian products, but the COVID-19 crisis has upended the deal’s execution.

The pandemic may have decreased defense ties to a limited extent, since there have been no major joint exercises since the advent of the crisis. Furthermore, there may be delays in some areas of defense industrial cooperation that require cross-border travel, such as arms sales and professional military education exchanges. However, these changes will not fundamentally disrupt strong Sino-Russian security ties, even if

they delay some activities. In fact, they may follow the U.S. example of employing fewer service personnel in the future and relying more heavily on computer-assisted command post exercises.

Throughout the crisis, the two governments have skillfully dampened potential sources of tensions. The Russian Embassy to China stressed that its border closure measures were temporary, while Chinese officials and media commentators have argued that Moscow's actions were not motivated by malign intent, and were indeed understandable given the international situation. PRC media has also sympathetically noted the weaknesses of the Russian health sector, as well as the country's "crucial period of domestic political adjustment"—a reference to Putin's controversial proposal to revise the country's constitution to allow him to remain in power after his second term ([Global Times](#), February 19).

The Chinese Embassy in Russia initially lodged an official protest with the Moscow authorities regarding alleged racial and discriminatory harassment of Chinese nationals ([Reuters](#), February 26). However, the Embassy quickly retracted the allegation after it became public, claiming that it had been a misunderstanding and that the Russian authorities were appropriately enforcing quarantine restrictions against all nationalities equally. The Embassy further urged Chinese citizens to follow all local regulations ([SCMP](#), March 2).

Several months later, a Chinese editorial—one intended to urge Chinese nationals not to risk traveling back to the PRC, and thereby risk bringing more COVID-infected people into China—irritated the Russian government by describing its poor performance in containing the virus ([Global Times](#), April 13). Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov felt compelled to respond by declaring that the Russian government did not want to join in the exchanges of criticism among countries over the virus, and instead called on the international community to fight the virus ([Izvestia](#), April 15). However, Peskov directed his criticism at the publisher of the editorial, *The Global Times*, rather than the Chinese government. Meanwhile, though PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian called on the Russian government "to provide convenience and guarantees for our citizens with regard to their stay and medical needs," he directed all Chinese citizens to "comply with Russia's pandemic prevention regulations" ([FMPRC](#), April 9).

Russia and the PRC have also demonstrated a policy of eschewing open competition for influence in third countries. After a high-profile shipment of Chinese masks and aid to Serbia aroused some unease in Russia—whose leaders consider Serbia as falling within Moscow's sphere of influence—China reduced its aid, while the Russian military intervened in force to assist the Serbian authorities in their response to the crisis ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), April 14). In May, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov termed Western allegations—such as those made by U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper ([Reuters](#), May 4)—that Chinese and Russian medical assistance to European countries was motivated by a desire to enhance their geopolitical influence as "another manifestation of Russophobia and Sinophobia" ([Xinhua](#), May 15).

Presidents and Praise

The Xi-Putin high-profile partnership has continued despite COVID-19. As early as January 31, Putin sent Xi a telegram that “expressed confidence that the radical measures that the Chinese authorities were taking would help stop the spread of the epidemic and minimize the damage from it” ([Kremlin](#), January 31). In several subsequent phone calls, the two presidents have pledged to cooperate against the virus, while praising each other’s performance. According to the PRC Foreign Ministry, in an April 16 conversation Xi said that “China will never forget Russia’s strong support during the gravest moment in its fight against the disease.” He also “expressed [China’s] confidence that under the strong leadership of President Putin, Russia will soon contain the spread of the virus to protect the safety and health of its people and bring economic and social development back on track” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), April 17). Countering allegations of Russian mistreatment of Chinese nationals, Xi thanked Putin “for the active efforts Russia has made for Chinese nationals in Russia, saying he believes that Russia will, as always, protect Chinese nationals’ normal work and life on its soil” ([Xinhua](#), April 17). According to the Kremlin’s summary of the same exchange, Putin praised “the consistent and effective actions of Russia’s Chinese partners, which helped stabilize the epidemiological situation in the country. He stressed that it was counterproductive to accuse China of releasing information to the global community on this dangerous infection in an untimely manner” ([Kremlin](#), April 16).

Mutual exchanges of thanks were also evident in other official channels. In a lengthy March interview with the prominent Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, Beijing’s ambassador to Moscow, Zhang Hanhui, thanked Russia for rendering “sincere, timely, unwavering, and comprehensive” assistance to China in combating the virus. The Ambassador said the Chinese were “sympathetic” about the Russian restrictions on Chinese tourists entering Russian territory, and other epidemic control measures provided they were “moderate” and “consistent with the spirit of Sino-Russian friendship and the good level of bilateral interstate relations.” Zhang added that China was not preoccupied by the West’s “malicious attacks” and valued more the support of Russians and other “friendly nations” because these “true friends” constitute “the majority of voices of the international community” ([Izvestia](#), March 16).

Likewise, the virus has given the Russian government another opportunity to ingratiate Moscow with the PRC leadership by defending China against the criticism of Western political leaders. On May 11, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian singled out for praise how “President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov explicitly expressed objection to a handful of countries’ attempts to smear China and pin the blame on it with regard to COVID-19” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), May 11). In his May 13 speech to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO], Lavrov denounced “baseless accusations against the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation” ([TASS](#), May 13). Chinese and Russian diplomats affirmed solidarity within other multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa] ([TASS](#), April 28). Summing up their joint approach to the pandemic, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in his annual press conference during the third session of the 13th National People’s Congress

on May 24 that "Together, China and Russia have forged an impregnable fortress against the 'political virus' and demonstrated the strength of the bilateral strategic coordination." He further stated that the two countries will transform the current crisis into an opportunity to expand their future cooperation in many areas ([CGTN](#), May 24).

Conclusion

The virus could have had a game-changing impact on the Sino-Russian relationship. Moscow has placed its bets on a growing Chinese economy serving as Russia's main growth driver in coming years. The PRC's mishandling of the initial virus outbreak, and the contraction of Sino-Russian trade, could plausibly have led Russian policy makers to reassess the wisdom of their intemperate alignment with China. However, China's apparent rapid economic recovery, combined with Russia's staggering economic problems--both those directly caused by the virus (e.g., domestic business closings), as well as second-order effects (e.g., collapsing demand for Russian hydrocarbon exports)—has for now convinced Russian policy makers that they need Chinese imports and investment more than ever ([Carnegie.ru](#), April 27). Although the pandemic has set back the governments' efforts to promote lagging societal ties, Xi likely echoed Putin's sentiments that the two countries "should explore new flexible and diverse forms of cooperation amid regularized epidemic prevention and control measures so as to continuously push forward bilateral cooperation" despite the pandemic ([Xinhua](#), April 17).

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Chinese Views of the United States Amid Rising Sino-American Clashes

By Nikita Savkov

Introduction

On May 20, the White House published a new policy document titled *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*. According to the document, China poses challenges to the economy, values, and security of the United States. Therefore, the administration's new approach to China offers a reevaluation of mutual relations, recognizes the long-term strategic competition between the two countries, and proclaims a return to principled realism in order to protect American interests and advance American influence ([White House](#), May 20).

These messages were not surprising for Chinese experts, because recently Sino-American relations have steadily declined, especially amid the COVID-19 outbreak. State-affiliated academics and other authorized policy commentators in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have recently offered a number of opinions of their own, which shed some light on how the party-state views the contentious relationship with the United States—and provide indications as to how the PRC is likely to formulate policy in the future.

Outlook #1: After Trump, Everything Goes Back to Normal

Among Chinese intellectuals who debate Sino-American relations, one of the main questions is what will happen to U.S. policy towards China after the elections of November 2020. Ruan Zongze (阮宗泽), the Vice-President of the China Institute of International Studies (中国国际问题研究院, *Zhongguo Guoji Wenti Yanjiuyuan*), asserts that the American political system is the reason why America was not as organized as China in preventing and fighting COVID-19. According to Ruan, the United States has entered an election period, and American politicians are doing their best to maximize their interests for political consideration—and what they are considering now is short-term competitiveness and votes, not the matters of high policy ([Xinhua](#), May 20).

Chinese expert Wang Wen (王文), the dean of the Chongyang Institute of Renmin University in Beijing, argues that China is not interested in waging a new Cold War with the United States, because it could hurt Chinese development and global interests. He is also skeptical about the ability of the United States to engage in this new Cold War because of internal problems in America. He is calling the current China-U.S. conflict "not a cold war, but a scold war," and comparing people who started it to Don Quixote: "They are picking up their spears, rushing toward the windmill, and acting as warriors" ([Global Times](#), May 24).

Wang Wen argues that previous attacks on China ended up causing no serious damage: for example, the trade war led to America coming back to negotiations, and the offensive against Huawei helped increase the

company's prestige and determination to achieve technological autonomy. According to Wang, "since April almost all Chinese media outlets fired a battle against the U.S. government, especially against Pompeo." Wang Wen expresses optimism about the conflict, on grounds that it is mostly a battle between media outlets, and that Trump has difficulty in gaining full support even inside his own country ([Global Times](#), May 24).



Image: Ruan Zongze, Vice-President of China Academy of International Studies, speaking at a conference (undated photo). Ruan has cited contrasting responses to the COVID-19 epidemic to tout the superiority of the PRC's political system over that of the United States. (Image source: [Xinhua](#))

Outlook #2: Chinese-American Conflict Is the New Normal

Other analysts are more pessimistic about the future of Sino-American relations, and point out that tensions were rising long before Trump. One such person is Yang Xiangfeng (杨向峰), a PRC national on the faculty of Yonsei University in South Korea. He points out that in 2016 post-election analyses Chinese analysts were overwhelmingly optimistic, even gleeful, because for China the election of Donald Trump was the lesser evil. [1] Because Trump was not tethered to the liberal orthodoxy of American foreign policy tradition, Chinese elites reckoned that he would not lecture them about human rights and democracy, as Clinton was expected to do. This sentiment was summarized by Shen Dingli (沈丁立) of Fudan University, who has said that "anything's an improvement on Obama and Hillary" ([Sydney Morning Herald](#), November 10, 2016).

Teng Jianqun (滕建群) from the China Institute of International Studies believes that at present U.S. foreign policy exists in a structure of "dualization" (二元化, *eryuanhua*): the Trump Administration stands on one side, and "American realist politics" (美国现实政治, *Meiguo xianshi zhengzhi*) stand on the other side. Per this view, the Trump Administration has brought about a global contraction, solicited benefits from allies, and initiated trade frictions; the ultimate purpose of these actions is to promote an "America First" policy. Driven by global power thinking and commercial interests, realist politics have forced the United States to maintain

its presence in relevant regions and refuse to give up global geopolitical interests. Even if Trump is re-elected as president in 2020, the differences between the administration and realist politics will not stop, but the gap between the two will narrow ([US-China Perception Monitor](#), May 20).

Another prominent current controversy is the potential for economic "decoupling" (脱钩, *tuogou*) between China and the United States (China Brief, [April 1](#) and [May 1](#)). According to Professor Wang Li (王黎) of Nankai University, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Wang argues that modern China possesses both qualified human resources and the financial resources for further technological development, so the rupture with the United States will not hurt that much. Moreover, he argues that "decoupling" on certain sharp security issues provides Beijing and Washington with some room for maneuver, making the situation similar to the "decompression strategy" (解压之策, *jieya zhi ce*) that the Soviet Union and the United States often used during the Cold War. Wang argues that, even during long-term conflict, there is room for bilateral cooperation ([US-China Perception Monitor](#), May 25).

Wang Haiyun's Strategy of Resistance Against U.S. Hegemonism

One of the clearest visions for addressing the competition with America comes from Wang Haiyun (王海运), a retired PLA brigadier general and a former military attaché in Russia. According to Wang Haiyun, Chinese have to realize that the American government attempts to frame and discredit socialist China and its policies—with the ultimate aim that China will be forced to pay retributions, become damaged in terms of its own position, and lose its ability to strategically compete with the United States. According to Wang, although the world leadership of the United States is in slow decline, China still confronts America's "framing of hegemonic power" (霸权势力的诬陷, *baquan shili de wuxian*) ([Sohu](#), May 5).

Wang notes that America has many allies, and while they sometimes question American actions and vision in certain situations, these allies are still ready to support the United States—and could potentially become hostile to China. Therefore, it would be a huge mistake for China to underestimate both the hard and soft power of the United States—as occurred in the example of Iraq, when the United States launched a war without solid legal grounds. Wang asserts that China can no longer be easily bullied—but that if the U.S. "hegemonic" strategy succeeds, the damage to China would be great, China's rise would be interrupted, and its potential destiny could suffer ([Tencent](#), May 5).



Image: Wang Haiyun, a retired PLA brigadier general and former military attaché in Russia, has called for the PRC to resist the "arrogance of hegemonic power" (霸权势力气焰, baquan shili qiyan) embodied by the United States (undated photo). (Image source: QQ.com)

To secure China's current advantages and confront American attempts to stop the rise of China, Wang Haiyun proposes five steps:

1. Reorganize China's system of strategic military command, in order to make it more united and effective in a potential struggle with the United States across various fields—to include the military realm, economics, scientific research, and politics.
2. Publish a "white paper of China's anti-epidemic measures" (中国抗疫白皮书, *Zhongguo kangyi baijishu*) that would make clear the comprehensive Chinese government response to the coronavirus, to include a list of detailed measures—and especially addressing accusations regarding the Chinese origins of the virus—in order to help maintain the PRC's reputation. (*Editor's note: The PRC issued such a white paper on June 7; see the discussion by Dr. April Herlevi separately in this issue.*)
3. Organize an active investigation, with the help of specialists in medical science and international law, to reveal the origins of coronavirus and protect China from American accusations. In this, China should not blindly follow the narrative of Western countries, but instead should articulate its own version of events—and possibly re-direct accusations against America.
4. Create an international united front to build up China's international support. In this, China's main partners should be Russia—China's "New Era comprehensive strategic collaboration partner" (新时代全面战略协作伙伴, *Xinshidai quanmian zhanlue xiezuo banhuo*)—as well as members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS countries, and neighboring countries that are friendly to China.

5. The Chinese government should protect the country by striking out at pro-American and anti-China elements inside the country—especially those who have close relatives and property in America—that indulge American aggressive actions and question Chinese national interests. At the same time, it will be necessary to promote education based on patriotism and national pride. China should make all efforts to avoid new "Boxer Indemnities" (庚子赔款, *Gengzi Peikuan*) and secure its rise from enemy threats ([Tencent](#), May 5).

Conclusion

On the one hand, some Chinese foreign policy commentators argue that the current clash between China and the United States has occurred primarily because of the unpredictable Trump Administration—and that if America had a different president, it would automatically improve relations between the two countries and solve many bilateral problems. On the other hand, others argue that the gradual process of rupture between the two countries started during the second term of President Obama, and that therefore the clash with the United States would happen regardless of who resides in the White House. A third group, broadly defined, sees China's relationship with the United States and its allies primarily in terms of threatening U.S. "hegemonism," and calls for the PRC to focus its resources on a self-defensive strategy of resistance. The results of the U.S. elections later this year may produce some shifts in the U.S.-China relationship—but whatever the outcome, the PRC's authorized commentators are in general agreement that significant tensions are likely to persist between the two countries throughout the year ahead.

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Notes

[1] Yang Xianfeng, "The Great Chinese Surprise: The Rupture with the United States Is Real and Is Happening," *International Affairs*, Vol. 96(2), February 2020.

The India-U.S. Defense Relationship Grows Amid Rising Tensions with China

By Rup Narayan Das

Introduction

China's rise and assertive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific Region—as demonstrated most recently by the June 15 clashes between Chinese and Indian troops in the Galwan Valley region ([India Today](#), June 21)—has contributed to a strategic convergence between the United States and India. Although the Indian government's official position on China has always been subdued or nuanced, concerns about the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been growing for many years, under administrations of both of India's primary political parties.

The thinking of the government can be gleaned from recent editions of the *Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence*. The report for 2009-2010, issued under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) administration led by Prime Minister (PM) Dr. Manmohan Singh, observed that: "China is engaged in building its Comprehensive National Power encompassing economic and military development, which would enable her to play a dominant role in global affairs...India also remains conscious and alert about the implications of China's military modernisation on the regional and national security situation" ([Indian Ministry of Defence](#), 2010).

India's Threat Perceptions and the Growth of India-U.S. Defense Cooperation

It was against this backdrop of growing threat perceptions in India, and a building Sino-Indian security dilemma, that defense cooperation between India and the United States has grown: it is China's rise and assertive behaviour that has brought a closer relationship between the two vibrant democracies. Considering the democratic nature of the two political systems, the incubation of the strategic partnership between India and the United States has been relatively slow. However, the partnership has grown steadily, with bipartisan support among India's rival political coalitions.

Strengthening Defense Ties Under PM Singh in 2012-2013

Then-U.S. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter was instrumental in giving a boost to the relationship with the launch of the Defence Trade Technology Initiative (DTTI) in 2012. Also in 2012, the Indian IT behemoth Tata Advanced System Limited (TASL) and Lockheed Martin established a joint venture to produce C-130J Super Hercules airframe components. TASL also has a joint venture with Sikorsky, established in 2011, to co-produce S-92 helicopter cabins. In June 2016, TASL and Boeing announced a Hyderabad-based joint venture to manufacture components for Apache helicopters, and to collaborate on integrated systems development opportunities in India ([U.S. Embassy in India](#), December 8, 2016). It is no coincidence that negotiations surrounding the DTTI were intensified following an April 2013 border incursion by the PRC

across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Depsang sector ([The Hindu](#), May 7, 2013), for this was yet another incident that increased India's threat perceptions regarding its northern neighbour.

It was against this backdrop that Prime Minister Singh visited the United States in September 2013 to participate in the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly, and held a side meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama. The Joint Statement issued by the two sides affirmed that "the partnership between the two democratic nations is stronger today than at any point in their 67-year history" ([Indian PM Office](#), September 27, 2013). The two leaders reiterated their desire to further strengthen defense trade cooperation by endorsing a *Joint Declaration on Defence Cooperation* as a means of enhancing their partnership in military technology transfers, joint research, and co-development and co-production of certain types of military equipment. President Obama encouraged further participation by U.S. firms in partnering India's efforts to enhance its defence capabilities ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), September 27, 2013).



Image: Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter (left) and then-Indian Minister of Defence Manohar Parrikar (right) appear together at a press conference in December 2015.

(Image source: [USNI](#), December 11, 2015)

Defense Ties Continue to Grow Under PM Modi Since 2014

The same engagement continued, but with added dimensions, after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) administration of PM Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. The Ministry of Defence report for 2014-15 reiterated concerns about China, and said that "India is also taking necessary measures to develop the requisite capability to counter any adverse impact on our own security" ([Indian Ministry of Defence](#), 2015). A landmark development in the transformational defence and security cooperation between the two countries

was the signing of the new *Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship* in June 2015 ([U.S. Department of Defense](#), 2015).

These arrangements were further strengthened when, after twelve years of protracted negotiations, the two countries signed the *Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement* (LEMOA) in August 2016. LEMOA is a tweaked version of standard logistics cooperation agreements that the U.S. military has with dozens of countries. The agreement enables the naval ships and aircraft of both countries to dock in each other's bases for refuelling and similar purposes. Indian and U.S. naval ships and aircraft have often used each other's naval and air bases before; however, in the past this has been an ad hoc, complex action in which clearance had to be obtained for each individual case ([The Hindu](#), August 30, 2016).

Continuing India-U.S. Defense Initiatives Since 2018

Against the backdrop of China's belligerent behaviour, the renaming of the former U.S. Pacific Command as the "Indo-Pacific Command" (effective June 1, 2018) was yet another strategic gesture by the United States to co-opt India. In September 2018, the India-U.S. defence relationship received a major boost at the "2+2 Ministerial Dialogue" in New Delhi, where the "foundational" *Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement* (COMCASA) was signed between the two countries. COMCASA enables the Indian military to get a better picture of maritime activity in the Indian Ocean region, which is seeing increased Chinese military activity. In addition to this defense agreement, both sides agreed in a joint statement that they had discussed "advancing a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" and promoting "sustainable debt financing practices in infrastructure development"—widely viewed as a riposte to the PRC's much touted Belt and Road Initiative ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), September 6, 2018).

The second round of the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue between the two countries took place in Washington in December 2019. During the meeting, the two sides announced important progress under the DTTI—including the finalisation of a "statement of intent" to co-develop several projects, and the finalisation of standard operating procedures for setting forth implementation guidelines for projects under the DTTI. The two governments also signed the *Industry-to-Industry Framework*, which will establish a standing mechanism for dialogue between defence contractors in the United States and India. During the 2+2 meeting the two sides also welcomed the signing of the *Industrial Security Annex* (INA), which will facilitate the exchange of classified military information between the two sides ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), December 19, 2019).

India Looks to U.S. Arms Sales to Counter Chinese Military Capabilities

While a comprehensive diplomatic framework and legal edifice for defense cooperation is in progress, there has also been an exponential growth in defense trade between the two countries. India is gearing up to ramp up its capacity to meet threats to its security and territorial integrity. From 2008 through the end of 2016, U.S.-India defense trade increased from roughly \$1 billion to over \$15 billion dollars. This has included Indian

procurement of: thirteen C-130 Hercules aircraft from Lockheed Martin; ten C-17 Globemaster and twelve P-8 Poseidon aircraft from Boeing; as well as twenty-two AH-64 Apache and fifteen CH-47 Chinook helicopters ([U.S. Embassy in India](#), December 8, 2016).

The two countries also entered into a contract in December 2016 for the procurement of 145 U.S.-made M777 ultra-light howitzers. It was agreed that the first 25 howitzers would be sold off the shelf, while the remaining 120 would be assembled in India. The howitzers are likely to be deployed on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) along the contested India-China border, in the regions of Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh (in Jammu and Kashmir). The LAC is not formally defined, which at times results in border transgressions by both sides. The M777s, which have been used by U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, will help India secure its borders with China along the LAC. Once ready for deployment, the howitzers will be transported by heavy-lift Chinook helicopters to forward area helipads, such as the Walong Advanced Landing Ground in Arunachal Pradesh ([Economic Times](#), October 7, 2019).



Image: A billboard in India touting the meeting between Indian PM Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump in Gujarat, India in February 2020 (undated photo). During the visit, the U.S.-India relationship was declared to be a “Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” and new sales of U.S. military equipment to India were announced. (Image source: [Economic Times](#), February 19, 2020)

The India-U.S. Defense Relationship—and Concerns About China—Grow Even Stronger in 2020

In his characteristic style, PM Modi hosted U.S. President Donald Trump in the city of Gujarat on February 24 this year and regaled him in a rousing road show from the airport to the Motera Stadium, touted to be the biggest cricket stadium in the world. During the visit, the India-U.S. relationship was declared to have been elevated to a “Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” and PM Modi hailed it as one the defining

partnerships of the 21st century. China was clearly the elephant in the room for this meeting, as revealed when President Trump contrasted India's democracy with an unnamed "nation that seeks power through coercion, intimidation and aggression" ([Economic Times](#), February 24).

During the February visit, President Trump announced a defense deal of more than \$3 billion, under which India will buy additional U.S. military equipment, including MH-60R naval and AH64E Apache helicopters ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), February 25). This was followed by a subsequent announcement in April of the U.S. intent to sell to India a package of Harpoon air launched missiles and lightweight torpedoes worth \$155 million. The sale of ten AGN Harpoon Block 11 air-launched missiles is to cost \$92 million; while the MK54 All Up Round Lightweight Torpedoes and three MK 54 Exercise Torpedoes are estimated to cost \$63 million (DSCA, [April 13](#) and [April 13](#)).

The weapons sales announced earlier this year have a clear naval orientation—a growing concern for India, as China's presence in the Indian Ocean is on the rise. The helicopter acquisitions will help strengthen the Indian Navy, which currently lacks helicopters of similar capability. The Harpoon missile system and MK54 torpedoes will be integrated into the P-81 maritime reconnaissance aircraft for anti-surface warfare missions in defence of critical sea lanes, while also enhancing the Indian Navy's inter-operability with U.S. and other allied forces.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has resonated in the triangular relationship between India, China, and the United States, serving to further exacerbate Sino-Indian tensions that had already been building for a number of years. The growing estrangement between the two countries was demonstrated by yet another recent development: as the pandemic spread in the month of April, PM Modi, who is a consummate communicator, spoke to nearly all major world leaders—including President Trump—but not to PRC President Xi Jinping or PRC Premier Li Keqiang. This is a further sign of disquiet in the relationship between the two countries.

COVID-19 is certainly going to impact the geopolitics between countries in Asia, and to reshape and redefine the triangular relations between the United States, China, and India. In the case of China and India, both the pandemic and recent border clashes are increasing a geopolitical estrangement that was already underway. In this changing equation, the India-U.S. strategic partnership will likely be further strengthened as both countries watch with concern China's increasingly belligerent posture in the Indo-Pacific Region.

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