**2020\_05\_06 아주대학교중국정책연구소 벙커자료**

**JIIA Strategic Comments (2020-4):
The Coronavirus Blame Game Intensifies the US-China Information War for International Public Opinion**

04-23-2020

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The hardening of US attitudes toward China's exercise of sharp power in recent years has been dramatic. As a result, China's sharp power has been eliminated from the US, and the confrontational structure between the US and China has shifted from a "US-China trade war" to a "political war" or "information war".
    Since the beginning of 2020, the two superpowers have engaged in verbal warfare over responses to the new coronavirus. Whenever the US criticizes China, China shifts the blame to the US, and they use the media to restrain each other. Now the US and China are fighting against the new coronavirus even as they also waging a "propaganda war" against each other.

## China trying to rebuild its image

    The outbreak of the new coronavirus in Wuhan, China, which has quickly spread to the rest of the world, has considerably worsened China's image globally due to the Chinese government's delayed initial response, especially the late disclosure of information. It was a blunder not only from a crisis management perspective, but also from a public diplomacy perspective.
    In order to recover from this blunder, China turned to a proactive stance on information disclosure and, at the same time, it developed an image strategy that included criticizing the US for its harsh stance toward China and lauding Japan's stance toward China in order to win support from Japan and other countries. The PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs not only criticized the US response to the pneumonia epidemic caused by the new coronavirus as causing panic, but also played with the notion that the US might be the source of the virus, while praising the fact that Japan sent masks and other relief supplies.
    Specifically, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying at a regular press conference on February 3 strongly denounced the US for not providing substantive support for the Chinese government's efforts to address the deadly coronavirus outbreak but instead creating and spreading fear, and Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Liqian on March 12 even invoked a conspiracy theory that the US military had brought the coronavirus to Wuhan. By contrast, Hua in an extremely rare expression of official gratitude toward Japan at a regular press conference on February 4 said "the Japanese government and its people from all walks of life have expressed sympathy, understanding and support to us", adding she was "deeply touched".
    She has also frequently posted pro-Japanese messages of support in Japanese along with Chinese poetry on her own Twitter account. In addition, the Chinese government has sent relief supplies to Italy, Iran and other countries accompanied by messages of support in the form of Chinese poetry. This approach could be seen as imitating Japan's use of Chinese poems written on relief supply boxes as a sign of heartfelt support for China to convey its concern for these countries. In this way, China can be seen as pursuing public diplomacy in an effort to restore its own image and get other countries, including Japan, on its side.

## US-China war of words I: Scapegoating

    The confrontation between the US and China appears to be turning into a war of words over the spread of the new coronavirus. Some Chinese government officials have claimed that the US military brought the virus to China, while President Trump has referred to the virus as the "Chinese virus," causing both sides to blame each other for the spread of the virus.
    China's initial response to the outbreak of the new coronavirus in Wuhan was too late, and it can be said that China is responsible for the spread of the infection around the world. However, the fact that President Xi Jinping toured Wuhan on March 10 and declared that the spread of the disease had been "basically curbed" in Hubei Province and Wuhan, the fact that he sent aid supplies to Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere and acted as if he were exercising global leadership in responding to the crisis, and the fact that a Foreign Ministry spokesperson herself tweeted pro-Japanese messages on Twitter, an act supposedly banned in China, are also seen as aimed at avoiding China's isolation from the international community and fending off domestic criticism.
    The biggest concern for President Xi is that the spread of the new coronavirus will have a negative impact on his country's economy and domestic public opinion. Much of China's economy had been frozen for several weeks but, now that companies have resumed production and other operations, Chinese consumers are gradually regaining their confidence, and economic activity is steadily recovering. However, the long time it will take to fully recover, as well as the Chinese police's treatment of Dr. Li Wenliang, who was the first person in China to point out a new pneumonia epidemic on a social networking service, and his subsequent death from pneumonia, are causing discontent in Chinese society.
    For this reason, it can be said that China is trying to avoid a bilateral confrontation with the US and instead create a China-led confrontation between the international community and the US by shifting the blame to the US, insisting to the public at home and abroad that it has acted heroically to contain the spread of the virus and standing by countries around the world facing difficulties to win domestic and international public opinion.
    The US, on the other hand, now has the highest number of infected people in the world, and the Trump administration has tried to emphasize China's responsibility by referring to the source of these infections as the "China virus".

## US-China war of words Ⅱ: Media war

    On February 19, China announced that it had revoked the press credentials of three Beijing-based reporters from the US newspaper The Wall Street Journal, expanding the US-China confrontation into a heated media war. This was in response to the newspaper's February 3 opinion piece entitled "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia". Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang said "The Chinese people do not welcome those media that use racially discriminatory language and maliciously slander and attack China."
    However, the column was written by outside experts and not by the three reporters whose press credentials were revoked. Leading US newspapers usually make a strict distinction between news and opinion pieces. In other words, the three reporters who were expelled this time had nothing to do with the writing or publication of the column, and it must be said that China's response was misguided.
    Meanwhile, the US State Department designated five Chinese state-run media outlets − Xinhua, CGTN, China Radio, China Daily and The People's Daily− as "foreign missions" in accordance with the Foreign Missions Act. The US thus identified these five outlets as "propaganda outlets" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rather than just news media. Furthermore, on March 2, President Trump reduced the number of Chinese citizens able to work in the US for those five state-run Chinese news organizations from 160 down to 100.
    In response, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang warned that if the US "insists on taking its own course, compounding mistakes, China will be forced to take further countermeasures." In retaliation, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it would expel American journalists who work for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post and demanded that those three outlets, as well as Voice of America and Time magazine, provide written details of their operations in China.
    The US-China strategic competition, which began with trade friction between the two countries, is already viewed as a "new Cold War," but the US and China are now fighting an information war as the new coronavirus spreads, so relations between the two may become even more tense.

## China's growing influence around the world

    The close relationship between the WHO and China has recently been exposed. While China's delay in taking initial steps to halt the spread of the new coronavirus has been criticized around the world, China's influence is also apparent in the WHO's pandering to China.
    WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared the coronavirus a pandemic on March 11, but the lateness of this declaration and the fact that Dr. Tedros emphasized the expression "outside China" in the regular press conference where the declaration was issued, saying that the number of cases outside China had increased 13-fold in two weeks, are signs of WHO's deference toward China.
    These suggest that China has been increasing its contributions to the WHO and expanding its influence. China's share of funding for the United Nations has overtaken Japan's to become second only to the US' (22% for the US, 12% for China, and 8% for Japan in 2020). In addition, Dr. Tedros' home country of Ethiopia, where he served as health minister and then foreign minister between 2005 and 2016, has received enormous economic support from China and has close relations with China, and successive WHO directors-general have held pro-China views.
    China's influence around the world is growing, and it is no longer the case that countries can easily criticize China. For democratic countries and international organizations that value democracy, completely eliminating the influence of China, which is considered to be an authoritarian state, or maintaining a balance with China can be said to have become a challenge.
    An economic crisis is unlikely to occur in China as long as the CCP's authority remains intact. As long as the CCP rules China under an authoritarian regime, it is difficult for other countries that depend on the Chinese market and economy to rule out the exercise of Chinese economic and political influence. The problem comes, however, when the CCP loses its authority. If the Chinese people lose faith in CCP rule and the society destabilizes, China's political system could collapse. For the CCP, such a situation is unacceptable. Accordingly, China, which believes that US criticism of China will isolate China in the international community, impede China's economic development, and ultimately undermine the political system of one-party rule by the CCP, is pursuing anti-US public diplomacy and information warfare in order to bring international public opinion over to its side.
   The US and China are engaged in political warfare, with other countries getting caught up in the conflict and the world dichotomizing in terms of markets and values as well as information and communication networks and security. Behind the scenes of the coronavirus pandemic lies a US-China information war and perhaps what other countries need to be most vigilant about are disinformation campaigns capable of spreading false information and speculation that in turn can swing international public opinion. This also means that Japan must realize the importance of disseminating information as part of its crisis management and must be prepared for information warfare.

The Date of Completion of Writing: April 13, 2020
\*This strategic comment is based on the commentary in the Japanese version published on April 9.

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<https://www.jiia.or.jp/strategic_comment/2020-4.html>