



Pompeo bet against China — and COVID-19 may prove him right

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Before anyone knew how the coronavirus pandemic would upend the trajectory of U.S.-China relations, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a gamble. When he assumed the podium at the 2020 Munich Security Conference in February, the secretary leveled a broadside at “Westlessness,” the gathering’s somber theme: “The West is winning. We are collectively winning. We’re doing it together.”

At some level, optimistic rhetoric is requisite for any chief diplomat, but Pompeo was taking a calculated risk by speaking with such confidence. Just weeks prior, Britain had publicly parted ways with the U.S. by giving Chinese tech giant Huawei the green light to participate in its 5G buildout. London’s dismissiveness of Washington’s warnings was indicative of Europe’s broader hesitancy in embracing the return of great-power competition.

But instead of adjusting diplomacy to match reality, Pompeo was betting that the tide would eventually turn. In his view, not only would the Old World be driven to side with the New, but a broader coalition of America’s allies and partners would assemble against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To this end, Pompeo spearheaded diplomatic campaigns to blunt Huawei’s advance across Europe, to shine a light on the horrific plight of Uyghur Muslims in China’s western province of Xinjiang, to bolster Taiwan’s international relationships, and to stand with demonstrators in Hong Kong who face an inevitable crackdown.

Before the coronavirus, many of these initiatives felt perfunctory. European capitals were uninterested in American warnings about 5G network security. Likewise, governments throughout the Middle East and Central Asia seemed remarkably indifferent to Uyghur persecution — and remain so today. Meanwhile, Beijing has siphoned off a growing number of supporters from Taipei in recent years with lucrative investment offers. And, despite delaying a forceful response, the U.S. ultimately was unable to deter the CCP from fully eroding Hong Kong’s autonomy.

But the fallout of COVID-19 has both revealed a crack in the facade of China’s invincibility and underscored the logic behind Pompeo’s gamble: Given enough time, the CCP will trip itself up.

The four-stage progression of Beijing’s propaganda throughout the pandemic has highlighted a regime in ongoing crisis mode. What started as a campaign to silence doctors and censor medical records devolved into ham-fisted conspiracy theories about the U.S. Army bringing COVID-19 to Wuhan. The CCP ignored the spread of the virus in an effort to stop the spread of information — and failed to do both. The party then tried to rehabilitate its image outside China by selling back the personal protective equipment (PPE) it had stockpiled weeks before the pandemic spread globally. But PPE diplomacy turned sour once nations realized that this “aid” came with a price, and was often defective to boot.

By this time, China was facing a growing chorus of anger that led some nations to upgrade relations with Taiwan and call for investigations into the party’s coverup in late 2019. The CCP then entered the final stage of its COVID-19 diplomacy: economic coercion. Even now, Beijing is leveraging its PPE stockpile and especially market access in an attempt to control the actions of foreign governments — bringing its entire position full circle. What began as a fire drill to conceal the existence of the coronavirus has now morphed into a global campaign to hide the CCP’s paranoia.

How governments treat their own people is the best indicator of how they will treat the rest of the world. This axiom has been the basis of Pompeo’s aggressive China agenda. In this way, COVID-19 is more than just a stress test of public health infrastructure; the virus has helped to reveal institutional resiliency in various nations. And as it turns out, the CCP is a great deal weaker than many observers thought.

Even so, policymakers in the U.S. still face a difficult road ahead.

European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell recently dismissed any possibility of a transatlantic alliance against China, instead calling for a “big positive agenda” with Beijing — a testament to the still-potent allure of China’s market and its mammoth One Belt, One Road initiative. In this way, Pompeo’s rhetoric at Munich was hyperbole. Clear divisions persist between America and Europe, and bridging them fully may be impossible. But, then again, Britain went from enthusiastically welcoming Huawei equipment to spearheading a “D10” network of ten Huawei-free democracies in the span of 120 days.

No one knows how the U.S.-China relationship will evolve in the next month, let alone the coming decade. In this way, policymaking is always a gamble of sorts. But if you know your opponent has a losing hand, playing the odds becomes easier. When it comes to China, Pompeo has this diplomatic acumen in spades.

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