

# *Coronavirus Drives the U.S. and China Deeper Into Global Power Struggle*

Many experts warn that an international health and economic crisis calls for more cooperation, not confrontation, between Washington and Beijing.



By Michael Crowley, Edward Wong and Lara Jakes

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WASHINGTON — When President Trump took the podium at the White House briefing room one afternoon last week, his prepared remarks included a reference to the “corona virus.” But a close-up photograph revealed that Mr. Trump had used one of his signature Sharpies to cross out the word “corona,” changing the phrase to “Chinese virus.”

Mr. Trump was scathing as he accused Beijing of concealing the outbreak first detected in Wuhan that has become a pandemic now paralyzing the United States. “Certainly, the world is paying a big price for what they did,” he said. And the next day, he was joined at a White House briefing by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who accused China’s government of distorting vital health data and said its response “creates risk to people all around the world.”

The withering criticism is an abrupt change in tone for a president who has long sought to stay on friendly terms with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, and who initially praised Mr. Xi’s government for “doing a very professional job” against the epidemic. But as Mr. Trump and top American officials toughen their condemnations of Mr. Xi’s government, national security and public health experts fear that the two world powers are heading into a new Cold War that could seriously undermine joint efforts to quash the virus and salvage the global economy.

Even some health officials in the Trump administration have warned that denouncing China’s government could make it more resistant to sharing accurate data about the virus. China has shared the genome sequence of the virus, and Chinese scientists have written many public papers on the virus, even if officials initially covered it up. China also has the power to interfere with medical supply chains into the United States, and its economic policies are crucial to the wider global economy.

Eswar Prasad, a China expert and professor of trade policy at Cornell University, called the new

hostility “dispiriting.”

“The U.S.-China relationship has deteriorated to a new post-Tiananmen low at a particularly unfortunate time, when the two countries ought to be joining forces to limit the ravages wrought by the pandemic on public health, economic activity and financial markets,” he said.

Kelly Magsamen, a former diplomat and deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific affairs during the Obama administration, added that “a posture of competition” undercuts efforts to contain the virus. “Rather than China bashing just for the sake of China bashing, we need to be working together to get this under control,” she said.

But China hawks see the pandemic as a chance to spotlight what they call the sinister nature of China’s Communist Party, turn international opinion against it and combat its anti-American conspiracy theories.

“It is obvious from the facts that there is an information hot war and an economic hot war that we’re currently in,” said Stephen K. Bannon, a former Trump White House strategist and leading conservative critic of the Chinese Communist Party.

China’s government, Mr. Bannon added, “has proven to the world they’re an existential threat to the Chinese people and to the world, not just the United States.”

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Mr. Bannon in effect speaks for the many senior Trump administration officials who have long pressed for a more confrontational posture toward Beijing. These officials warn that a fast-growing China, under Mr. Xi’s increasingly authoritarian rule, seeks military, economic and technological domination over the United States and its allies.

They include Mr. Pompeo, a hard-liner who employs the term “Wuhan virus” despite widespread criticism of that phrase, which incenses Chinese leaders. Mr. Pompeo has condemned Beijing for suppressing initial reports about the illness, including by local doctors whom the government reprimanded for posting about it on social media.

Another influential hawk is Matthew Pottinger, Mr. Trump’s deputy national security adviser

and the main architect of strategic policy on China in the White House. Mr. Pottinger is a former Wall Street Journal reporter who covered China, including its 2003 SARS crisis, and chronicled government efforts to suppress information about that epidemic. He has publicly recounted being “punched in the face” by “a government goon” while reporting on corruption in Beijing.



President Trump has repeatedly called the coronavirus the “Chinese virus.” Erin Schaff/The New York Times

And in an appearance at the Heritage Foundation this month, Mr. Trump’s national security adviser, Robert C. O’Brien, focused his commentary about the virus on what he called China’s culpability for its ferocious spread, saying “this outbreak in Wuhan was covered up.”

But some of Mr. Trump’s economic advisers, including the Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, and the director of his National Economic Council, Larry Kudlow, believe that antagonizing China over strategic issues threatens economic cooperation that is required in an interconnected global economy in which China holds many of the cards.

The hardened messaging from Washington has infuriated China’s government, whose officials and news outlets have fired back, accusing the United States of an attempt to deflect blame offshore — and even of producing the virus: This month, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman pushed a conspiracy theory online that the U.S. Army might have taken the virus to Wuhan.

China also has significant leverage over global health supplies. American officials have criticized China for buying up a vast portion of the global supply of medical masks, and called for bringing the supply chains that produce pharmaceuticals, medical devices and protective gear back to the United States.

“President Trump is in a very difficult situation, because he still needs the cooperation of the C.C.P. on many things — not just on the economy but on this virus,” Mr. Bannon said, referring to the Chinese Communist Party. “We are still coupled.”

Mr. Trump seemed to acknowledge as much on Friday, when he couched some of his earlier criticism of China’s government. “I respect China and I respect President Xi,” Mr. Trump said, calling the Chinese leader — with whom he has spent months trying to negotiate a comprehensive trade agreement — “a friend of mine.”

Such comments were more common from Mr. Trump a few weeks ago, when few known coronavirus cases existed in the United States and large parts of China were under lockdown. But the language shifted as the United States proved incapable of halting the virus’s spread, and China appeared to be getting its outbreak under control, emboldening officials to chastise Washington.

Some Trump officials and Republicans in Congress say the crisis has underscored an urgent need to reduce America’s economic dependence on Beijing. The White House trade adviser Peter Navarro has helped draft an executive order that would require the federal government to buy more American-made pharmaceuticals.

Some Republicans say an article published this month by China’s state-run Xinhua news service amounted to a threat that America could lose access to vital drugs made in China.

“They can threaten to cut off our pharmaceutical supplies,” Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, told Fox News on March 13. “That’s a tremendous amount of leverage.”

Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Representative Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, both Republicans, have introduced legislation that would “end U.S. dependence on China for pharmaceutical manufacturing,” as a statement from Mr. Cotton’s office put it.

Trump officials are also gauging the effect of the coronavirus and a related spike in tensions on their trade talks. Chinese and American officials have not publicly said whether China will be able to meet a commitment it made under an interim trade pact in January to purchase \$200 billion in American goods over the next two years, but widespread economic disruptions make that appear unlikely.

The current friction is as much about political rhetoric and national pride as it is about economics, however. Senior administration officials are outraged over China’s propaganda campaign playing up its efforts at sending medical supplies around the world — a clear attempt to whitewash the party’s reputation both at home and abroad after a bungled response to the outbreak, American officials say.

The officials also say the United States might have been able to help contain the virus had China

not initially refused to admit international experts, including ones from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, into Wuhan. Chinese interference “probably cost the world community two months to respond,” Mr. O’Brien said last month.

Geng Shuang, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, rejected such talk on Friday. “Their claims of China lacking openness and transparency are simply fact-distorting,” he said.

American officials are also angry that Chinese leaders are doing little to acknowledge that the United States sent 18 tons of medical supplies to China on charter airplanes used to evacuate American citizens from Wuhan. In early February, the United States also pledged \$100 million of aid to China and other nations to fight the virus.

A new strain on relations came last week when China expelled almost all American citizens reporting for The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.

Some conservatives, as well as Trump administration officials, are unhappy with the White House’s talk of a “Chinese” or “Wuhan” virus, saying that such language should target China’s rulers more specifically. “I honestly believe we’re getting the nomenclature wrong,” Mr. Bannon said. “This is not a Chinese virus. This is a ‘C.C.P. Virus.’ The Chinese people are the victim of this.”

Asian-Americans also say the “Chinese virus” label has led to incidents of racial slurs and physical attacks.

Many China hawks say broader fears of antagonizing China for concern of losing its cooperation are overstated. “China really does not want to help us,” said Daniel Blumenthal, the director of Asian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. “They have every interest in covering up and distracting and blaming the U.S.”

But Ryan Hass, a senior Asia director in the Obama administration’s National Security Council who is now at the Brookings Institution, noted that during previous global crises, the United States and China found ways to look past their differences and come together.

“In a normal functioning administration, my advice would be to identify practical ways where the U.S. and China can pool resources and expertise to help get the global spread of coronavirus under control,” he said. “Such an approach is a bridge too far for the current administration, sadly.”

“To be clear, there is much criticism to be levied against China, and there will be plenty of time for score-keeping,” he added. “But now is not that time.”

Ana Swanson contributed reporting.

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