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COVID-19 and Public Opinion Warfare between the U.S. and China

Dr. Lee Seong-hyon

(sunnybbsfs@gmail.com)

Director of the Center for Chinese Studies, the Sejong Institute

English Abstract

A global epidemic offers room for countries to cooperate each other. That doesn't seem to apply to Washington and Beijing. The U.S. and China are currently engaging in a fierce "public opinion warfare" surrounding coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The U.S. is trying to weaken the Communist Party leadership of China and its authoritarian system by highlighting the China's governance model, as well as China's attempts to cover up and control public opinion. Meanwhile, China has been putting its utmost effort to contain the rising civic discontent.

The U.S. has defined China as a "strategic competitor" and has been curbing China's rise. For Washington, the most ideal strategy is to thwart Beijing's ambition without using any kinetic means, such as a war. COVID-19 is clearly an unfortunate plague, but given the stark reality of the realpolitik of international relations, such an epidemic could be a strategic opening for a country competing with China. History has shown a plague can topple a dynasty.

The following elements may suggest a future prospect of the outcome: △ how much the circumstance revolving around COVID-19 poses a threat to Xi Jinping and the Communist Party of China (CPC), △ whether and how much the U.S. will be able to utilize the occasion from strategic perspectives, and △ how effectively and how soon the CPC will contain a possible civic uprising due to discontent.

The U.S. has been marshalling a robust public opinion warfare, underscoring the internal resentment from the Chinese public. China, at the same time, is experiencing negative situations throughout the state. Specifically, China is facing high social instability due to the death of Li Wenliang, a medical doctor who first disclosed a possible outbreak of COVID-19, inadequate medical response system, a lack of masks, prolonged quarantine of residents, distrust of the government, and severe decline in economic activities.

In short, the U.S. strategic concern rests with how serious a threat the situation poses to the communist regime. However, the CPC has also initiated its tactics of △“hierarchical legitimacy” and △“hero making and scapegoating.” A tentative prognosis, as of this writing, states that the coronavirus epidemic isn’t likely to measure to a “meaningful” challenge to the CPC in the short term, which could be roughly earmarked by the end of March with a clear sign of downward trajectory of new infections. ♣

※ Translator’s note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author’s personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.