



China's 'mask diplomacy' to change the COVID-19 narrative in Europe

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China has attempted to change the COVID-19 narrative (a disease caused by SARS-COV2 virus) and dissociate itself from the virus after reports indicate SARS-COV2 spread from a 'wet market' in Wuhan. It is acting both out of fear and confidence. China is afraid that its standing in world affairs will take a beating due to its botched response in the initial stages to combat COVID-19. It is trying to save face internationally. China is apprehensive that the pandemic will highlight its less developed domestic conditions. It is also concerned it will be blamed for more than three million infections and more than 185,000 deaths globally and for the worst economic meltdown since the 'Great Depression' of the 1930s. China is also deeply anxious about regime survival due to domestic and global economic meltdown.

On the global stage, China is exuding confidence in its victory in the war against COVID-19 under the leadership of President Xi. China has declared that there are no new cases in mainland China and only foreign and asymptomatic cases were being reported until recently.¹ China is portraying itself as an essential power which has the capacity to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and ancillary medical equipment (as a public good) relative to the US-led West. It has allowed Xi to boost his image as a model global leader. China has also highlighted the strengths and effectiveness of its governance model. It has repeatedly emphasized the struggles of Western countries in combating COVID-19 and criticized these countries for their inadequacies.

¹Reports indicate that zero domestic cases in China is because of decrease in testing as local officials follow Beijing's diktat of winning the war against COVID-19 (Rauhala 2020).

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China's 'mask diplomacy'

China has used 'mask diplomacy' both for coercive diplomacy and for winning hearts and minds. In 2009, it used 'mask diplomacy' in Mexico during the H1N1 flu to portray itself as a benevolent nation. Recently, China hinted at imposing controls over the export of pharmaceuticals which would lead to 'the mighty sea of coronavirus' in the USA (Chakraborty 2020). To change the COVID-19 narrative and portray itself as a good Samaritan and a responsible and reliable partner in combating COVID-19, China has provided medical assistance, vital health equipment and shared its expertise with various countries in tackling the pandemic. China has provided medical aid and sold ventilators, other ICU facilities, masks, gloves, testing kits and medicines to numerous European countries. It has sent medical experts and shared medical expertise with France, Italy and '17 + 1' grouping of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). China's assistance has been appreciated in most of the European countries. This is despite reports from the UK, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Czech Republic and the Netherlands that some of the PPE and virus testing kits were of substandard quality and dysfunctional. Chinese media has left no stone unturned to highlight the gratitude of the European countries towards China.

Chinese multinational corporations have also indulged in 'mask diplomacy'. It is not completely clear whether this is at the behest of the Chinese government. The Alibaba Foundation and the Jack Ma Foundation have already provided medical assistance to France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Ukraine and other countries. Jack Ma Foundation has also published a handbook to help countries fight COVID-19. Huawei has also provided testing kits and masks to Italy, Ireland, Spain, Poland, Czech Republic and the Netherlands. Oppo, Xiaomi and other Chinese smartphone companies have also sent thousands of masks to European countries.

Despite medical aid and assistance and provision of PPE, China's attempts to change the COVID-19 narrative in Europe have largely been unsuccessful (Brattberg and Le Corre 2020). Italy which signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China in 2019 regarding its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative has been a major recipient of PPE from China. The EU declined Italy's request for help under the Civil Protection Mechanism. Other EU countries also did not come to Italy's aid. To make matters worse, Germany, France and Czech Republic imposed a ban on the export of PPE. This led to feelings of abandonment, humiliation and deception amongst a large number of Italians.

Responding on a bilateral basis, China provided 30 tons of medical supplies to Italy. Huawei offered to connect not only Wuhan with Italian hospitals but also Italian hospitals amongst themselves using cloud computing to combat COVID-19. China's 'mask diplomacy' was successful in changing China's image. The social media narrative in Italy was that China was Italy's saviour. Italians have been genuinely grateful for China's assistance although not to the extent portrayed in Chinese media. While Italians believe that China is associated with the origins of COVID-19, there is a realization that China has been more efficient in tackling the pandemic relative to Italy (Ghiretti 2020). Spain has also praised China and decided to draw lessons from China's experience to combat COVID-19. China's timely assistance has further dented European unity.

China has undertaken measures to strengthen economic, political and diplomatic ties with Central and Eastern European Countries under the China-CEEC or 17 + 1 (previously 16 + 1) framework launched in 2012 in Warsaw. This framework is a key part of the ambitious BRI. China has tried to use trade and commerce to increase influence among CEEC and rupture EU unity. Out of the six Balkan countries, Serbia has received the largest amount of investment and loans from China. Serbia extensively eulogised China (and threw insults at the EU which did not come to Serbia's aid)² after the latter provided medical equipment and medical experts to Serbia to combat COVID-19.

Serbian President Vucic remarked that only China and President Xi can help Serbia. Vucic went to the airport to receive 16 tons of medical aid and kissed the Chinese flag. Subsequently, Serbia adopted China's model of combating COVID-19 (Albert 2020). Hungary with its authoritarian, populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic Prime Minister Viktor Orban has praised China for its assistance and provision of medical supplies. Similarly, in Czech Republic, the sentiment is that China was the only country which came to its aid. It is evident that China has been able to strengthen ties with CEEC at the EU's expense and has been able to depict itself as a reliable and responsible partner in combating COVID-19.

EU's response

The EU dithered in its initial response to tackle COVID-19 and in coming to the aid of both member and non-member states. However, the EU has ramped up procurement and provision of PPE to member countries. It has established 'RescEU stockpile' of medical equipment and allowed member countries to apply for direct grants to the European Commission (EC). Hungary has also received EU assistance but the aid has been played down.³ Serbia, a non-EU state, is also allowed to apply for the grant. EC also provided a €93 million aid package to Serbia. Despite EU providing more aid than China, Vucic remarked that EU solidarity is a fairy tale and it does not exist (Popovic 2020a). The EU has also announced aid packages for other Balkan countries⁴ (Popovic 2020b).

The EC also provided €50 million to Italy for medical equipment and on April 16, 2020 offered a 'heartfelt apology' for not coming to its aid initially. Germany, Austria and Luxembourg are treating COVID-19 patients from France and Italy. Later on, Germany, France and Austria sent PPE to Italy and other European countries. Recently, the EU agreed to a €540 billion rescue package for member countries affected by COVID-19. The European Central Bank has announced a separate €750 billion rescue package.

² Vucic has been critical of the EU because of the Kosovo dispute and the EU insistence that Serbia strictly implement EU conditionality and monitoring procedures. The EU has criticised Serbia for regressing on media freedom and democracy.

³ Hungary has been a key Chinese ally in the EU and has blocked statements inside the EU which have been criticised China for its human rights record and actions in South China Sea among others.

⁴ Balkan countries are not members of the EU.

Josep Borrell Fontelles, the EU's top-ranked diplomat has criticized China for its attempts to create fissures in the EU by extending aid and assistance to certain countries in Europe in the battle against COVID-19. He stated that the EU countries should prepare themselves for a "struggle for influence" in a global battle of narratives... Armed with facts, we need to defend Europe against its detractors' (Stojanovic 2020). Ursula von der Leyen, President of the EC, was quick to point out that China does not communicate directly with the EU but with individual member countries. The EU has countered China's propaganda and pointed out that Germany and France provided more masks to Italy than China. Following criticism from Borrell, Huawei stopped supplying masks to Europe. Huawei's 'mask diplomacy' is perceived as attempts to change the COVID-19 narrative, boost China's geopolitical ambitions and influence European countries to allow the use of Huawei equipment in the information and technology sector.

Borrell has also been critical of China's attempts of discrediting the EU and branding Europeans as carriers of coronavirus. On April 17, 2020, French President Macron refuted that China has dealt better with the crisis. France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned China's ambassador to France to express its disapproval after a message appeared on China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website claiming that western countries had left their old people to die in care homes. With the EU (and the USA) fighting against China's COVID-19 narrative, China's attempts at shirking culpability and passing the buck is most likely to backfire globally.

Policy recommendations

China is an indispensable partner in combating COVID-19. Europe should ensure that China conforms to World Health Organization's norms regarding information sharing and shares its expertise and equipment in combating COVID-19. Second, the EU should continue to combat Chinese misinformation and propaganda campaign to change COVID-19 narrative. Third, the EU should enhance its capacity to manufacture medical equipment to decrease its reliance on China. Fourth, the EU has to be united in its dealings with China. The unity of the West including the EU and G7 is sine qua non to deal with China and any crisis. President Trump with his 'America first policy' and blaming the US' European allies have put deep strains in the Trans-Atlantic ties. EU's unity and solidarity have already been punctured due to its internal contradictions, and disagreements and shortcomings are exacerbated in times of crisis.

China must improve and transform the regulatory framework especially with respect to wet animal markets which might prevent the reoccurrence of another epidemic/pandemic. It can seek help from the EU in this endeavour. It must also accept responsibility for its bungled response in the initial stages of COVID-19; but this is highly unlikely given the proclivity to save face coupled with nationalism and concomitant regime legitimacy/survival. Last but most importantly, China should be careful regarding its COVID-19 diplomacy. If there is a perception that it is trying to take advantage of Europe in this crisis, the goodwill that it has generated will not only wither quickly but also most likely to backfire.

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