

# 'To Tell China's Story Well': China's International Messaging during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has dented China's image as an efficient party-state, given how an effort to cover up the outbreak and the resulting delays in reporting led to the virus spreading beyond its origins in Wuban in Hubei province to the rest of the country as well as rapidly across the world. This article examines China's massive external propaganda effort launched as part of the effort to repair the damage to its global image and interests. It notes how China has not let the situation stop it from pursuing its traditional foreign policy and security interests, including, of competition with the USA. The article also argues that it is the ruling Communist Party of China's concerns about its legitimacy at home that have determined the nature and scale of Chinese responses to the pandemic outside its borders.*

**Keywords:** Novel coronavirus/COVID-19, propaganda, Communist Party of China (CPC), foreign policy, great power competition, self-image

At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping noted that

... as a world we face growing uncertainties and destabilizing factors. Global economic growth lacks energy; the gap between rich and poor continues to widen; hotspot issues arise often in some regions; and unconventional security threats like terrorism, cyber-insecurity, *major infectious diseases*, and climate change continue to spread. As human beings we have many common challenges to face. (Xi 2017, 52, emphasis mine)

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He had also declared

We will, with emphasis on prevention, carry out extensive patriotic health campaigns, promote healthy and positive lifestyles, and *prevent and control major diseases*. (Xi 2017, 43, emphasis mine)

Earlier still in the speech, he would state

We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as *to tell China's stories well*, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's cultural soft power. (Xi 2017, 39, emphasis mine)

The Chinese leadership was, therefore, cognisant of the many global challenges it faced at the beginning of Xi's second term as General Secretary. With the outbreak of the coronavirus disease, termed COVID-19, and the fact that both its origins and responsibility for its spread can be traced back to Wuhan in China's Hubei province, not only have Xi's promises to 'prevent and control major diseases' been broken, but the task of enhancing the country's soft power has become all the more challenging in the face of the resultant global criticism. The high official death toll in several countries due to the pandemic—higher than even that in China—makes the task of Chinese diplomacy in restoring the country's global image harder still. While the responsibility for poor preparation and countermeasures in the face of the advancing epidemic lies partly with the respective national governments, China is also an easy target, given its role in withholding crucial information at various stages, including from its own people and international organisations like the World Health Organization (WHO).

Under these circumstances—with the pandemic still ongoing and international relations and the global economy both in flux—'to tell China's stories well', whether at home or abroad, becomes an even more important task for the CPC's propaganda apparatus.

The CPC's propaganda efforts to repair its image within the country fall beyond the remit of this article. Also falling outside the scope of this article is a detailed examination of the specific roles of CPC bodies, such as the United Front Work Department and the International Liaison Department, that count among their responsibilities propaganda work outside China's borders and, have increased their reach and activities since Xi's ascension to power as General Secretary. While these bodies have no doubt played, and will continue to play, an important role in getting across China's points of view to the rest of the world in the context of the pandemic, this article focuses on the content of the message that party and state organisations have sought to convey abroad.

The first section offers some background to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, termed SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) and responsible for COVID-19, in Wuhan. The second section looks at the propaganda measures China has undertaken in order to refurbish its image abroad, while the third section looks at how China has also sought to take advantage of the pandemic to

achieve its traditional foreign policy goals. The essay notes in conclusion that China's international efforts are ultimately geared towards boosting the domestic legitimacy of the CPC.

### COVER-UP AND DELAYS

SARS-CoV-2 might have been circulating in Wuhan as early as 10 December 2019 (Allen-Ebrahimian 2020), even though China's official news agency Xinhua, in its timeline, talks of the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention having 'detected cases of pneumonia of unknown cause' only in 'late December' (*Xinhua* 2020b). The virus quickly spread to nearly every country in the world with well over two million people infected as of mid-April 2020 and some 160,000 deaths (WHO 2020a). By about mid-March and after putting in place stringent measures, Wuhan—the epicentre and source of the largest number of infections and deaths until then—reportedly had no new cases (*Xinhua* 2020d). But by this time, Italy in Europe had become the new epicentre of the virus and on 19 March, the number of deaths in that country had overtaken that in China (Faulconbridge and Mackenzie 2020).

The COVID-19 outbreak came at a particularly challenging time for the CPC leadership led by Xi. After months of protests in Hong Kong against Beijing's excessive interference in the Special Administrative Region's internal affairs, the return to power of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in both the presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan, and an ongoing trade war with the USA, interspersed with occasional truces, the pandemic could be seen as a test of both the CPC's domestic legitimacy and China's international standing and credibility.

The Chinese central government responded to the novel coronavirus with greater speed and transparency than it had during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002–2004. This included a lockdown, beginning 23 January, of Wuhan, a city of some ten million people and a GDP of over US\$210 billion in 2019, the ninth largest among cities in China (*China Daily* 2020b). However, Beijing had not acted quickly enough and wasted precious time, owing to both inbuilt limitations of the system of reporting and accountability (Han 2020), as well as other political considerations such as possibly issues of its image in the international system. The annual internal migration for the Chinese Lunar New Year was already underway before the government declared the virus a public health emergency and the Chinese government waited still longer—till 27 January—before it issued an order, suspending group travel to foreign countries (Nakazawa 2020).<sup>1</sup> While information about the virus

<sup>1</sup>The *Nikkei* suggested that 'The delay in the Chinese government's ban on group travel to foreign countries may have helped to double or possibly triple the number of people infected'. The delay has been confirmed by non-state-run Chinese media (see, Han 2020)

was communicated to the WHO at the end of December 2019 (WHO 2020b), it had emerged that the head of the China's National Health Commission, in a teleconference with provincial officials on 14 January, had warned of a serious emergent situation with human-to-human transmission possible and noting the upcoming Lunar New Year holidays and high numbers of people expected to be travelling (*The Associated Press* 2020). Human-to-human transmission of the virus was finally publicly confirmed by the National Health Commission on 20 January, but it was only on 23 January that Wuhan was actually placed under lockdown (*Xinhua* 2020b). By this time, some five million people were estimated to have already left the city without being screened (Allen-Ebrahimian 2020).

Earlier, however, on 1 January, authorities in Wuhan had taken 'legal measures' against eight doctors who had shared information of the growing epidemic in chat groups at the end of December. The authorities even widely publicised the punishment of the eight 'rumor spreaders'. It was not until a month later on 29 January that the Wuhan city mayor finally admitted a failure to disclose information on the outbreak to the people in a timely manner (Gao et al 2020).

The admission of guilt by the Wuhan mayor is part of a common Chinese political practice of local authorities becoming the fall guys for mistakes that often have their genesis in policies and practices of the central government.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Wuhan mayor did hint that it was existing central government instructions, restricting disclosures on disease outbreaks, that were responsible for his decision to delay informing the general populace (Lu 2020). Xi Jinping would, at a CPC Politburo Standing Committee meeting on 12 February, declare 'formalism and bureaucracy were big enemies in the fight against the virus' before firing the Wuhan mayor and the Hubei Party Secretary the next day (*CGTN* 2020b).

While restrictions could be justified on grounds of ensuring time for verification of information, the massive delay in informing the public despite the clear signs of an epidemic outbreak also suggests that the Chinese authorities saw this as a political issue of management and control of the population rather than of safeguarding their health. While Chinese authorities possess the authority—and the means—to ensure obedience and silence at home,<sup>3</sup> foreign governments and their peoples were a different matter, and Beijing launched a full-blown propaganda effort to try and counter the damage to its reputation, resulting from the spread of the COVID-19 disease beyond China to the rest of the world.

<sup>2</sup>A documentary by state-run television network CGTN carefully inserts a clip of a Wuhan citizen criticizing local authorities for being slow in their response at the beginning of the crisis even as she says the rest of the country was making great efforts to save the city (*CGTN* 2020b).

<sup>3</sup>There were brief days of openness which allowed for an outpouring of criticism, especially of the Wuhan administration's reprimanding of Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist and one of the aforementioned eight doctors, who had warned colleagues of a potential new infectious disease and would later succumb to the disease himself. This forced the authorities once again to clamp down on free flow of information within China (Lawler 2020).

#### EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>4</sup>

There are at least six elements to China's endeavours abroad in trying to shape the narrative around its role and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the pandemic.

First, there has been an effort to magnify the scale and scope of China's mitigation efforts. State-run *China Daily* launched a new website, 'Fighting COVID-19: The Chinese Way' (*China Daily* 2020a) and Beijing has, so far, been able to ensure that the WHO has not criticised it for any lapses. A joint WHO-China report on the coronavirus disease was practically hagiographic in tone, talking about how China had 'rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history' and stating that the measures China had adopted were 'the only measures that are currently proven to interrupt or minimize transmission chains in humans' (WHO 2020c).

Second, China has highlighted the struggles of other countries in dealing with their own outbreak (Feng 2020). For instance, it quoted the WHO Director-General's 14 March comment that more coronavirus cases were being reported each day outside of China than the latter had reported at the epidemic's peak and that Europe had become the new global epicentre of the disease (Kou 2020). Chinese media also highlighted the USA's 'overconfidence and lack of knowledge on the virus' that stopped it from preventing the virus from spreading (Chen and Liu 2020; *People's Daily* 2020). Part of this exercise reflected also in the highlighting of cases of COVID-19 entering China from overseas (*Xinhua* 2020a).

Third, there has been an increased effort to advertise China's contribution to helping other countries fight COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> It has also highlighted without fail the gratitude each of these has apparently expressed to China for such aid.<sup>6</sup> Official efforts have been supplemented by those of Chinese enterprises. For instance, the philanthropic foundation of one of China's top private enterprises, Alibaba, as well as that of its founder, Jack Ma, announced donations of medical equipment to every country in Africa (Ma 2020a). Ma had earlier also announced a donation of 500,000 coronavirus testing kits and one million masks to the USA (Jack Ma Foundation 2020).

Fourth, there is a desire to underline the robustness and legitimacy of the Chinese political system. The aforementioned WHO-China report, for instance, highlighted the 'sincerity and dedication' of not just the medical personnel and scientists but also of Chinese 'Governors and Mayors' (WHO 2020c), thus indirectly absolving the CPC leadership of its mistakes. Criticism of the USA, while often warranted, also involved references to the Chinese central government's 'decisive measures' as well as advice to

<sup>4</sup>This section is an expanded version of Jacob (2020).

<sup>5</sup>To take just a sample, China has sent medical aid and offered training to several countries: Iraq (*Global Times* 2020b), Italy (*Xinhua* 2020c), Iran (Zhang Hui 2020), South Korea (Bai 2020), Japan (Ji 2020), Spain (Hua 2020b), and the Philippines (Hua 2020c) among others. For more details, see *Xinhua* (2020b) and Leng (2020).

<sup>6</sup>For a case involving Italy, see Zhao (2020d) and for Iran, see, Hu (2020).

the USA—one of the first modern federal states—on ‘strengthen[ing]...coordination’ between the US federal and state governments (Chen and Liu 2020).

References in the WHO report to the ‘community grid management system in China’ and its role in fighting the 2019-nCov (Chen and Liu 2020) while accurate, also however, elided over the fact that it was the same system that aids and abets surveillance and control measures over minority ethnic populations in Tibet and Xinjiang and which form the subject of disaffection at home and criticism abroad. China also prepared carefully to pre-empt questions along these lines. In a documentary on the Wuhan lockdown by CGTN, there is a scene of a Muslim man from Qinghai in hospital due to coronavirus infection showing him describing how the government was taking care of him, including getting him *halal* food to eat (CGTN 2020b). This was surely aimed at the Muslim world in general as part of the larger effort to counter criticism of Chinese policies towards Uyghur and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.<sup>7</sup>

The pandemic is also seen as offering an opportunity for China to push CPC General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s rhetoric of a ‘community of common destiny’ (Kou 2020)—part of the narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—as a way of framing China’s help to the outside world. Calling Xi, ‘commander-in-chief of China’s war against COVID-19’ (Kou 2020) is no doubt also about reinforcing not just his leadership supremacy at home but offering him as a model for other leaders and peoples around the world.

Fifth, there is an active Chinese effort to deflect the blame from China. This, Chinese officials have done by frequently pointing out that the virus ‘respects no borders’, calling it a ‘common enemy’ and talking of ‘collective response’ from the international community. While all of this is true as points of fact, the consistency and frequency of these statements from the highest levels of the Chinese leadership (Li Keqiang 2020; MOFA 2020j; Wang 2020a; Xi 2020;) with, of course, no acknowledgement of their role in allowing an outbreak in Wuhan escalate to a pandemic, suggest that they view as important the need to create a new narrative around the issue.

Finally, and perhaps as a backup to the above endeavour, the Chinese have engaged in spreading misinformation about the origins of the virus. This began with China’s most famous epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan being quoted as saying that while ‘the infection was first spotted in China, the virus may not have originated in China’ (CGTN 2020c). The most prominent part of this campaign has been the effort to somehow pin the blame on the USA for the origins of the virus. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, one of the most active Chinese on Twitter—a medium that is banned for ordinary Chinese—actively pushed the narrative that the novel coronavirus was introduced into China by the US military (Zhao 2020a, c) and incoherently—but successfully, going by the number of retweets—linked proceedings

<sup>7</sup>There are reportedly up to a million Uyghur in multiple ‘reeducation centres’ across Xinjiang (BBC News 2018).

in the US Congress to his conspiracy theory (Zhao 2020b). Another line that the Chinese took was to claim that the fact that the USA had been able to start vaccine trials quickly meant that it had been working on it well before the pandemic (Kwan 2020). While the Chinese ambassador to the USA, Cui Tiankai would say it was ‘crazy’ to spread such a theory, other Chinese diplomats seem to have taken Xi’s injunction to them in 2019 to show more ‘fighting spirit’ quite seriously (Zhai and Tian 2020).

## BACKLASH

Of course, none of this has been easy for China to pull off, and there have been missteps and counter-reactions. For instance, the poor quality of Chinese medical supplies attracted criticism from several countries.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the poor treatment meted out to Africans resident in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, on suspicion of them being carriers of the virus (Vincent 2020) invited strong protests from African representatives and appears to have seriously undermined years of official Chinese efforts at cultivating African elites.<sup>9</sup> Other instances, include such overreach as the Chinese consulate-general in Chicago in the USA, sending an email asking the head of the senate of the state of Wisconsin to sponsor a bill praising China’s response to coronavirus. It even helpfully sent a draft resolution for ‘reference’. The reaction was predictably hostile (Hoonhout 2020). The French, meanwhile, were furious at an allegation posted on the website of the Chinese embassy in Paris by an unnamed diplomat defending his country’s response to the pandemic and criticising the West’s handling, specifically stating as an example of the latter, that employees at Western nursing homes had abandoned their responsibilities and left residents to die (Irish 2020). Meanwhile, questions in general about the reliability of China’s own figures for those affected and dead from the virus have been frequent (Crawford and Martin 2020), and the upward revision of deaths in Wuhan by over 1,200 in mid-April (*Xinhua* 2020e) did not help matters.

The Chinese have often reacted quickly either substantively—by shutting down the offending exporters (Tan and Zhou 2020) and trying to mollify African interlocutors at the diplomatic level<sup>10</sup>—or by explaining matters away arguing shortcomings about the quality of the medical equipment were ‘overblown’ (*Global Times* 2020c; Yang 2020) and by shifting blame directly or indirectly to the USA in the case of the turbulence in China–Africa ties (Hua 2020a; MOFA 2020g; Wang 2020b). In other instances, such as accusations about China not revealing the truth about the origins or

<sup>8</sup> For examples from around the world, see, Jones (2020); Weedon (2020); Dudik and Tomek (2020); Gunasekar (2020).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Mahamat (2020) and Ossify Media (2020). Moussa Faki Mahamat is Chairperson of the African Union Commission while Arikana Chihombori-Quao is former African Union ambassador to the USA.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Chinese Embassy in Ghana (2020); Wang (2020b); Chinese Embassy in Nigeria (2020); Zhang Yiming (2020). Zhang Yiming is Chinese ambassador to Namibia.

complaints about its handling of the pandemic, its officials simply countered saying, 'so-called China's cover-up and intransparency (sic) is groundless' and that there was 'no so-called cover-up at all' (MOFA 2020f).

Overall, though, the sophistication and spread of the Chinese propaganda campaign shows how seriously China's rulers take their country's image abroad and the importance of this image to maintaining their hold on power at home. The importance the CPC attaches to controlling the narrative about itself and China is also brought home by the decision to expel reporters of American citizenship working for the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal.<sup>11</sup> This is a way of reducing coverage of China by foreign media — coverage, which has been crucial to exposing China's missteps and cover-up in dealing with the outbreak as well as other sensitive topics in China (Tracy, Wong, and Jakes 2020).

### THE FOREIGN POLICY USES OF A VIRUS

In addition to trying to repair their image, the Chinese have been alert to opportunities from the COVID-19 pandemic to promote more traditional foreign policy objectives.

#### CONTINUING TERRITORIAL CLAIMS

In the Chinese campaign of support for Italy during its management of COVID-19, a map put out on the Chinese Internet was particularly interesting. It showed two nurses wearing masks and uniforms in the colours of the Italian and Chinese flags, respectively, helping support a map of China with Wenchuan—the epicentre of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake—marked on it and the words, '*Keneng ni wangjile, dan women yizhi dou jizhe 2008.5.12*' (maybe you have forgotten, but we will always remember 2008.5.12). This recalls Italy's support to China during the earthquake relief efforts. The image was a response to a similar drawing by an Italian girl of a map of Italy supported by two nurses similarly attired and drawn to thank the Chinese for their help.<sup>12</sup> But what was important about the map of China was that it carefully also marked out the nine-dash line signifying China's claims in the South China Sea, which are disputed by a host of its neighbours.

<sup>11</sup> The Chinese action is also a tit-for-tat response to the US State Department placing limits on the number of Chinese employees of five state-run media organizations from China—Xinhua, CGTN, China Radio, China Daily and People's Daily—following an earlier decision to treat the news agencies as representatives of the Chinese government (Jakes 2020). The Chinese have also criticised the USA for its own supposed lack of press freedoms (Chen 2020).

<sup>12</sup> In Chinese: "可能你忘记了,但我们一直都记着" (*Guanchzhe Wang* 2020).



China has also continued to deny Taiwan—the island territory it claims for its own—any agency amidst the pandemic, saying it ‘opposes politicizing epidemic prevention and control measures’ (MOFA 2020c, f, i), with particularly sharp words and sarcasm for the USA in this regard (MOFA 2020e). It also refused to acknowledge any possibility of legitimizing the latter’s engagement with international organisations such as the WHO or allowing formal membership (MOFA 2020 b, d, e). In one instance, a Chinese diplomat included Taiwan in a list of Chinese provinces showing their infection, deaths and recovery numbers while saying Taiwan ‘did well in the prevention & control of #COVID-19, but {that it had} no need to exaggerate’ (Li Xiaosi 2020).<sup>13</sup>

### PROMOTING THE ‘CHINA MODEL’

An important part of China’s foreign policy objectives in recent years has been to promote the narrative of Xi’s ‘Chinese dream’ whose external manifestation is the promotion a ‘Chinese model’ of development—or ‘Chinese wisdom’, as he has called it (Xi 2017, 54)—for the rest of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated its own adaptations in Chinese efforts to this end. One Chinese academic noted, ‘we need a revolution in the concept and mind-set of global governance’ before adding quickly that ‘{i}nfectious diseases are no longer a simple medical problem, nor a problem of one country {but} a problem of global ideology’ (Wang 2020). At one stroke, China’s responsibility for the spread of the pandemic was denied and the CPC-led model of governance in China also promoted as the model best suited to deal with the pandemic and with a post-Covid world.

China’s BRI is naturally, a significant component of the ‘China model’. It was not surprising, therefore, that Chinese media reported that, in a phone conversation between Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, the former mentioned his country’s willingness to ‘strengthen solidarity with countries along the Belt and Road and jointly march on the ‘Healthy Silk Road’ through concerted efforts to combat the epidemic’; the Italian foreign minister for his part was recorded as echoing Wang’s sentiment (*Global Times* 2020a). This new type of ‘Silk Road’ is an addition to the many kinds of connectivities the BRI represents and is now being highlighted as part of the ‘war’ against the pandemic (Awan 2020; He 2020a).

### PUSHING FOR LEADERSHIP

This then leads us to how China has used the moment to seek leadership of global public health initiatives and international organisations involved in the field. The

<sup>13</sup> Li Xiaosi is presently Chinese ambassador to Austria.

USA's inability to map out a coherent strategy to respond to the coronavirus epidemic within its borders, weakened at the outset by President Donald Trump's attempts to deny the problem, made Chinese efforts look good by comparison. And the longer the USA struggles to contain the epidemic within its borders, the better China will appear to those observing the competition between the two powers.

As indicated above, the Chinese also seemed to have their way with the WHO—almost from the time the crisis hit international headlines, there were concerns that the WHO was going slow on declaring a full global emergency with the imputation being the Ethiopian head of the WHO, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, was swayed by the fact his country was a major recipient of Chinese aid (Akita 2020). The Trump administration's decision to cut funding to WHO citing some of these reasons, however, has also been seen as strengthening China's ability to control the organisation (Dozier 2020). The Chinese for their part criticised the USA for 'shirking international responsibilities' and 'scapegoating the WHO' (MOFA 2020h; Xu 2020; Zhong Sheng 2020) and highlighted their own role in supporting the WHO (He 2020b) as well as other international organisations (Li Keqiang 2020).

#### COUNTERING THE USA

The Chinese have taken particular umbrage at what they think are the USA's efforts to paint China in a bad light in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and especially, American efforts to remind the world of the Chinese origins of the virus.<sup>14</sup> China countered this by actively targeting the USA in turn and trying to step into the gaps that the Trump administration has left in its international responses to the pandemic.

One part of this Chinese approach was to accuse the USA of racism and deliberately targeting China. A *Wall Street Journal* op-ed titled 'China is the Real Sick Man of Asia' (Mead 2020) was the ground for the Chinese to start this particular line of attack. The text of the article, written in early February, was focused on the economic impact of the epidemic, actually hoping that it would lead to nothing more than 'a short-lived disturbance in China's economic growth'. But the article was also realistic in believing that this would not really be the case and reflected on the possibility that under the circumstances, China's rise was not all it was made out to be nor even guaranteed (Mead 2020). It was this casting of doubt on China's inexorable and inevitable rise that the Chinese probably found the most offensive and damaging.

The USA, however, would go on to employ more direct language that could again be interpreted as racist. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo began by calling the novel coronavirus, the 'Wuhan virus' (*Politico* 2020) while US President Donald Trump would in a tweet several days later refer to it as the 'Chinese Virus' (Trump 2020). While Trump has also on occasion, praised Xi Jinping, the characterisation of

<sup>14</sup> Private conversations with Chinese scholars, March 2020.

the virus as such by Pompeo and other American politicians and officials also suggests a pushback against the Chinese propaganda efforts to deflect blame on to the USA for the outbreak (Rogers 2020). Pompeo has also pointed out that, within China, the virus has been referred to as the ‘Wuhan virus’ (U.S. Department of State 2020). Still, given the racist and xenophobic overtones of the expression when used by foreigners, the Chinese will find it useful to exploit this American approach to not just rally their own citizens but also other nations with concerns about American policies.

#### UNDERMINING AND CRITICIZING

Another of China’s traditional foreign policy objectives has been to highlight divisions in the West as a sign of weaknesses in its systems and alliances and of the efficacy of Chinese foreign policy. A case in point is the Chinese media’s references to the European Union’s ‘lack of solidarity with Italy’ and its slow responses to the latter’s demand for medical supplies in the wake of pandemic. By contrast, China’s response is described in detail (CGTN 2020a).<sup>15</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum are Chinese efforts with respect to countries treated as pariahs by the West, such as Iran. Chinese articles do not fail to mention that the West Asian nation’s difficulties in dealing with the disease outbreak have much to do with the fact of the country’s economic difficulties as a result of American sanctions (Zhang 2020).

In between, there is perhaps, what might be termed as signalling to those countries that are perceived to be close to the USA and seen as potential rivals in Asia, such as India. New Delhi had delivered 15 tonnes of medical equipment to Hubei on 26 February, after the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised the assistance in a written letter to Xi as early as 8 February (MEA 2020a).<sup>16</sup> Public knowledge of the flight was available from at least 17 February (Chaudhury 2020; MEA 2020d).

However, in his Munich Security Conference speech on 15 February, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang specifically highlighted support from two of India’s neighbours but not India. He noted that ‘Pakistan, our iron-clad brother, sent us virtually all the masks in its stock’ while Sri Lankan, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa ‘prayed for China at the Abhayarama Temple in Colombo, alongside nearly a million Buddhist believers in his country’ (Wang 2020a). Similarly, even if he would eventually send supplies to India too (*Hindustan Times* 2020), Jack Ma’s mid-March announcements of support outside of China named every country in South Asia but Bhutan and India (Ma 2020b). It would appear that the Chinese have been less than fulsome in acknowledging India during the crisis.

<sup>15</sup>The European Union would later apologize to Italy (*DW* 2020). For more on China’s outreach to Italy, see Cristiani (2020).

<sup>16</sup>This was acknowledged by the Chinese Foreign Ministry (MOFA 2020a).

Indian media reports seemed to suggest as much saying the Chinese were deliberately delaying India's evacuation efforts of its citizens (Chaudhury 2020).<sup>17</sup> This might have been because following the novel coronavirus outbreak in China, the Indian government had also issued advisories on travel to and from China including temporary suspension of e-visas and quarantines for those coming from China (MEA 2020c). India's Ministry of External Affairs called this necessary 'purely to maintain public health so that infection does not spread to different parts of India' and clarified that there was 'no ban on travel to China or from China' (MEA 2020d). The Chinese, however, seemed to view the Indian action as a negative statement on China's handling of the crisis.<sup>18</sup>

What should be clear from these instances is that Beijing seldom misses an opportunity to protect and promote its political interests both bilaterally and globally. China's ability to make use of the possibilities, at a time when the health crisis has not quite passed at home and continues globally, speaks of a well-oiled institutional machinery always on the job and possessing strong capacities.

## CONCLUSION

China's international messaging in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic shows the importance with which its leadership views the country's image abroad. Respect for and acknowledgement of China's contributions to the global good are seen as burnishing the image of its leaders in front of their own people. Indeed, for decades, this goal of a return to China's apparently historical greatness in the world has been part of an implicit deal between the CPC leadership and the population it has governed, in which the latter sacrificed their rights and immediate interests under the direction of the former for the greater good of the country. Since taking over as CPC General Secretary, Xi Jinping has continued to stress this theme to achieve what he calls 'the brilliant future of national rejuvenation' (Xi 2017, 64).

Thus, the bad press China has received in the wake of the spread of COVID-19 to pandemic proportions is as much a domestic political calamity as it is a foreign policy issue, if not more so. For the CPC, the only way forward remains one of reinforcing the global exercise to 'tell China's story well'. This has included considerable efforts by Chinese embassies and other state and Party entities abroad, using a variety of social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube as well as more traditional media. The intensifying competition with the USA in recent years has meant that these

<sup>17</sup> Another report (*India Today* 2020) quoted the Indian embassy in China, confirming the delay. To an earlier question on 30 January, the Indian foreign ministry spokesperson had denied there was any delay by the Chinese (MEA 2020b).

<sup>18</sup> Private conversation with Chinese scholar, March 2020.

efforts have proceeded on a dual track of talking of the importance of international health cooperation—bilaterally as well as multilaterally through the WHO—on the one hand, and aggressively countering perceived slights, especially from the USA and those perceived close to it, on the other.

At the same time, the CPC leadership's legitimacy is also tied equally importantly to the state of the domestic economy—a path of continuous economic development and the raising of standards of living for all people fairly and without corruption and environmental damage have not been easy for the Party to achieve. In this context, China's foreign policy outreach and assertiveness of recent years have often been seen as a distraction from the principal task at hand. For example, since the launch of the BRI, apprehensions have been expressed within China about the huge expenses and risks that Xi's grand foreign policy plans entail.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, China's leaders have increasingly to consider both the economic reality at home and the potential blowback from overreach overseas, both from constituencies at home and those abroad. It is important, for instance, to note that Chinese media has alongside highlighting the willingness of Chinese citizens to help other countries also pointed out their reluctance to help beyond their means (Leng 2020), telling countries they had to 'seek help from others to fight the virus outbreak' (Zhang 2020).

It is not as if Xi has not accounted for this sentiment. At the 19th Party Congress, he had also stated

China will continue to hold high the banner of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit and uphold its fundamental foreign policy goal of preserving world peace and promoting common development. China remains firm in its commitment to strengthening friendship and cooperation with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and to forging a new form of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation" (Xi 2017, 52)

Embedded in Xi's high-sounding declarations are justifications for the pursuit of self-interest too, in terms such as 'mutual benefit', 'common development' and 'mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation'. Thus, even as it pursues both domestic consolidation and global standing for China, the CPC leadership retains the right to determine what is beneficial, fair or just from its own perspective, with possibilities included, of both stepping back from a leadership role, and taking umbrage at criticism or excessive demands from other nations.

Finally, no matter how successful China's external propaganda efforts might be and whatever advantages might accrue to it on traditional security issues such as its territorial disputes while the rest of the world is occupied with the challenges of the

<sup>19</sup> Private conversations with Chinese scholars, various years.

pandemic, the fact will not be lost on the CPC that the outbreak of COVID-19 in China and its management highlight certain structural flaws in the Chinese political system. Going forward, issues of economic revival—including, of employment and consumption—also await China's central and provincial governments. These cannot be left unaddressed, for to do so will likely create further problems for the CPC in promoting a 'Chinese model' of development and politics abroad.

Taken together, these factors indicate a push-and-pull dynamic in China's international propaganda efforts. What needs to be underlined is that it is ultimately domestic interests that form the CPC's primary focus, and China's messaging outside its borders must always be understood in relation to this reality.

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