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CHINA'S PANDEMIC DIPLOMACY

DENNY ROY

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About the Author

Denny Roy

Author Denny Roy has been a senior fellow at the East-West Center since 2007, focusing on Asia-Pacific security issues.

He can be reached at: royd@eastwestcenter.org.

Papers in the AsiaPacific Issues series feature topics of broad interest and significant impact relevant to current and emerging policy debates. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Center.

INTRODUCTION The COVID-19 pandemic threatened to damage China's international reputation just as the Chinese government under Xi Jinping was peaking in its promotion of China as a model political system and superior international citizen. Beijing launched a massive diplomatic effort aimed at both foreign governments and foreign societies. The goal was to overcome initial negative publicity and to recast China as an efficient and heroic country in the eyes of international public opinion. The crisis created an opening for China to make gains in its international leadership credentials as the world saw the superpower United States falter. Ultimately, however, Chinese pandemic diplomacy contributed to a net decrease in China's global prestige, largely because domestic political imperatives motivated behavior that generated international disapproval and distrust for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government. This paper summarizes the content of Chinese pandemic diplomacy through the key period of January through May 2020¹, identifies specific strengths and weaknesses of China's effort, and briefly assesses its global impact.

Damage Control

China's pandemic diplomacy began with a considerable burden. The disease apparently started in China.² As early as February there were numerous credible reports that mismanagement of the outbreak by Chinese officials wasted valuable time.³ As it realized the extent of the outbreak in China, the Chinese government reportedly instructed Chinese organizations in foreign countries to buy up supplies of medical equipment for shipment to China⁴ and seized supplies of masks made in China by foreign firms intending to export the masks back to their home countries.⁵ While China eventually gained positive international recognition for bringing its virus outbreak under control, international awareness of these initial steps damaged China's prestige.

Chinese pandemic-related messaging saw two distinct phases. During the first phase from January to early March, the emphasis was on damage control and the external messaging was mostly an extension of the Chinese government's domestic propaganda. There were four major themes. The first theme was that the Chinese government's response was correct. Chinese officials said the authorities moved quickly to contain the outbreak in China, take care of the sick, and share information about the virus with the international community, including its genome sequence. The Chinese government acted with "openness, transparency and a high sense of responsibility," Chinese officials said repeatedly.⁶ For its heroic efforts, Chinese officials said, foreigners and international organizations were lauding China.⁷ The second theme was anti-"stigmatization," meaning objection to associating the virus with China, such as calling it "the Chinese virus." The third theme was anti-"overreaction," which meant Beijing objected to foreign governments restricting travel from China into their countries and advising their citizens against traveling to China. The fourth theme was China's generosity in sending medical supplies to help other virus-stricken countries. Termed "donations" by Chinese officials and media, much of these supplies were sold.⁸ The Chinese government also scrambled to refute other embarrassing issues that arose during the pandemic, including the persecution of Africans living in China, reports that Chinese medical equipment was faulty, the penchant of some Chinese for consuming wild animals, the poor treatment of whistle-blower Dr. Li Wenliang, and Beijing's policy

of excluding Taiwan from participation in the World Health Organization (WHO).

Pivot from Defense to Offense

In March, the second phase of Chinese pandemic-related messaging emerged. While some of the previous themes continued, the tone pivoted from defense to offense—from shielding China against criticism to attacking other governments, particularly the United States. Several new themes arose in China's diplomatic rhetoric. The least aggressive of these was anti-"decoupling," rebutting the calls of some Americans for reduced US-China economic interdependence.

A second, similar, theme was criticism of the notion of seeking financial compensation from China for damages caused by the virus.⁹ The Chinese response was that this idea was unjustified, was precluded by the international legal principle of sovereign immunity, and would invite China and other countries to sue the United States for various grievances.¹⁰

A third theme was blame-shifting. Chinese officials and media extended the earlier anti-"stigmatization" theme in mid-March to assert that officials in the United States and Europe, having demonstrated "incompetence" in handling the pandemic at home, were "trying to shift the blame to China."¹¹ By May, Chinese commentators were criticizing Trump by name, seemingly abandoning prior restraint based on hope that Trump would de-escalate the bilateral acrimony.¹²

A fourth theme of the offensive phase was asserting that the virus started in the United States, although this was more an innuendo than an official position of the Chinese government. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian garnered much attention for seemingly endorsing the theory that US soldiers brought the virus to Wuhan.¹³ After US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that the virus started in a Chinese government laboratory in Wuhan,¹⁴ Chinese officials and media retaliated by demanding an investigation into the activities inside a US Army research facility in Fort Detrick, Maryland.¹⁵

The fifth, and most expansive, theme of the second phase of Chinese messaging was a critique of America's fitness for global leadership, an attack with deep and long-term ramifications.¹⁶

Chinese pandemic-related messaging saw two distinct phases: damage control and offense

Why this shift from defense to offense? The explanation involves three likely factors. First, as Western Europe and the United States seemed to be managing the pandemic more poorly than China had despite having several weeks' additional warning, the Chinese government saw an opportunity to contrast Western weakness with Chinese strength.¹⁷ Second, Chinese were frustrated that China was getting so much international criticism rather than praise.¹⁸ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Beijing felt compelled to answer a growing list of jabs thrown by foreign leaders and media that were so hurtful from China's point of view as to justify a more belligerent response.

What Chinese Diplomacy Did Well

China demonstrated an impressive capacity for broadcasting its message through various international media and for incorporating the voices of foreign analysts and organizations that aligned with Chinese government positions. Chinese diplomacy enjoyed two huge advantages on the international stage. First, it could access the relatively open media of the Western countries to publicize Beijing's narrative. Chinese officials posted abroad took countless opportunities to present their government's positions by giving televised interviews and submitting editorials to foreign newspapers.¹⁹ Indeed, political conservatives in the United States complained that American news coverage of the pandemic regurgitated the Chinese narrative.²⁰ Social media have become an important aspect of Beijing's public diplomacy. Chinese diplomats outside of China freely used Twitter and Facebook (both banned in China) to advance the Chinese pandemic narrative. Beijing-linked computer technicians reportedly opened huge numbers of Twitter and Facebook accounts that posted messages deflecting blame for the pandemic away from China.²¹

Second, when formulating criticisms of the United States, Chinese strategic communicators found their work largely already done for them by US commentators—ironic given frequent Chinese criticism of journalism from the liberal democracies. Chinese public diplomacy often cites and quotes criticisms of the United States made by Americans, reflecting the understanding that these are not as easily dismissed as Chinese propaganda. For example, a single China Global Television Network report

in May quoted US scholar Noam Chomsky, *The Atlantic*, Dr. Anthony Fauci, a Canadian newspaper, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, US media network CBS, and a California state legislator to support its thesis that the United States is responsible for the global spread of the virus.²²

Where Chinese Diplomacy Stumbled

China garnered considerable favorable international attention for its rapid containment of the outbreak in February and for supplying other countries with medical equipment.²³ The Chinese government, however, tried too hard to manipulate the foreign discussion of China's actions, crossing the line between effective public relations and boorish overbearance. Inevitably the excesses of Chinese officials came to light, negating much of the admiration for what China had done well.

Multiple reports alleged that Beijing pressured the WHO to align its statements with China's agenda.²⁴ This included an awkward and much-publicized episode in which a senior WHO official refused to comment on the issue of Taiwan's WHO non-membership.²⁵ In at least one instance, a Chinese diplomat tweeted a video doctored to inaccurately make it appear Italian citizens were cheering China.²⁶

Although New Zealand earned widespread acclaim for its handling of the pandemic, Foreign Minister Winston Peters revealed that his PRC counterpart pressed him not to impose a "lockdown," arguing that this was an "overreaction."²⁷ Chinese officials were caught pressuring foreign governments and even the Wisconsin state government to make public statements praising China.²⁸ Chinese officials censored two European Union-authored documents to remove passages critical of Chinese pandemic policy.²⁹ Lu Shaye, China's ambassador to France, was so abrasive in condemning French criticism of China that the French government summoned him to formally protest.³⁰

The pandemic highlighted what could be called the routinization of Chinese economic coercion. For decades Beijing has employed economic power as a means of coercing other governments to support China's political agenda or punishing those that did not.³¹ Usually these cases involved the failure to pay proper respect to PRC sovereignty claims, such as treating Taiwan as an independent state or hosting a visit by the Dalai Lama. During the pandemic,

Though it garnered favorable international attention for its containment of the outbreak, the Chinese government then tried too hard to manipulate foreign discussion of China's actions

The resort to economic coercion has become a routine aspect of Chinese foreign policy

however, Beijing backed its diplomacy with threatened or actual economic coercion when the stakes were lower for China (short-term face-saving for the CCP) and higher for the targeted countries (their public health). This suggests the resort to economic coercion has become a routine aspect of Chinese foreign policy, not limited to the special and ultra-sensitive case of what Beijing calls “separatism” and potentially including demands that would expose the target countries to physical harm.

Pakistan suspended air travel with China on Feb. 1, but resumed it only three days later amid suspicion Islamabad was bowing to pressure from Beijing.³² The Chinese ambassadors to Indonesia and the Philippines warned that travel bans against China could result in Chinese economic retaliation.³³ Australia suffered bans on its beef and barley exports to China as punishment for requesting an independent investigation into the origin of the virus and the WHO’s actions.³⁴ After Nobel Prize-winning Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa criticized China’s role in the pandemic, Chinese media reported approvingly that Chinese e-commerce merchants were halting sales of his works.³⁵ Other Chinese media stories warned that China might withhold medical supplies from the Netherlands and the United States over political disagreements.³⁶ Although these were not official statements from senior national leadership, they expressed the banality of exploiting China’s economic leverage on any issue, in this case unmitigated by a major health emergency.

Assessing the Effectiveness of China’s Pandemic Diplomacy

The test of a country’s diplomacy is whether it helped the country gain influence or prestige in strategically or economically important regions. Despite thorough promulgation by Beijing, the Chinese narrative did not take hold in much of the world.

Southeast Asian governments generally accommodated China during the pandemic, trying not to embarrass or annoy Beijing. They avoided criticizing the early Chinese cover-up, did not restrict travel from China during Chinese New Year celebrations, and complimented Beijing’s efforts to suppress the spread of the virus. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said it was unfair to blame China for the pandemic. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said there was no reason to fear “the tiger’s dung.” Thailand’s health minister blamed “dirty Caucasian

tourists” for the virus.³⁷ The sub-region remains committed to a strong economic relationship with China despite worries about Chinese domination. China was already fighting the fallout of being caught holding back Mekong River waters in 2019, which worsened drought conditions and caused low river levels in downstream countries. The Singapore government indicated it would seek to diversify its supply chains away from China as a result of the “lesson” learned during the pandemic.³⁸

Similarly, China likely held but did not gain ground in the Pacific Islands. As in some other countries, China donated medical equipment, eliciting expressions of gratitude, and placed statements in local media. In one case, China’s ambassador gained a photo-op presenting an oversized check for US\$100,000 to Vanuatu’s minister of foreign affairs. Nevertheless, China committed far less funding to pandemic assistance for the Pacific Islands than did Australia and the United States. Commentators in the Pacific Island states were keenly aware that the outbreak began in China, and many expressed concern about the health of their nationals residing in China—aspects of the pandemic from which Chinese diplomacy sought to divert attention. Pandemic-related travel restrictions shut off Chinese tourism, reminding many of the island states of the perils of their economies becoming over-reliant on China.³⁹

Among key audiences in Europe, Africa, South Asia, and the Western Hemisphere, China’s pandemic diplomacy was, on balance, unsuccessful.

Journalist Charles Dunst argues that “Anti-Chinese sentiment was already rampant in the developing world before the coronavirus” due to issues such as indebtedness to China and the mass incarceration of Chinese Muslims, and “The CCP’s demonstrably poor initial response to the pandemic’s outbreak has added fuel to the fire.” Dunst offers evidence from India and Africa, particularly the outrage over the persecution of Africans living in China because of the misconception that they were responsible for the virus.⁴⁰

As for Europe, EU foreign policy director Josep Borrell said in May, “With China, we have been a bit naive. China has a selective multilateralism based on a different understanding of the international order. It’s also selective in matters of international law.”⁴¹ Reinhard Buetikofer, who chairs the European Parliament’s China delegation, said more bluntly, “Over these months China has lost Europe.”⁴²

The Australian public's view of China, unsurprisingly, has deteriorated as a result of the pandemic.⁴³ "China's behavior has hardened and Australian policy and Australian public opinion has hardened in response," said Lowy Institute's Michael Fullilove.⁴⁴

Recent polling indicates that in the United States, as well, views of China have turned more negative in 2020, with about two-thirds of Americans seeing China unfavorably and believing Chinese power and influence are threatening.⁴⁵ China's pandemic diplomacy has helped push US-China relations to perhaps their lowest point since the normalization of relations in 1979.⁴⁶ This indicates a failure on China's part given that Beijing's consistent message has been a desire to return to normal bilateral "cooperation." China stumbled into the unwanted position of being an issue in a US presidential election campaign, with the main contenders competing in late 2020 over who is tougher against China.⁴⁷

In particular, Beijing failed in its efforts to forestall economic decoupling, which has new momentum not only with regard to medical supply chains, but more generally.⁴⁸ International demands also resurged for the WHO to include Taiwan as a member despite Chinese opposition.⁴⁹

Beijing's lack of success is largely related to a single cause: China's pandemic diplomacy was an extension of the CCP political system.⁵⁰ Since the 1980s, the CCP has emphasized foreign victimization of China as a means of rallying popular support for the regime.⁵¹ For over a generation the CCP has conditioned its citizens to expect persecution from the outside world.⁵² This helps explain the sensitiv-

ity the Chinese government displayed during the pandemic in matters relating to China's international image: the quick fallback to daily complaints about foreigners "smearing" China and the overzealous attempts to manufacture foreign praise of China.

Chinese diplomacy during the pandemic seemed torn between appealing to foreign and domestic audiences. It was most effective when drawing attention to foreign messengers who were making the same points Beijing wanted to make, and when the brightest and most experienced Chinese diplomats made arguments designed to prove China's case before a neutral audience.⁵³ Often, however, messages seemingly aimed at foreigners spoke in terms that would have pleased crowds at home but were unlikely to resonate overseas. An example was Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Hua Chunying's statement during a press conference with international journalists on May 6: "If there are still people in Washington who want to act like bullies and pin the blame on China to get away with their poor handling of COVID-19, the 1.4 billion Chinese people will never allow it. The late Dr. Li Wenliang would never allow it. We advise US officials to learn more about Chinese history and mind their own business."⁵⁴

The nationalism the Party has committed to cultivating for regime security at home risks generating a backlash abroad that harms China's quests for international leadership and global market share. China's pandemic diplomacy illustrated a recurrent issue: despite the apparent short-term domestic political benefit, hypernationalism in the service of regime legitimacy ultimately makes it harder for the Party to deliver on its promises to the Chinese people.

In particular, Beijing failed in its efforts to forestall economic decoupling, which has new momentum

Notes

¹ The COVID-19 outbreak first garnered international attention in January 2020, with China announcing its first cases and the United States and many other countries detecting their own cases by the end of the month. In early June, world attention and particularly the rhetorical war between the United States and China, shifted focus to China's political clampdown on Hong Kong and the demonstrations by Americans against racially motivated police brutality.

² The Chinese government initially acknowledged that the virus began in China, "from wild animals illegally sold at a Wuhan seafood market." "Expert: Wild Animals Source of Novel Coronavirus," China Global Television Network, Jan. 22, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-22/Expert-Wild-animals-source-of-novel-coronavirus-Nsmh7N0iCk/index.html>.

³ James Palmer, "Chinese Officials Can't Help Lying About the Wuhan Virus," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/03/wuhan-coronavirus-coverup-lies-chinese-officials-xi-jinping/>; Julia Belluz, "China Hid the Severity of its Coronavirus Outbreak and Muzzled Whistleblowers — Because It Can," *Vox*, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/10/21124881/coronavirus-outbreak-china-li-wenliang-world-health-organization>; Jonathon Gatehouse, "Why Some Experts Are Questioning China's Coronavirus Claims," *CBC News*, Feb. 24, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/china-coronavirus-cover-up-claims-1.5471946>; Javier C. Hernández, "China Detains Activist Who Accused Xi of Coronavirus Cover-Up," *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/world/asia/coronavirus-china-xu-zhiyong.html>; Shawn Yuan, "Inside the Early Days of China's Coronavirus Coverup," *Wired*, May 1, 2020,

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⁴ For example, in the Czech Republic. Lukáš Valášek, “Confiscated Face Masks Imported by an Influential Chinese Representative In Czechia,” *Aktuálně.cz*, Mar 26, 2020, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/confiscated-face-masks-imported-by-an-influential-representa/r-560650326f6611ea842f0cc47ab5f122/>.

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⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on January 23, 2020,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Jan. 23, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1735680.shtml. Hereafter “MFA.”

⁷ MFA, Feb. 10, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1743009.shtml.

⁸ Charles Dunst, “How China’s Mask Diplomacy Backfired,” *The American Interest*, Apr. 15, 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/04/15/how-chinas-mask-diplomacy-backfired/>

⁹ Benjamin Weinthal, “Germany’s Largest Paper to China’s President: You’re Endangering the World,” *Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 20, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/international/germanys-largest-paper-to-chinas-president-youre-endangering-the-world-625074>; “India May Lose \$98 Billion Due to Coronavirus Lockdown,” *Great Game India*, Apr. 5, 2020, <https://greatgameindia.com/india-may-lose-98-billion-due-to-coronavirus-lockdown/>; “Nigerian Lawyers Sue China for \$200 Billion Over Coronavirus Damage,” *Daily Sabah*, Apr. 27, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/nigerian-lawyers-sue-china-for-200-billion-over-coronavirus-damage>. By May, the US state of Missouri and several groups of private US citizens had filed lawsuits against China.

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¹¹ MFA, Mar. 23, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1759985.shtml; “Fifth Question to American Politicians: Aren’t You Afraid that Passing the Buck to China Will Backfire?” *People’s Daily* online, May 12, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0512/c90000-9689455.html>; MFA, Apr. 20, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1771576.shtml; Xie Wenting, “UK, France Scapegoat China for Epidemic Losses, But Cooperation Still Mainstream: Expert,” *Global Times*, Apr. 17, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185926.shtml>.

¹² “Second Question to American Politicians: Is this What You Call ‘Human Rights?’” *People’s Daily* online, May 8, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0508/c90000-9688155.html>; Yuan Jiang, “COVID-19 Governance: An Issue Between Plutocracy and Meritocracy?” *China Daily*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/13/WS5ebb6d1aa310a8b24115561c.html>.

¹³ “US Army Might Have Brought Epidemic to China, Says Chinese FM Spokesman In Tweet,” *People’s Daily* Online, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0313/c90000-9668143.html>.

¹⁴ Ken Bredemeier, “Pompeo: ‘Enormous Evidence’ Coronavirus Originated in Chinese Lab,” *Voice of America News*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/pompeo-enormous-evidence-coronavirus-originated-chinese-lab>.

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¹⁶ MFA, Mar. 17, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1757063.shtml; Zhong Sheng, “US Is the Creator of Human Right Disasters,” *People’s Daily* Online, Mar. 23, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0323/c90000-9671210.html>; “World Left in Shock Over US Sabotage of Global Cooperation Against COVID-19,” *People’s Daily* online, May 12, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0512/c90000-9689593.html>; “US Loses to Virus Because of Politics,” *Global Times*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188276.shtml>; “World Health Assembly Slaps US Hooliganism,” *Global Times*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188805.shtml>.

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Tel: 808.944.7197
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