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CHINA'S HUMANITARIANISM: AID, PANDEMIC AND FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract

The onset of the novel coronavirus or Covid-19 pandemic has proved to be a major opportunity for China to redeem itself despite the scrutiny into its role in pandemic. Through its soft diplomacy and humanitarian aid, China is currently making its footprint felt in regions where the US would have invariably been the key player. Covid-19 aid is doing what BRI could not achieve, i.e. horizontal and vertical spread of China's influence. Through its Covid-19 diplomacy, it seeks to portray the image that China is ready to steer world politics, but its actions have been deeply scrutinized by the US and other rising powers. Adopting a 'wolf warrior' stance, China is now pressurizing states to tow its line of thinking; through China's investment and aid, the 'strategic autonomy' of countries is being tested.

Keywords: *BRI, Coronavirus, revisionist power, strategic autonomy, wolf warrior diplomacy*

Introduction

China's policy on foreign assistance and aid is often coalesced with principles of sovereignty and mutual benefit (Cheng, 2019). Moreover, China's aid policy is often aimed to appease its domestic constituency and portray the image of an infallible government which is willing to lead the world now. Through the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was initiated in 2013, China hoped to be in a commanding position to steer the future course of the global economy and create a platform wherein it could truly alter its status in the hierarchical world order. However, the BRI proved to be over ambitious and has not achieved any credible success as yet. The Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to heightened tension between major powers and can greatly alter the course of relations between countries. While the Covid-19 blame game has started between the US and China, but importantly, the supply of medical aid and its peripherals has assumed strategic dimensions. China is now keen to share its expertise in controlling the pandemic (Nyabuage, 2020). However, China's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic has come under severe scrutiny from different quarters. China criticized the tweet of the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, refers to Covid19 as the 'Chinese virus' (bbc.com, 2020a). It must be recalled that President Trump put on hold America's funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), accusing it of becoming China-centric during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic (The Economic Times, 2020a).

In the coming days, through pandemic diplomacy, China will try to deepen its foothold in the 'high risk countries' and redeem itself as a 'care-giver' that can truly uplift the economic conditions of the least developed countries. As the Trump administration has sought to make China accountable for its failure to control the novel coronavirus at the 'source', many of the European powerhouses and Australia have also been very critical of China. As the novel coronavirus endemic spreads, a realignment of relations between countries is bound to take place which China will try influence by establishing itself as indispensable to many countries around the globe.

I

China's Covid-19 Outreach

While the origins, causes and responsibility for the spread of the coronavirus pandemic remain a matter of controversy, the fact remains that it has touched all parts of the globe, affecting relations between individual, communities and states. As the world continues to be overstretched in terms of healthcare facilities to deal with this pandemic, some countries have moved in swiftly to aid and assist others. China is perhaps the frontrunner in providing aid and medical assistance to numerous countries to fight this pandemic. The pace and the enthusiasm with which the Chinese have indulged in 'facemask diplomacy' that has taken countries by surprise. Again, China has been accused of indulging of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' due to its aggressiveness in attacking the critics of its aid which has made the democratic world uncomfortable. Irrespective of its motive behind its aid diplomacy and its wolf warrior diplomacy, the fact is that China has in a rather hurried fashion made its presence felt around the world as a medical 'caregiver'.

The coronavirus pandemic underscores the growing gulf between the EU member states, with Italy and Spain accusing Germany and the Netherlands of not rising to the occasion. China has taken full advantage of this vacuum and has embarked upon an aid blitzkrieg- which includes supply of gloves, ventilators, masks and medical experts to France, Spain, Italy, Greece and other countries (guardian.com, 2020). In the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic, China has thus embarked upon a 'Health Silk Road'. The Indo- Pacific region too has witnessed a surge in medical diplomacy by China. Beijing has pledged to provide \$1.9 million for testing kits and protective equipment to the Pacific islands such as Vanuatu, Tonga and French Polynesia and Kiribati (Needham, 2020). Incidentally, the Solomon Islands, albeit reluctantly, switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing in 2019 (Power & Tobin, 2020). It has also received US\$300,000 from China 'to buy testing kits and other laboratory equipment to strengthen the capacity and capability of health authorities.' (solomontimes.com, 2020).

China's interests in the countries of South Asia are well documented and the Covid-19 pandemic has provided it with an opportunity to strengthen its stranglehold over these countries. China has stepped up its effort and has emerged as the key player to supply ventilators, medical equipment and masks to Pakistan. Moreover, China has already supplied over 10,000 testing kits, 10,000 sets of personal protective equipment (PPE) and 1,000 infrared thermometers to Bangladesh. Likewise, Nepal too has been a recipient of Chinese aid to counter the pandemic. Additionally, China has given a concessionary loan of \$500 million to Sri Lanka to deal with the novel coronavirus crisis. (Latif, 2020) Likewise, on the diplomatic front; China continues its charm offensive in Africa. Chinese medical aid to African continent continues to grow exponentially while the countries receiving aid are unable to repay China. Chinas' philanthropy is now questioned more frequently than before on account of its intentions to continue to provide aid to such countries which remain indebted to it. China's aid diplomacy also extends to South America where 'more than 15,000 people have been killed by the novel coronavirus' (The Times of India, 2020). China's 'mask-diplomacy' in South America includes 'planeloads of medical supplies, teams of experts' (Puglie, 2020).

II

China's pandemic aid and its implications

As China pursues pandemic diplomacy, EU's chief diplomat Josep Borrell warned that there is "a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'.ⁱ Through aid diplomacy, China has been able to make inroads to regions which are vital to its national interests. Its logistics base in Djibouti and the funding of construction of new seaports at Gwadar, Pakistan and Hambantota, Sri Lanka point out that China is beginning to expand its sphere of influence.ⁱⁱ Incidentally, China has stepped up its medical efforts in Djibouti (Haoran, 2020) and Pakistan (The Economic Times, 2020b). It has also granted Sri Lanka a concessionary loan of \$500 million to tide over the pandemic. (Kuruwita, 2020) Countries like Algeria, which is also part of the BRI,

has been supplied with medical equipment and ventilators by China. China exported goods worth around \$560 million to Algeria which has now embraced China as a 'true friend' (xinhuanet.com, 2020c).

Through its pandemic diplomacy, China continues to supply test kits and other medical supplies to European nations. China is hoping to bring about a narrative that it has contributed to saving lives in the European continent, something which it has not managed so far. Through this act, it not only uplifts its international profile, but it also boosts the Xi Jinping administration on the domestic front as well. Furthermore, infrastructural projects and aid from China has also left many of the European countries exposed to China's pressure. China has invested heavily in the European countries and the Balkan states, which includes 'the expansion of the port of Piraeus in Greece' and 'building roads and railways in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia' (bbc.com, 2019b). Countries elsewhere such as Djibouti, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan are already deeply indebted to China- through aid as well as through the Chinese investment in their development infrastructure. Given the urgency brought on by the current pandemic, aid in the form of medical supplies from China, is definitely welcome but it also leads to concerns over compromise of strategic autonomy in foreign policy issues amongst these states. So when it comes to voting on issues in the global institutions like the UNO, the weight of China may just be too overbearing on these countries, thereby hindering their autonomy.

On the other hand, European countries and others are wary of the 'wolf warrior' (Baker & Emmot, 2020) diplomacy pursued by China, *i.e.* the pressure being put on countries by China to express their gratitude towards Beijing for the aid provided by it and the defiant brazenness of its diplomats to absolve China from accepting responsibility for the creation and control of the pandemic (Landale, 2020). Further, European nations were miffed with the poor portrayal of its the health infrastructure by the Chinese government; the French government, for instance, was quick to identify the 'objectionable' articles about France's inability to protect its senior citizens in the website of the Chinese Embassy (Chaudhury, 2020).

III

Confronting the ‘Dragon’

As the US withdraws from the troubled hotspots of the globe, its allies grow concerned about its growing non-committal attitude towards their concerns. Through provisions of aid to multiple countries in the current pandemic, China has to some extent demonstrated its ability to help the developing countries and build a narrative that it is capable of filling in the void left behind by the US. China has also been able to paint another picture through its aid diplomacy - that of Europe needing China.

The overzealous efforts of China to promote the ‘health silk route’ has certainly not gone unnoticed as many states perceive it as an attempt to cover its tracks in the creation and failure to control the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. In attempting to push its national interests forward through pandemic diplomacy, China has faced resistance from several quarters. China is hoping that all resolutions against it in any multilateral institution by the US or its allies will not be supported easily by the European states and more so by smaller non-European states who are now beneficiaries of its aid. Moreover, through its aid diplomacy, China has managed to bring about a narrative that it has contributed to saving lives in the European continent, something which it has not managed to claim prior to this pandemic. However, the medical equipment supplied by China has come in for criticism from countries like India, Spain, Georgia and Czech Republic. In the midst of the pandemic, many African countries have protested against the racial discrimination of Africans in Guangzhou (Burke, Akinwotu & Kuo, 2020; japantimes.co.jp, 2020). The US and European powerhouses like France, Germany and the UK have been very critical of China’s handling of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, reports of attempts by China to pressure the EU into diluting a report on coronavirus disinformation (Apuzzo, 2020) has only led to further mistrust between the EU and China.

States are increasingly concerned about strategic contests and gains in the neighbourhood of China as every ‘rising’ country looks behind its shoulders and ahead as well, especially in its ‘umbra-zone’. China is seeking not only to ‘recover its lost territories’ (Holstag, 2015) which includes regions in the South and East China Sea, but also become the next concertmaster of world politics. While Japan is increasingly concerned about the Asia-Pacific region, India is concerned with the South East Asia and South Asia region and Australia about the security situation in the South Pacific region.

IV

Conclusion

Through supplies of aid, China wants to be seen as part of the solution but it cannot seem to shake off the allegations that it failed to control the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. While countries such as the US, India, Australia as well as other European countries have extended aid to different countries across the globe towards tackling the pandemic, seldom have questions about their ‘motive’ been raised. The altruistic goal of Chinese aid has often been questioned. From the Chinese perspective, ‘China Bashing’ by its critics is an attempt to ‘tarnish a 5,000-year-old civilisation’ (Guocai, 2020). Therefore, blaming China may be a well-designed diversionary tactic to tide over the precarious health situation in their respective countries.

Accusing China of ‘rogue aid’ or of indulging in ‘debt diplomacy’ hardly hides the fact that the West too has indulged in similar activities which promoted their strategic and economic interests whenever possible; China merely seeks to emulate the US model of ‘invisible boundaries’ (Brown, 2018). As Pádraig Carmody notes, ‘Attacking China or Chinese companies for engaging in commercial transactions, as do Western companies, would be self-evidently hypocritical for Western governments’ (Carmody, 2020). While blaming China would be the easier way out for the US administration to cover up its failure to deal with the Covid-19

pandemic, there is no denial that China's severe censorship of media and the internet on the Covid-19 pandemic has only heightened the level of mutual suspicion. In China, the voices of the medical community have been censured and doctors have been warned against making their opinions public (cnn.com, 2020). This certainly has not helped refurbish China's image as a 'responsible stake holder' (Breslin, 2009; Zoellick, 2005) in the existing international order.

Given China's rapid rise and issues of regional security, its regional competitors-democratic Japan and India, given the domestic sentiments, will certainly align with the US when it comes to hard decisions. An enduring image of China contains an intolerant political system, censorship of the media and the internet, and promotion of 'strategic proxies' (Scott, 2010; Bernier, 2003). Its outlook of a 'regional bully' has not helped China's cause. China's rise as an economic and military powerhouse does not necessarily mean that it will be able to carve a world order which suits its needs. The liberal order may be under duress, but its ideals continue to be supported in various degrees by nations, institutions and the civil society. As such, through its initiatives like the BRI and the aid it provides during the pandemic, China might have enhanced its already exalted position in world politics, but it will have to do more to inspire confidence in order to become the primary decision maker and agenda setter in world politics.

End Notes:

¹Refer to EU HRVP Josep Borrell: The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating, 24.3.2020. Complete text is available at https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en (accessed on 22 May 2020).

²For more details see Overseas Military Bases, available at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/overseas-bases.htm> (accessed on 8 April 2020).

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