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China's bid to repair its coronavirus-hit image is backfiring in the West

By Gerry Shih

As China in March became the first major country to recover from the coronavirus outbreak that spread from the central city of Wuhan, its officials kicked off another campaign: to heal its tattered international image.

President Xi Jinping held a flurry of phone calls with world leaders to promise aid. More than 170 Chinese medical experts were dispatched to Europe, Southeast Asia and Africa. State media outlets flooded the Internet with photos of Chinese masks arriving in 100 countries and stories questioning the pandemic's origins. Ambassadors inundated international newspapers with op-eds hailing the sacrifices Beijing made to buy time for other countries, without acknowledging how the outbreak erupted in the first place.

One month later, that campaign has yielded mixed results. In many cases, it has outright backfired.

In Britain, a parliamentary committee on foreign relations urged the government to fight a surge in Chinese disinformation. Officials in Germany and at least one U.S. state — Wisconsin — exposed quiet outreach attempts from Chinese officials hoping to persuade them to publicly praise China.

In Spain, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, governments announced recalls of Chinese masks and testing kits after large batches were found to be defective, undercutting what China sought to portray as goodwill gestures. In Nigeria, the country's professional medical association slammed a government decision to invite a team of Chinese doctors, going as far as claiming that they might carry the disease with them.

And on Twitter, Chinese diplomats have not only spread their country's message but have gone on the counterattack. They publicly feuded with the Brazilian president's son and his education minister, who accused Beijing of seeking "world domination" by controlling protective-equipment supplies. They tangled with Iran's Health Ministry spokesman, who questioned the accuracy of Chinese epidemic data, and lashed out at a Sri Lankan businessman who criticized China's epidemic response.

The wave of skepticism, sometimes from nations friendly toward China, underscores the challenge facing policymakers in Beijing as they look toward the post-pandemic global landscape. While governments from Washington to Brussels have been faulted for mismanaging the crisis or failing to galvanize an international response, China's standing has taken a hit precisely at a moment when the country was positioning itself as an up-and-coming leader in world affairs.

"They know when the dust settles and people turn their eye toward whether Beijing was responsible, it's going to be a very difficult situation," said Nadège Rolland, a senior fellow at

the National Bureau of Asian Research, who described China's globe-spanning, hard-sell campaign in recent weeks as public relations "on steroids."

"They're trying to get ahead of that narrative" of blame, Rolland added. "It's as much out of fear as it is confidence."

Chinese officials have appeared frustrated by the emerging backlash to what they say is simply altruism. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said this month that China was not using coronavirus diplomacy to burnish its image or extend its influence over other countries. Chinese officials have also pledged to immediately crack down on shoddy medical equipment.

"We would like to share China's good practices and experience with other countries, but we will not turn it into any kind of geopolitical weapon or tool," Hua said. "Leadership is not gained by boasting or jostling."

Conspiracy theorists blame U.S. for coronavirus. China is happy to encourage them.

To be certain, many countries with growing investment ties to China, particularly across Southeast Asia, have responded positively. In Serbia, a billboard reading "Thank You, Big Brother Xi" went up on the streets of Belgrade. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, a member of the Euroskeptic Five Star Movement, uploaded a Facebook video showing him receiving shipments of Chinese medical equipment.

He said the Chinese aid validated his party's decision to distance itself from the European Union.

"Joining China's Belt and Road Initiative saved Italian lives," Di Maio declared, referring to Xi's signature policy to expand Beijing's influence through infrastructure and loan programs, in comments widely reported in Chinese state media.

In several African countries, China's reputation was bolstered by speedy donations from Jack Ma, the billionaire co-founder of Chinese tech behemoth Alibaba.

"China led a master class in modern public diplomacy with its medical donations, leveraging a vast propaganda network that it built in Africa over the past 10 to 15 years," said Eric Olander, co-founder of the China Africa Project.

China started to lose momentum in the "donation diplomacy" narrative after reports emerged that the quality of the masks may have been suspect, Olander added. But in the early weeks, the Chinese aid was "warmly received by the governing elites," he said. "People were impressed."

A new tactic

In many Western countries, it is not so much China's medical assistance that draws consternation but rather Beijing's departure from its traditional diplomacy into the realm of disinformation, which had rarely been seen from China before the coronavirus emerged in Wuhan in late 2019.

Last month, Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian and other diplomats questioned whether the virus had been brought to China by U.S. military personnel, provoking a furious response from Washington. A disinformation watchdog agency of the European Union rejected the Chinese officials' conspiracy theory.

After Chinese state media widely reported that a renowned Italian researcher said the coronavirus may have originated in Italy, not Wuhan, the nephrologist Giuseppe Remuzzi spoke

to Italian daily *Il Foglio* to correct the record, saying his words had been distorted for propaganda purposes.

Zhiqun Zhu, chair of international relations at Bucknell University and author of the book “China’s New Diplomacy,” said the coronavirus has sharpened a long-standing debate within Chinese diplomatic circles: Should China wage an all-out “discourse” war to beat back critics like Trump administration officials and assert its prerogatives as a world power? Or should it present a more humble, less confrontational face?

“There is no consensus in diplomatic establishment circles,” Zhu said. “Surely some diplomats know that outside, the world blames China, that the propaganda projecting China as its savior is counterproductive. But right now, the leadership also wants to boost nationalism at home.”

No room for 'gloating'

Zhu said more traditional-minded Chinese diplomats, including the long-serving ambassador to Washington, Cui Tiankai, have sought to tamp down the spread of fringe theories and the bureaucracy’s most combative impulses. In a couched essay in the Communist Party’s flagship newspaper this month, another senior official, former vice foreign minister Fu Ying, said Chinese diplomats should uphold “the spirit of humility and tolerance, and adhere to communication, learning, and openness.”

Representative of the more pugnacious wing has been Lu Shaye, the former envoy to Ottawa who famously decried Canada’s detention of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in 2018 as an example of “white supremacy.” Lu, currently the ambassador to France, was summoned and reprimanded by the French foreign minister on Tuesday for publishing a second essay criticizing Western countries’ handling of the coronavirus in which he said he witnessed French nursing homes “leaving their residents to die of hunger and disease.”

Chinese intellectuals have also worried about their country’s deteriorating image under the current diplomatic tack. A drumbeat has grown from conservative politicians in the United States and Britain to demand economic reparations from China, although it’s not clear whether such an effort would succeed in international court.

In a series of widely distributed essays, leading economist Hua Sheng warned China against spreading conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus or “gloating” when other countries were still struggling to overcome the pandemic. He urged China to have the courage to conduct an accounting of what went wrong in Wuhan.

“Some people say if we investigate our country’s culpability, we would be giving evidence to outsiders and give them a tool to hurt our national interests,” Hua wrote. “I must say, it’s precisely the opposite.”

Lucrezia Poggetti, a researcher at the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin, said China’s internal dynamics and the emphasis on saving face for the domestic population meant it was highly unlikely that the government would thoroughly admit fault or show weakness on the international stage.

But even if Chinese diplomats successfully manage the near-term public relations crisis, they might struggle to counter the longer-term trends set in motion by the pandemic. As an example, Poggetti said, European countries — including France, Germany and Britain — and the United

States and Japan are reassessing their dependence on China for critical health and national-security-related supplies.

“There will be a reckoning after the pandemic ends,” she said.