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 2020, 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. As early as February there were numerous credible reports that mismanagement of the outbreak by Chinese officials wasted valuable time. 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 China and seized supplies of masks made in China by foreign firms intending to export the masks back to their home countries. 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. For its heroic efforts, Chinese officials said, foreigners and international organizations were lauding China. 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. Titled “donations” by Chinese officials and media, much of these supplies were sold. 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. 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.

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.” By May, Chinese commentators were criticizing Trump by name, seemingly abandoning prior restraint based on hope that Trump would de-escalate the bilateral acrimony.

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. After US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that the virus started in a Chinese government laboratory in Wuhan, Chinese officials and media retaliated by demanding an investigation into the activities inside a US Army research facility in Fort Detrick, Maryland.

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.
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. Second, Chinese government officials were frustrated that China was getting so much international criticism rather than praise. 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. Indeed, political conservatives in the United States complained that American news coverage of the pandemic regurgitated the Chinese narrative. 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.

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.

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. 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 overbueandance. 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. 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. In at least one instance, a Chinese diplomat tweeted a video doctored to inaccurately make it appear Italian citizens were cheering China.

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.” Chinese officials were caught pressuring foreign governments and even the Wisconsin state government to make public statements praising China. Chinese officials censored two European Union-authored documents to remove passages critical of Chinese pandemic policy. 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.

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. 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,
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. 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.

Similarly, China likely held but did not gain ground in the Pacific Islands. As in some other countries, China committed 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.

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.

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

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.


