



Delhi Policy Group

DPG POLICY BRIEF

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Volume V, Issue 13

APRIL 21, 2020



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



DPG Policy Brief, Vol. V, Issue 13

April 21, 2020

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviewing the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in an address to the nation on April 14, 2020. Source: pmindia.gov.in

Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacting with the Chief Ministers of States via video conferencing on April 02, 2020, to discuss measures to combat COVID-19. Source: pmindia.gov.in.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacting with the Heads of Indian Missions abroad through video conferencing on March 30, 2020 to discuss responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Source: pmindia.gov.in

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COVID-19 Response: Beijing Consensus versus New Delhi Model

by

Mohit Musaddi and Arun Sahgal

Assertive geopolitics and self-serving agendas pursued by nation states are threatening to overshadow global efforts to combat the gravest health crisis the world has faced in more than a century. As death tolls in the United States and Europe rise, calls for bringing China to account are becoming louder. Tensions between the West and China have risen as Beijing's "wolf warrior"¹ diplomacy has attempted to shift the blame for the pandemic to poor handling and policy failure of democratic policy elites. French President Emmanuel Macron has already disputed Mr. Xi's narrative with his remark "let's not be so naïve as to say [China has] been much better at handling this".² US President Donald Trump has expressed the desire to send in a team of experts to China to investigate the origins of the virus, which has reportedly been seconded by Australia and the UK.³ China has vehemently rejected the proposition by claiming that it is "not the culprit, nor the accomplice of the virus".⁴ The German tabloid newspaper, Bild, has put together a £130 billion invoice that Beijing "owes" Berlin for the impact of the pandemic on Germany.⁵ The World Health Organization's perceived role in becoming a tool of China's disinformation campaign and alleged "mismanagement, cover-up and

¹ See Sarah Zheng, "China's Wolf Warrior diplomats battle on Twitter for control of coronavirus narrative", *South China Morning Post*, March 23, 2020, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3076384/chinas-wolf-warriors-battle-twitter-control-coronavirus>

² Steven Lee Myers, "China's Aggressive Diplomacy Weakens Xi Jinping's Global Standing", *The New York Times*, April 17, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/world/asia/coronavirus-china-xi-jinping.html>

³ Oli Smith, "China faces backlash as UK joins US to investigate mysterious Wuhan lab's role in COVID-19", *Express*, April 19, 2020, available at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1270676/China-UK-US-Wuhan-virus-lab-coronavirus-origin-mystery-COVID-19-latest>

⁴ Echo Xie, "'We are not the culprit': Beijing tells US to stop blaming China for coronavirus pandemic", April 20, 2020, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3080769/we-are-not-culprit-beijing-tells-us-stop-blaming-china>

⁵ Oli Smith, "Germany sends China £130billion bill for 'coronavirus damages' – sparks fury in Beijing", *Express*, April 20, 2020, available at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1271028/Angela-Merkel-Germany-China-coronavirus-blame-Wuhan-Xi-Jinping-Trump-latest>

failures" has resulted in the withholding of funding from the United States, its largest donor.⁶

More worryingly, a lack of global consensus or leadership to fight the pandemic has made it obvious that globalisation and the multilateral system that we know today might never be the same again. Instead, political and economic decisions will be dictated primarily by core national interests and augmented by partners and allies with a similar ideological bent. This could possibly have a deeper impact on China, making it a virtual outlier as more countries will be circumspect about reliance on China as the world's factory once the pandemic is contained.

Within the above backdrop, we provide an outline of two very different responses: one by China, a one party authoritarian state, attempting to hide its subterfuge and concealment of facts by showcasing the success of its rigorous containment strategies and demanding accolades for its generous COVID-19 assistance; and the other by India, a democratic state of similar size that has sought to base its fight against COVID-19 on principles of openness, transparency and universal human values.

China's Handling of the Pandemic

In an article published by the Qiushi Journal, President Xi Jinping claims that China has responded to the virus in a "swift, decisive and effective" manner.⁷ During a visit to Wuhan in March, he also heaped praise on his administration by remarking that "daring to fight and daring to win is the Chinese Communist Party's distinct political character, and our distinct political advantage."⁸ Further, in his conversations with leaders from across the globe, Mr. Jinping has offered to share China's experience in controlling the outbreak and has promised medical assistance. In recent weeks, China has lifted lockdowns and reopened its economy after claiming that almost 93 percent of persons who tested positive of the coronavirus have recovered.⁹ The percentage would have

⁶ "President Donald J. Trump Is Demanding Accountability From the World Health Organization", *White House*, April 15, 2020, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-demanding-accountability-world-health-organization/>

⁷ Xi Jinping, "Solidarity and Cooperation Are the Most Powerful Weapons for the International Community to Defeat COVID-19", *Qiushi Journal*, April 16, 2020, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1770433.shtml

⁸ Vivian Wang, "China's Coronavirus Battle is Waning. Its Propaganda Fight is Not", *The New York Times*, April 8, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/asia/coronavirus-china-narrative.html>

⁹ According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Database, as on April 20, out of the 83,817 positive cases in China, 77,715 have recovered. Link: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

been higher had China decided not to revise its official death toll in Wuhan upwards by 50% on April 17, 2020.



A celebratory banner was displayed at the Wuhan International Airport in China to signal victory over COVID-19, April 8, 2020. Source: Associated Press

Since then, Beijing has attempted to take advantage of the massive demand for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies, ventilators and key medical goods across the world by rapidly enhancing their production and ramping up exports. However, some of these rushed exports have led to complaints about their quality. For instance, while Spain purchased testing kits from a Chinese company which turned out to have an accuracy rate of only 30%¹⁰, the UK paid USD 20 million for two million home-test kits of the coronavirus that were found to be faulty.¹¹ India also received 170,000 PPE sets from China out of which at least 90,000 have failed the quality test.¹² China's hurried increase in

¹⁰ Alexandra Stevenson and Tiffany May, "China Pushes to Churn Out Coronavirus Gear, Yet Struggles to Police It", *The New York Times*, March 27, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/business/china-coronavirus-masks-tests.html>

¹¹ David D. Kirkpatrick and Jane Bradley, "U.K. Paid \$20 Million for New Coronavirus Tests. They Didn't Work.", *The New York Times*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/world/middleeast/coronavirus-antibody-test-uk.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

¹² "Over 50,000 Chinese Made PPE Kits Dumped After Failing Quality Test In India", *Outlook India*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news->

production has been driven by concerns regarding its slowing economy, the desire to maintain its leading position in global supply chains and the need to suppress the anti-globalisation trend triggered by the pandemic.¹³ Indeed, Japan has already earmarked USD 2.2 billion to help its manufacturers shift production out of China.¹⁴ There have also been calls for the United States to follow suit. Meanwhile, data released by China's National Bureau of Statistics has shown that for the months of January and February 2020, "China's fixed asset investment fell by 24.5%, total retail sales of goods fell by 20.5%, industrial value added fell by 13%, and imports and exports fell by 9.6% year-on-year".¹⁵



Chinese medical supplies to Italy were accompanied with lines from Chinese poems citing friendship and solidarity. Source: Reuters

On a larger scale, there is an attempt by the Xi administration to rebrand the Chinese narrative around COVID-19. The leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has sought to weave this narrative to align with the so-called

over-50000-chinese-made-coronavirus-ppe-kits-dumped-after-failing-quality-test-in-india/350853

¹³ See "DPG China Monitor", Vol. 3, Issue 3, *Delhi Policy Group*, March 2020, available at https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/vol-iii-issue-3-1396.pdf

¹⁴ See Isabel Reynolds and Emi Urabe, "Japan to Fund Firms to Shift Production Out of China", *Bloomberg*, April 8, 2020, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-08/japan-to-fund-firms-to-shift-production-out-of-china>

¹⁵ See "DPG China Monitor", Vol. 3, Issue 3, *Delhi Policy Group*, March 2020, available at https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/vol-iii-issue-3-1396.pdf

"Beijing consensus" which projects a society that is technocratically and efficiently governed, dominated by state-owned enterprises, driven by export-oriented manufacturing and powered by a disciplined workforce.¹⁶ This "consensus" is also supposed to be "as much about social change as economic change... about using economics and governance to improve society".¹⁷ However, the Beijing consensus has failed to generate a global camp following, not least given China's restrictions on individual freedoms, territorial assertions in disregard of international law and pursuit of debt-trap diplomacy. Moreover, the manner in which Beijing has dealt with the ongoing pandemic has only further exposed the shortcomings of the model.



President Xi Jinping visited Wuhan on March 10, 2020 for the first time since the outbreak of the coronavirus in January. Source: Quartz

While Beijing has criticised countries for restricting travel to and from Wuhan or for pulling out foreign citizens from China from mid-January onwards, it has in the past month barred virtually all foreigners from entering the country,

¹⁶ Vijay Gokhale, "India's Response to COVID-19 Will Define Its Future Global Role", *Strat News Global*, available at <https://stratnewsglobal.com/indias-response-to-covid-19-will-define-its-future-global-role/>

¹⁷ Joshua Cooper Ramo (2004), "The Beijing Consensus", pg. 5, *The Foreign Policy Centre*, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130824150344/http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>

given the trend of new positive cases among those coming from abroad.¹⁸ There has been no visible attempt to bring back Chinese nationals from severely impacted countries like the United States, Italy or France. The Chinese government has done little to prevent racial roundups and forced quarantines of immigrants living in China, such as the sizeable African population of Guangzhou.¹⁹

To limit foreign access to information about the coronavirus, China expelled American journalists working for the Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times on March 18, 2020. While the ostensible reason may have been to retaliate against the Trump administration's decision to limit the number of Chinese citizens who can work in the United States for the five state-run Chinese news organizations, the Chinese Spokesperson's remarks announcing the measure also came with a warning that the CPC rejects "ideological bias against China, fake news made in the name of press freedom, and breaches of ethics in journalism".²⁰ It is clearly difficult for an authoritarian state to realise that the American media outlets in question are as likely to criticise their own government as that of China.

All of these factors have been further compounded by reports of Chinese assertions, particularly on two fronts. One, even during the COVID-19 crisis, China continues to destabilise the Indo-Pacific region. Between April 1-11, "36 incursions of Chinese vessels [were] identified within Japan's contiguous zone, and four Chinese vessels...within Japan's territorial sea."²¹ This is also in consonance with a recent statistic published by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) which has tracked state-owned or operated survey vessels in waters beyond their government's legal jurisdiction from April 2019 to March 2020. It is no surprise that China has more government vessels (25) operating beyond their areas of national jurisdiction than any other

¹⁸ Vivian Wang and Amy Qin, "As Coronavirus Fades in China, Nationalism and Xenophobia Flare", *The New York Times*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/world/asia/coronavirus-china-nationalism.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "China Takes Countermeasures Against Restrictive Measures on Chinese Media Agencies in the US", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 18, 2020, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1757162.shtml

²¹ Stephen R. Nagy, "Opportunity in crisis: Exploiting global disarray", *Japan Times*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/04/16/commentary/japan-commentary/opportunity-crisis-exploiting-global-disarray/#.XpmWXkBuIRk>

country.²² Such activities have the potential to serve both civilian and military purposes as research vessels can use their instruments to gather intelligence on foreign military facilities and infrastructure. As recently as April 16, Chinese research vessels have reportedly commenced operations within the EEZs of Malaysia and Brunei, thus attempting to further increase its presence in the contested waters of the South China Sea.²³ Vietnam has also claimed violations to its sovereignty after Beijing announced on April 19, 2020 that it had set up two new administrative districts on the Paracel and Spratly Islands.²⁴ Secondly, the US State Department recently released a report suggesting that Beijing may have been secretly conducting zero-yield nuclear tests at its Lop Nur site throughout 2019.²⁵ This is in contrast to Beijing's repeated claims that it has been strictly adhering to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty which prohibits all nuclear tests, including for civilian purposes.

India's Response to COVID-19

Albeit far from perfect, India's response to COVID-19 has been rooted in democratic principles and based on a system of complete openness and transparency. Calibrated but timely measures have been taken, starting with screening of passengers coming from countries affected by the coronavirus long before India had any active cases, a mandatory quarantine period for all arriving international passengers before the country had 100 active cases, air travel restrictions and shutdown, and eventually a 21-day lockdown when it became necessary to safeguard public health and save lives. The Union Health Ministry estimates that the number of positive COVID-19 cases could have spiralled to more than 800,000 by April 15 if the lockdown had not been imposed.²⁶

²² See "A Survey of Marine Research Vessels in the Indo-Pacific", *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://amti.csis.org/a-survey-of-marine-research-vessels-in-the-indo-pacific/>

²³ Drake Long, "Chinese Survey Ship Moves to Malaysian, Bruneian Waters", *Benar News*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-china-04162020172003.html>

²⁴ Catherine Wong, "Vietnam accuses Beijing of 'seriously violating' sovereignty in South China Sea", *South China Morning Post*, April 20, 2020, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3080756/vietnam-accuses-beijing-seriously-violating-sovereignty-south>

²⁵ See "Executive Summary of Findings on Adherence to and Compliance With Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments", *US Department of State*, April 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tab-1.-EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-OF-2020-CR-FINDINGS-04.14.2020-003-003.pdf>

²⁶ See "Without lockdown, India's Covid-19 cases would have been 8 lakh by 15 Apr: Govt", *Livemint*, April 11, 2020, available at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/without->



Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviewing the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in an address to the nation on April 14, 2020. Source: pmindia.gov.in

Since then, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after consultations with state Chief Ministers and various other stakeholders, has decided to further extend the lockdown till May 3, 2020. To cushion the economic impact of the lockdown, a stimulus package of Rs 1.7 trillion (USD 22.6 billion) was announced, which includes direct cash transfers to the poor and free rations, among other measures.²⁷ This is likely to be complemented with a second relief package and other economic support measures, particularly for the MSME sector.²⁸

New Delhi's international response has also been distinctive. The Indian government was quick in reaching out to its neighbours, with PM Modi hosting a video conference with the leaders of SAARC countries on March 15, 2020. India has proposed the creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Fund based on

lockdown-india-s-covid-19-cases-would-have-been-8-lakh-by-15-apr-govt-11586611399051.html

²⁷ Deepshikha Sikarwar, "Nirmala Sitharaman to meet PM Narendra Modi for stimulus 2.0", *Economic Times*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/nirmala-sitharaman-to-meet-pm-narendra-modi-for-stimulus-2-0/articleshow/75168078.cms>

²⁸ *Ibid.*

voluntary contributions, with India making an initial commitment of USD 10 million. As of April 10, the regional emergency fund has accumulated a sum of USD 21.8 million which is available to any SAARC country to combat the ongoing pandemic. On March 26, PM Modi also participated in an Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit in which he called on the "Leaders to help usher in a new globalisation, for the collective well-being of humankind and have multilateral fora focus on promoting the shared interests of humanity".²⁹



Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacting with the Chief Ministers of States via video conferencing on April 02, 2020, to discuss measures to combat COVID-19.

Source: pmindia.gov.in

For the moment, India has chosen to defer accountability issues with the WHO and has employed a constructive approach as it seeks improvements in "global health governance and multilateral institutions to fight the pandemic".³⁰

²⁹ See "Press Release on the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit", *Ministry of External Affairs*, March 26, 2020, available at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32600/Press_Release_on_the_Extraordinary_Virtual_G20_Leaders_Summit

³⁰ Anirban Bhaumik, "Coronavirus: India joins Germany, France, others to support WHO; subtly disapproves US move against it", *Deccan Herald*, April 17, 2020, available at <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/coronavirus-india-joins-germany-france-others-to-support-who-subtly-disapproves-us-move-against-it-826341.html>

Even so, some of India's success stories have also come elsewhere. New Delhi has deployed civilian and defence assets to bring back Indian citizens from across the world, including countries like China, Italy and Iran, which have been among the worst hit. In a show of solidarity, India also extended help to citizens from neighbouring countries who were stuck in Wuhan, the original epicentre of the pandemic. Since mid-March, New Delhi has facilitated the evacuation of around 28,000 foreigners from 43 nations out of India.³¹ On February 26, 2020, the Indian Air Force airlifted 15 tonnes of vital medical supplies to Wuhan which included surgical masks, gloves, infusion pumps and defibrillators among others to help China contain the virus.³² Further, after an anti-malaria drug called hydroxychloroquine was identified as a possible experimental treatment for COVID-19, New Delhi lifted its export ban on the product and is currently in the process of supplying the drug to at least 55 coronavirus-hit countries.³³ Apart from hydroxychloroquine, the Indian Government has identified ten cargo destinations, under the 'Krishi Udan' scheme, wherein it will utilise its available resources to ferry essential goods such as fruits, vegetables and other medical equipment across the globe.³⁴

Indian diplomacy has assumed the role of an "unlikely frontline warrior" in the fight against COVID-19.³⁵ India is set to receive eight million PPEs over the next seven weeks, apart from equipment like ventilators from the US, Germany and China. It will also receive a total of one million testing kits from Korea, the UK, Ireland and Malaysia and ten million N-95 masks from a Singapore-based start-up. These results are a consequence of the coordinated efforts of Indian

³¹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India facilitates evacuation of 28,000 from 43 nations", *Economic Times*, April 13, 2020, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-facilitates-evacuation-of-28000-from-43-nations/articleshow/75115349.cms>

³² See "India provided 15 tonnes of medical supplies worth Rs 2.11 crore to coronavirus-hit China: Government", *Economic Times*, March 18, 2020, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-provided-15-tonnes-of-medical-supplies-worth-rs-2-11-crore-to-coronavirus-hit-china-government/articleshow/74693578.cms?from=mdr>

³³ Geeta Mohan, "India sending Hydroxychloroquine to 55 countries, will not procure PPES from China", *India Today*, April 17, 2020, available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-sending-hydroxychloroquine-to-55-countries-will-not-procure-ppes-from-china-1667822-2020-04-17>

³⁴ "Krishi Udan: Air India ferries essential farm produce to other nations", *Outlook India*, April 17, 2020, available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/krishi-udan-air-india-ferries-essential-farm-produce-to-other-nations/1805533>

³⁵ Indrani Bagchi, "Indian missions facilitate procurement of COVID-19 essentials", *Times of India*, April 18, 2020, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-missions-facilitate-procurements-of-covid-19-essentials/articleshow/75189808.cms?utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=iPadapp&utm_source=email

missions around the world as they call in their “diplomatic equities to stock up the country”.³⁶



Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacting with the Heads of Indian Missions abroad through video conferencing on March 30, 2020 to discuss responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Source: pmindia.gov.in

However, as with any other democratic country fighting the coronavirus pandemic, India too has had its share of issues. An economic standstill; loss of jobs, especially for informal sector workers and daily wagers; disruption in supply chains; some hoarding of goods; and a mass exodus of domestic migrant workers in various parts of the country are all part of the enormous disruption caused by the pandemic. Solutions to some of these problems have been found, others are still in progress. Bus services to ferry migrant workers were belatedly arranged and state governments have since ensured that those who have not been able to return home are taken care of in situ. A major challenge remains to ensure that direct cash transfer and food distribution benefits of the stimulus package reach the poorest segments of society and no citizen goes hungry.

As is the case for most nations across the world, overcoming the unprecedented threat of COVID-19 lies in the distant future, when effective therapies and eventually a vaccine become available. However, what is apparent already is that the citizens of a vast, diverse and pluralistic democracy have come together in a truly national response to the pandemic. Inspired, consultative, transparent and committed leadership has been on display; the administrative machinery has been deployed to deliver as never before; press

³⁶ *Ibid.*

freedoms are playing their expected watchdog role. A resilient, democratic India has sought to locate its own consensus within a “New Delhi model” which places the agenda of universalist humanism above all else and promotes global cooperation without seeking to advance strategic interests in the midst of human suffering.



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