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## When the World Reached Out to China

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*PPE kits and other medical supplies getting on way from the United States to China, February 5, 2020. Source: Twitter/@SecPompeo*

*A consignment of 15 tonnes of medical relief lands in Wuhan from India on February 26, 2020. Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar*

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## When the World Reached Out to China

by

Sanjay Pulipaka

The relationship between China and other major powers is under severe stress. In many capitals around the world, there is disappointment that China was less than transparent and (reportedly under its pressure) the World Health Organisation (WHO) failed in its primary function of alerting the world community about an impending pandemic of untold proportions. Simultaneously, there is a narrative that argues that China is now winning friends by supplying medical equipment to a world in need, which is in marked contrast to the other big powers, such as the United States and its allies.<sup>1</sup> It is also being argued that China is today the first responder in a regional and global crisis. However, such claims entirely overlook the remarkable outreach by the global community to assist a China reeling under the pandemic in the first two months of this year.

### Transcending Trade Friction: US Assistance to China

In the run-up to the COVID-19 crisis, the US and China were involved in an acrimonious trade war. On January 15, 2020 both countries signed a Phase One Trade Agreement calling a temporary truce to the trade war. Within a fortnight of the agreement, as it became evident that China was in the midst of the COVID-19 epidemic, the US government and business community stepped forward with assistance.

Responding to a request from the Chinese authorities, American drug-maker AbbVie reportedly donated "\$2 million worth of Kaletra drug doses as an experimental option."<sup>2</sup> Johnson & Johnson donated one million surgical masks along with other medical equipment such as "goggles, protective suits, thermometers and respirators."<sup>3</sup> BD donated \$300,000 worth of medical equipment such as catheters and flush products to the Red Cross in Wuhan.<sup>4</sup> Other US pharma/drug and medical companies also rushed in with assistance.

American tech companies were also forthcoming with generous assistance. Given Apple's deep supply chains in China, its CEO Tim Cook tweeted in late January that the company "will be donating to groups on the ground helping support all of those affected."<sup>5</sup> Microsoft donated RMB 1 million on January 26, 2020 and subsequently committed "RMB 40 million worth of products, services



and solutions to equip frontline hospitals and medical workers.<sup>6</sup> Microsoft's press release also mentioned that its employees in the "Greater China Region and the US" provided RMB 4.78 million as cash donations.<sup>7</sup> Google.org provided a grant of \$250,000 to support the relief efforts in China.<sup>8</sup> It is well known that Google, finding it difficult to adhere to Beijing's censorship requirements, withdrew its search engine operations from China a few years ago.



*Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits and other medical supplies getting on way from the United States to China, February 5, 2020. Source: Twitter/@SecPompeo*

Similarly, the National Basketball Association (NBA) pledged donations amounting to \$1.4 million.<sup>9</sup> It should be recalled that last year, there was considerable friction between the NBA and Chinese authorities as the manager of the Houston Rockets had expressed support for pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong. A host of other American firms such as Boeing (donated 250,000 medical masks), J. P. Morgan (pledged \$1 million to the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation), and Cargill (committed \$289,000 to China's Red Cross) were involved in assisting China.<sup>10</sup> According to news reports, unlike in other countries, the Red Cross Association of China is a government-organised non-government organisation and several American firms have routed their assistance through it.<sup>11</sup> The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) committed to providing \$ 5 million in emergency funding to China and later announced a commitment of up to \$100 million for the global response to combat COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> President Xi Jinping, in his letter to Bill Gates, noted that he deeply appreciated the generosity of the Foundation.<sup>13</sup>

At the political level, President Trump offered "any help that is necessary" to assist China to combat COVID-19 and a few days later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson expressed the hope that such "relevant assistance will be provided soon."<sup>14</sup> As promised, on February 7, 2020, Michael Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, announced that his department had "facilitated the transportation of nearly 17.8 tons of donated medical supplies to the Chinese people."<sup>15</sup>

### Europe: A Generous 'Embrace'

European firms were also proactive in providing assistance to China in its fight against the virus. For instance, Siemens<sup>16</sup> provided RMB 15 million worth of medical equipment. Bayer<sup>17</sup>, in addition to providing vital medicines, also donated € 1.5 million to the Chinese Red Cross. Leading fashion and luxury corporations such as LVMH and Kering pledged approximately 16 million yuan to the Chinese Red Cross Foundation and 7.5 million yuan to the Hubei Red Cross Foundation respectively.<sup>18</sup> The Vatican also stepped in with assistance. A Global Times news report on February 3, 2020 noted that "600,000-700,000 masks have been sent to China from the Vatican since January 27."<sup>19</sup>

Concerned that coronavirus may give rise to prejudice towards the Chinese people, a city official in Florence, Italy suggested that residents 'hug' the Chinese to express support.<sup>20</sup> In early February, China and other European countries were engaged in conversations on the scale of travel restrictions to be imposed. For instance, responding to the United Kingdom's (UK) travel advisory to its citizens, China's Ambassador to the UK stated: "We asked them



to take the advice of the WHO, to make a reasonable reaction”<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, on February 10, 2020 the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson called on Italy to “respect the WHO’s authoritative and professional recommendations”, which did not recommend travel restrictions, and hoped that Italy would take measures in an “objective, rational and science-based manner.”<sup>22</sup> A few days later, Italy dispatched about 1.5 tonnes of medical equipment to China<sup>23</sup>. According to an EU report, by February 21, 2020 Italy, France, Germany and the Baltic republics had provided over 30.5 tonnes of medical relief supplies to China.<sup>24</sup>

### Flag on the Burj



*In a show of solidarity and hope, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai was lit up in the Chinese flag by the UAE government on February 02, 2020. Source: Twitter/@BurjKhalifa*

In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief), promised 300,000 N95-standard masks along with other medical equipment.<sup>25</sup> On February 2, 2020 the UAE lit up the iconic Burj



Khalifa with the colours of the Chinese flag and displayed slogans which expressed solidarity with the people of China.<sup>26</sup> Qatar Airways dispatched five aircraft to Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou with 300 tonnes of medical supplies which included 2,500,000 face masks.<sup>27</sup> Israel expressed its support to China in its fight against COVID-19 and provided medical supplies as well. However, there was also a discordant note in Israel-China relations.<sup>28</sup> China's acting Ambassador to Israel reportedly equated the travel restrictions on visitors from China to the Holocaust.<sup>29</sup> However, the Chinese Embassy issued a quick clarification and apologised for the misunderstanding. Other countries in the region such as Iran,<sup>30</sup> Turkey<sup>31</sup> and Egypt<sup>32</sup> also provided medical supplies.

### BRICS Solidarity, South Asian Support

The BRICS countries also contributed assistance and the New Development Bank appreciated the efforts of China to contain the virus, declaring that it is ready to "provide its full support, including emergency financing."<sup>33</sup> In the first week of February, Russia<sup>34</sup> donated 23 tonnes of medical supplies and also dispatched six health specialists to advise on combating the virus.<sup>35</sup> The South African company U-Mask donated 30,000 masks,<sup>36</sup> and Suzano<sup>37</sup>, paper manufacturers in Latin America, donated 200,000 disposable masks to China which were transported with the assistance of the Brazilian foreign affairs ministry. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his letter to President Xi Jinping expressed solidarity with the people of China; India provided approximately 15 tonnes of medical gear/equipment.<sup>38</sup>



*A consignment of 15 tonnes of medical relief lands in Wuhan from India on February 26, 2020. Source: Twitter/@DrSJaisankar*

Other South Asian countries such as Pakistan reached out to China with symbolic gestures as well as medical supplies. In early February, a Chinese government statement welcomed the Pakistan government's refusal to "hastily evacuate the nearly one thousand Pakistani nationals in Wuhan."<sup>39</sup> Islamabad also supplied China with 300,000 medical masks and 800 protective suits.<sup>40</sup> Bangladesh demonstrated its large-heartedness by donating "1,000,000 hand gloves, 500,000 facemasks, 150,000 caps, 100,000 hand sanitizers, 50,000 shoe-covers and 8,000 gowns" along with other medical provisions.<sup>41</sup> Xinhua reported that senior Sri Lankan political leaders including Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa had offered prayers in the "Abhayaramaya Temple in Colombo in solidarity with China."<sup>42</sup> Approximately 100,000 protective masks were donated to China by Nepal.<sup>43</sup>

### East Asian Generosity: Lands Apart, Shared Sky

As with other countries in Europe, Chinese envoys were unhappy with the imposition of travel restrictions by some Southeast Asian countries. In early February, responding to Indonesia's decision to ban visitors from China, the Chinese envoy noted: "In this situation, we need to be calm....don't overreact and cause a negative impact on investment and the economy."<sup>44</sup> A few days earlier, to help China combat COVID-19, Asia Pulp & Paper, which is a subsidiary of the Indonesia-based Sinar Mas Group, made a considerable donation.<sup>45</sup> In early February, in addition to committing S\$1,000,000 and medical supplies, the Singapore government was involved in raising funds in collaboration with local trade associations and community organisations.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the Royal Thailand Government donated 3 million baht<sup>47</sup>, as well as essential medical supplies and Thailand's private sector also pitched in.<sup>48</sup> Malaysia,<sup>49</sup> which is the world's leading producer of gloves, committed to donating 18 million pieces and on February 3, 2020 an Air Asia aircraft delivered 500,000 pairs of gloves.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the Philippines<sup>51</sup> and Brunei also donated medical supplies.<sup>52</sup> Because of the current security situation in the South China Sea, the relations between China and Vietnam are tense.<sup>53</sup> However, in February the Vietnamese government and the Vietnam Red Cross Society donated medical supplies worth \$ 500,000 and \$ 100,000 respectively.<sup>54</sup>

Among East Asian countries, Japan's assistance to China was defined by both intense symbolism and provision of considerable aid. Initially, Japan did not impose a blanket ban on all visitors from China. Instead, it imposed travel restrictions on visitors from specific provinces in China such as Hubei. Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) deducted a small portion from the salaries of parliamentarians and donated the amount towards relief

efforts.<sup>55</sup> By February 7, 2020 Japan had donated about “380,000 pairs of gloves, 150,000 protective suits, 75,000 protective glasses” and its “monetary donations amounted to \$4.1 million.<sup>56</sup>” Japanese relief materials were sent in boxes with short poems such as “lands apart, shared sky” which reportedly moved many Chinese recipients.<sup>57</sup> South Korea also donated 1.5 million masks and promised \$ 5 million in emergency aid to China.<sup>58</sup>



*The HSK secretariat in Japan sent relief supplies to the Hubei province in China. The poem, “Even though we live at different places, we live under the same sky” is written on the last line. Source: The Asahi Shimbun*

Various other countries such as Australia and New Zealand, as well as the overseas Chinese community were engaged in assisting China.<sup>59</sup> International organisations such as the UNDP (approximately \$500,000 in emergency support, 10,000 suits and other equipment)<sup>60</sup> and UNICEF (6 metric tons of medical supplies)<sup>61</sup> made considerable contributions.

### Conclusion: A Few Trends

The above statistics are only indicative. Numerous other countries and organisations have surely also contributed to China in its efforts to combat COVID-19. Five broad trends can be discerned from the foreign assistance to provided to China.

- First, the United States, European countries and other nations across the world responded with alacrity in assisting China when Beijing was struggling with a high infection rate. The generosity displayed, which involved the contribution of vital medical supplies, suggests that many

governments across the world believed that China would be able to prevent the spread of the virus to other parts of the world.

- Second, unlike the Chinese authorities that had considerable experience in containing SARS, those in several other countries had no prior experience and expertise to recognise early the scale of the challenges they would themselves have to surmount. Further, the WHO's misleading advisories and statements, as well as the displeasure expressed by Chinese envoys at travel restrictions, delayed emergency preparedness outside China. Global assistance to China, even in mid-February this year, suggests that many countries had approached COVID-19 as a 'China problem' instead of erecting more stringent barriers and stepping up emergency preparedness.
- Third, while many countries and their business corporations had deep economic connections with China, they clearly did not possess multiple sources of information on the developments inside that country. As a consequence, many of these countries and companies generously donated medical equipment to China and then had to scramble to procure similar medical equipment for themselves from all over the world.
- Fourth, the failure to invest in multiple sources to collect accurate information indicates that the US and other countries have largely approached China, in spite of its assertions of coercive power, more as an economic competitor than as a full-spectrum adversary. As a consequence, democracies around the world did not coordinate their assistance to China. Multinational corporations located in western democracies extended assistance without consulting their respective governments.
- Fifth, many liberal democracies have become increasingly polarised in their domestic political space. In the US, the political discourse seems to be more about pulling down the incumbent at all costs regardless of merits and consequences. This inward-looking attitude has prevented dissemination of the good work that governments and private sectors in democracies are doing for the larger global good.

The fact is, since other major powers did not see themselves engaged in a contest with China, they did not grandstand from roof-tops to propagandise their generosity. The absence of such self-promotion does not imply that

democracies were not in fact the first responders when the pandemic struck China.

Clear ideological and systemic demarcations among great powers that define global order are either blurred or non-existent today. As a consequence, authoritarian regimes find it relatively easy to sway foreign public perceptions and build false narratives in democratic societies. It is precisely for this reason that the world's leading democracies need to improve strategic communication about their formidable strengths and will to provide global public goods to both domestic and international audiences. .

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