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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 and Its Impacts*

China and US Soft Power Responses

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has called on world leaders to set aside their differences and unite in the fight against the COVID-19 global pandemic. But not even the worst health crisis in recent human history can tame old-fashioned power politics. China and the US are looking at who will lose the most in the post-pandemic era.

COMMENTARY

CHINA AND the United States are apparently racing to emerge on top after the COVID-19 storm passes. But it is Beijing that seems to have a more coherent and sophisticated strategy. While China came under widespread criticism over its initial handling of the crisis, particularly damning were its alleged attempts at covering up the real extent of the infectious disease.

China's strong and radical containment measures were regarded as typically authoritarian in a tightly-controlled communist state. Information was curtailed and official actions not accountable to its population. However, the restrictive regime led to an eventual stabilisation of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Chinese government's capacity for social and administrative mobilisation in times of crisis has allowed it to impose seemingly draconian measures that western democracies are reluctant to undertake.

Changing Perception of China's Approach?

While many in the West initially criticised the Chinese state's heavy and supposedly undemocratic measures, China's apparent success in containing the COVID-19

outbreak may have largely muted its critics. In both the developed and developing countries, many saw China's strong measures as necessary and questioned the ability of democratic systems to handle such an unprecedented crisis.

The fact that developed European nations such as Italy with a population 23 times smaller than China's had suffered five times more fatalities seems to further reinforce the perception of the inadequacy of western democracies compared with the responsiveness of the communist system in China.

Very shortly after the COVID-19 situation in China began to stabilise in mid-March 2020, Beijing sent a team of doctors to assist Italy, which was then the most affected country in the world. Chinese specialists were soon sent to other European countries such as Spain and France. The European Union (EU) thanked China for donating protective masks and coronavirus testing kits.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez thanked China for its support and expressed the need for deeper cooperation — this coming at a time when trans-Atlantic relations are fraught with tension.

Comparing China and US Responses to Pandemic

China has also sent medicines, masks, gloves and other equipment to several South American and Asian countries. These initiatives gained positive media coverage in the receiving countries. Unlike the Trump administration, the Chinese leadership is very sensitive to world opinion and the way in which China is portrayed in the international media.

In contrast to Beijing's diplomacy to undo the damage of its early response to the pandemic, the Trump administration seems to care less about what other nations think. The constant contradictions between President Donald Trump and the Governor of New York State Andrew Cuomo, and between Trump and his scientific advisers as well as leading research institutions in the US conveyed to world audiences the impression of an erratic leader in charge at the White House in Washington DC.

Governor Cuomo has received favourable comments in both the US and international media. While President Trump regularly dispenses abuse to China, federal agencies and individual state authorities in the US are buying personal protective equipment (PPE) from China such as masks and gloves. Trump himself is also seen as fanning certain conspiratorial theories on the origins of COVID-19.

Trump's Fumble on COVID-19

Perhaps the most damaging to US prestige and global leadership was President Trump's decision to stop US funding for the WHO. He accused the organisation of not doing the job it was tasked to perform because it was too concerned with Chinese sensitivities. From the EU to the African Union, the criticism against Trump's move was loud and clear. The WHO and EU leaders, including those of Germany and France, called for unity in fighting the pandemic.

During one of his media briefings at the White House last week, President Trump suggested that people should be injected with household disinfectant, leading some to question his mental state. The perception is growing that the President has lost his ability to dictate the narrative of his administration's fight against COVID-19 and the economic devastation from the spread of the coronavirus.

While China may have made serious mistakes in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and will pay a heavy price for the blunder, the fact of the matter is that 10 times more people have died so far in the US from this coronavirus than in China. The US population is today at more than 330 million whereas China has over 1.4 billion people. While China appears to have controlled the fatalities from COVID-19, the number in the US is still rising by the thousand every day.

The messaging coming from the Chinese government is that it has done a much better job at protecting its people than most western democracies. While certain countries in the West have criticised China of taking undemocratic measures to tackle COVID-19, these same countries have ended up adopting the same tactics to fight the disease, just that they did so much later.

Absence of US Global Leadership

It is still too early to determine whether China has mitigated most of the damage to its image following the COVID-19 outbreak. While many have accused China of using its coronavirus aid to boost its influence on the world stage, such as seen in the so-called "mask diplomacy", China has only assumed this role in response to the requests of the affected nations which are all in critical need of PPE, test kits and medicines.

There is also a huge vacuum arising from an absent US leadership as the White House seemed preoccupied with the COVID-19 threat domestically. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global problem and will require global solutions. So far, the US president has focussed on his own country and its challenges in the face of increasing infected cases and fatalities.

Yet, in these dangerous times, the world has been expecting US leadership and solidarity as in past crises encountered by the global community. Unfortunately, the goal of "Making America Great Again" also means nationalistic and isolationist policies taking charge even when the planet is confronted with a never-before infectious disease killing people indiscriminately.

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