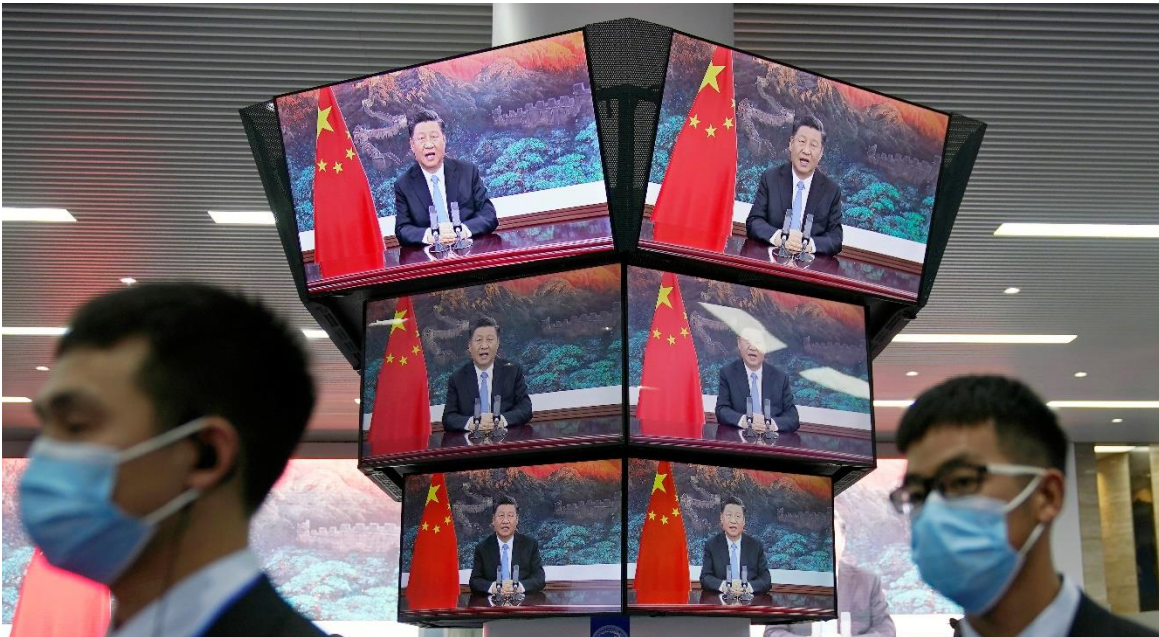




Telling China's COVID-19 Story Well: Beijing's Efforts to Control Information and Shape Public Narratives Regarding the 2020 Global Pandemic

Josiah Case

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Abstract

As the world continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has striven to shape the domestic and international public narratives around the crisis. Chief among its arguments are that China rose to the challenge of the outbreak and has exemplified the role of a responsible great power. At the same time, it has attempted to deflect blame for the initial outbreak by engaging in an unprecedented disinformation campaign aimed at sowing doubt over the origin of the virus. This report reconstructs the evolution of these narratives and their supporting themes, as well as the wide range of tools and tactics that Beijing has used to influence public opinion—to include diverse public messaging platforms, foreign aid efforts, and suppression of domestic dissidents. The report also examines how Beijing has attempted to use the crisis to degrade international trust in Washington by using the US response to the pandemic as a foil against which to highlight its own successes.

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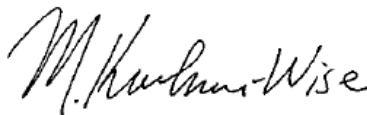
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Executive Summary

Beijing is deeply invested in shaping the domestic and international public narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic.

- At stake is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese public, as well as the PRC's standing in the international community.

Beijing's public stance on the outbreak has three main stages:

- *Suppression (late December 2019–19 January 2020):* the initial weeks of the outbreak in China during which the government tried to minimize the amount of information about the new virus that leaked to the public.
- *Waging a “people’s war” against the virus (20 January–mid-March):* the period when the PRC government declared defeating the outbreak in China its “top priority” and launched a “people’s war” to combat it.
- *Leading the global fight against the virus (mid-March–present):* the stage following China's declaration of victory over the outbreak within its borders, when it worked to position itself as an international leader in the global fight against the virus.

Beijing is engaged in a propaganda campaign that promotes narratives favorable to the CCP and seeks to suppress those that would undermine the Party's legitimacy and China's international image. The core arguments of this propaganda campaign are:

- China has responded competently to its outbreak and achieved victory over the virus.
- China has responsibly led the global battle against the pandemic.

To further promote these narratives, Beijing has used Washington as a foil by portraying the US as having failed to control COVID-19 and as hindering global efforts to fight the pandemic. For example, Beijing has:

- Attributed Washington's struggle to contain the virus to poor leadership, the US system of government, and an unwillingness to cooperate with the rest of the world.
- Responded to complaints about Beijing's transparency with counter-accusations that the US has falsified its COVID-19 numbers and silenced “whistleblowers” to hide the extent of its outbreak.
- Praised China's global assistance efforts while claiming that the US government has overpromised and under-delivered on aid.

- Contrasted Beijing's support for the World Health Organization (WHO) with Washington's break from the organization.
- Frequently commented on the impact of COVID-19 on US military operations around the world while maintaining the dubious claim that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has not experienced a single case.

To achieve its propaganda goals, Beijing has:

- Pushed its narratives through official statements, authoritative media outlets targeted at audiences at home and abroad, and Chinese and foreign social media platforms.
- Attempted to undermine US talking points through disinformation and satire.
- Suppressed information that could undermine its narratives with censorship, police action, and diplomatic coercion.
- Publicized actions, such as the donation of aid to foreign countries, that support Beijing's narratives about its responsible handling of the crisis.

In an effort to deflect blame for the pandemic, Beijing has engaged in an unprecedented disinformation campaign aimed at sowing doubt over the origin of the novel coronavirus.

Features of this campaign include:

- Assertions that the novel coronavirus' origin is unknown or unknowable.
- Insistences that any efforts to trace the virus' source are political attempts to smear China.
- Suggestions that the US Army could be responsible for bringing COVID-19 to Wuhan.

It remains to be seen whether this effort will enable the PRC to avoid being held accountable by the international community for letting the virus spread undetected beyond its borders.

At the time of writing, Beijing is still engaged in its propaganda campaign. Two fronts in the global fight against COVID-19 with major implications for the battle for the public narrative in the coming months include:

- The race to develop a vaccine for COVID-19.
- The process of recovering from the pandemic's impact on the global economy.

These developments will likely have resounding implications for the wider competition for influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, as well as for whether Beijing can successfully use the pandemic to enhance its global image and standing.

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1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) provides an official account of the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the government white paper titled *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*, which characterizes the crisis as “a fight that will determine the future of the human race.”¹ This is hardly hyperbole. The disease has already caused more than 1 million deaths, wreaked havoc on the world's financial and economic systems, and dramatically altered how people across the globe work, travel, and interact. Given the pandemic's immense impact on the world and China's central role in its spread, it is no surprise that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has prioritized shaping the public narratives around the outbreak. This is especially true in light of PRC President Xi Jinping's directive to the CCP that it “tell China's story well” to the world.² How the international community and China's own population understand and remember the course of the pandemic has major implications for the PRC, the US, and the world. As such, Beijing has engaged in a propaganda campaign dedicated to ensuring that narratives favorable to the CCP triumph over those that would undermine the Party's legitimacy and China's international image.

Sections 2–5 of this report seek to define those key narratives and reconstruct their evolution since the start of 2020. Section 6 then identifies the primary tools that Beijing has used to push its narratives on domestic and international audiences and silence those that it deems unfavorable.

To gain a holistic picture of how Beijing has attempted to shape public opinion in the context of the pandemic, this report examines Chinese government documents and statements, PRC media reporting targeted at domestic and international audiences, social media activity, and a range of on-the-ground actions. It also draws from outside analysis and earlier CNA works on relevant issues.

2. Pandemic Timeline

The chronology of the pandemic can be divided into the following three broad stages based on Beijing's public stance toward the crisis:

Stage I – Suppression (*late December to 19 January*): Beijing tries to prevent information about the novel coronavirus from reaching the masses. When news of the disease becomes public, CCP leadership is largely silent on the issue, and the limited PRC media coverage of the situation attempts to downplay the severity of the crisis.

Stage II – Waging a “people’s war” against the virus (*20 January to mid-March*): After weeks of silence, PRC leadership publicly acknowledges the seriousness of the situation and declares that curbing the outbreak has become the government’s “top priority.”³ The subsequent two months mark the height of China’s “people’s war” against the virus, with the domestic fight against COVID-19 dominating media reporting and government statements for the entire month of February and well into March. The CCP still makes considerable efforts to hide the severity of the outbreak and censor public discontent, but it has abandoned its earlier strategy of downplaying the *stakes* of what the country is facing.

Stage III – Leading the global fight against the pandemic (*mid-March to present*): Beijing declares “initial victory” over its domestic struggle with the virus as Wuhan and Hubei reopen in mid-March. As China’s cases decline and the world’s increase, Beijing conducts a comprehensive public relations campaign aimed at boosting its international image and negating criticism for its role in the virus’ spread. The PRC recasts itself as a combat-proven, responsible member of the global community, dedicated to providing aid and advice to countries in the grip of the pandemic.

Below we provide a brief explanation of how and why Beijing's narratives about the pandemic evolved between each stage, followed in Sections 3 and 4 by an in-depth look at the key themes in those narratives.

A Note on the Pandemic Timeline

Beijing maintains that Chinese officials were unaware of the new disease spreading throughout the country until the final days of 2019; however, Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* alleged to have seen Chinese government records suggesting that PRC officials were aware of a virus of unknown origin spreading through human populations as early as November 2019. Although it is possible that the novel coronavirus remained undetected until the end of December, further investigation is required to determine when exactly China's leadership knew of the crisis developing under their watch.

Source: Josephine Ma, "Coronavirus: China's First Confirmed Covid-19 Case Traced Back to November 17," *South China Morning Post*, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3074991/coronavirus-chinas-first-confirmed-covid-19-case-traced-back>

2.1 Stage I – Suppression

Beijing initially responded to the novel coronavirus outbreak by suppressing information about the unfolding situation.

Central PRC leadership was aware of the new illness spreading throughout Wuhan no later than 30 December;⁴ however, rather than taking action to warn the public and contain the virus, the PRC government spent the following three weeks trying to hide the extent of the problem. This approach is illustrated by the government's following courses of action:

Late December 2019 –
19 January 2020

- *Silencing whistleblowing doctors:* Some of the first people to raise the alarm about COVID-19 were doctors in Wuhan who alerted colleagues via private social media messages about patients suffering from severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-like symptoms.⁵ By 1 January, eight medical professionals in the city had been detained and questioned by the city's Public Security Bureau for the "illegal behavior" of "spreading rumors."⁶

⁴This is discussed in further depth in Sections 3.1.4 and 6.2.2. Liao Jun (廖君) and Feng Guodong (冯国栋), "Eight People Dealt with in Accordance with the Law for Spreading False Information Online About 'Wuhan Viral Pneumonia'," (*Ba Ren Yin Wangshang Sanbu 'Wuhan Bingduxing Feiyan' Bu Shi Xinxu Bei Yifa Chuli*; 8 人因网上散布 '武汉病毒性肺炎' 不实信息被依法处理), *Xinhua* (新华), Jan. 1, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-01/01/c_1125412773.htm.

- *Keeping information from the World Health Organization (WHO):* Despite the WHO repeatedly praising China publicly for “very impressive” transparency and timely updates, press reports would later reveal that the interaction between the UN organization and Beijing was hamstrung by the latter’s unwillingness to cooperate. According to records of internal WHO meetings from January, China kept the virus’ genome private for over a week after having decoded it and refused to share detailed data on patients and cases for over two weeks.ⁱⁱ This and other delays allowed the disease to spread unrecognized throughout the country and beyond.ⁱⁱⁱ
- *Censorship of Chinese social media:* Only one day after doctors in Wuhan began warning one another of the new illness spreading through the city, Chinese social media websites began censoring discussion of the then-unknown virus. For example, live-streaming platform YY added 45 keywords to its censorship list on 31 December, all of which made reference to the then-unknown SARS-like virus. WeChat, the most popular messaging app in China, similarly blocked dozens of keywords in January to prevent users from discussing the outbreak.⁶

The PRC government’s most prominent voices stayed quiet on the issue. While the Hubei provincial government and China’s National Health Commission publicly addressed the situation a handful of times in the first few weeks of 2020, the information they provided was sparse and mainly limited to factual notifications about the growing number of patients as well as statements downplaying the disease’s contagiousness.⁷ Meanwhile, the voices that Beijing uses to convey authoritative messages of national and international concern were quiet on the matter through this stage. For example:

- *Absence of statements from PRC leadership:* China’s leadership was conspicuously silent in the crucial first few weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak. Not only did senior figures such as PRC President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang fail to address the situation publicly before 20 January, the rapidly spreading virus was not mentioned at any of the Foreign Ministry’s routine press briefings held during that period.
- *Low coverage in authoritative PRC media:* As discussed in greater depth in Section 6.1.2 of this report, Beijing uses a handful of media outlets to communicate its positions and policies to domestic and international audiences. It is therefore significant that the

ⁱⁱ WHO officials have since argued that their public praising of China was done out of fear that Beijing would refuse to cooperate at all if openly criticized for its response. “China Delayed Releasing Coronavirus Info, Frustrating WHO,” Associated Press, June 3, 2020, <https://apnews.com/3c061794970661042b18d5aeaaed9fae>.

ⁱⁱⁱ CNN alleges to have seen internal Chinese documents suggesting that PRC officials were aware by 10 January that the testing kits they were using to diagnose the virus were regularly giving false negatives, meaning that they likely knew that the officially reported numbers were artificially low. See: Nick Paton Walsh, “The Wuhan Files,” CNN, Dec. 1, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/30/asia/wuhan-china-covid-intl/index.html>.

paper edition of *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the CCP and Beijing's main tool for communicating its policies to Party members, did not publish any content about the virus until 21 January.⁸ Meanwhile, other authoritative outlets, such as the government's Xinhua News Agency and China's official television station CCTV, only produced reports in this period that downplayed the seriousness of the outbreak.

Possible reasons for Beijing's initial reaction: There are a number of possible explanations for why China's initial reaction to the novel coronavirus outbreak was defined by silence and suppression, including the following:

- Lower level officials tried to cover up news of the outbreak, leaving top leadership unaware of the true scope of the problem.
- China's leaders hesitated to tackle the issue head-on, either because they were evaluating the seriousness of the outbreak or unable to decide on a public course of action.
- China's leaders believed that they could successfully hide the outbreak from the wider world.
- The CCP was loath to deviate from its painstakingly planned publicity campaign aimed at proclaiming Xi Jinping's bold visions for what was to be a year filled with historic accomplishments.⁹

It is likely that all of the above played a factor in Beijing's early response, along with an innate desire to protect the Party from blame and criticism. Regardless of the reason for Beijing's silence, the consequences of China's lack of decisive action in this period were immense. Failure to inform the Chinese public allowed the virus to spread as people continued to go about their lives as normal, and delays in sharing information with the WHO enabled the virus to spread undetected beyond China's borders. It was also a strategy that could last for only so long—with rapidly rising cases and the focus of the world on its response, Beijing had little choice but to adjust course and admit to its people and the world the scale of the problem on their hands.

2.2 Stage II – Waging a “people’s war” against the virus

20 January – Mid-March

On 20 January, Beijing began portraying the coronavirus outbreak as the government's most pressing task. Three full weeks after China's National Health Commission (a cabinet-level executive department) initiated an investigation into the new illness in Wuhan, the PRC government abandoned its Stage I strategy of trying to keep the coronavirus outbreak out of

the spotlight and began to publicly portray it as the government's most pressing task.¹⁰ As a result of Beijing's dramatic shift from downplaying the seriousness of the epidemic to declaring an "all-out battle to protect Wuhan and Hubei from the epidemic," a number of key developments all occurred on the same day, including the following:¹¹

- Xi Jinping ordered "resolute efforts" to stop the virus' spread and declared the people's safety and health to be the government's "top priority."¹²
- PRC Premier Li Keqiang instructed the government to "spare no effort in prevention and control" of the outbreak.¹³
- The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) addressed the outbreak for the first time in that day's routine press briefing.¹⁴
- China's National Health Commission set up a leading group devoted to tackling the outbreak.¹⁵ It also held a press conference in which renowned Chinese medical professional Zhong Nanshan declared publicly for the first time that the new virus was spreading between people.¹⁶
- Outbound traffic from Wuhan was closed, in a foreshadowing of the citywide quarantine that would be imposed three days later.¹⁷

This coordinated flurry of public government statements and activity was a signal to the Chinese public and the world that PRC leadership was now treating the containment of the virus as its "most important work," as Xi Jinping described it to the WHO director-general during the latter's 28 January trip to Beijing.¹⁸ Another signal of the seriousness with which Beijing was treating the outbreak was the decision to close Wuhan and other parts of Hubei province off to the rest of the country on 23 January.¹⁹

Chinese media began focusing on the outbreak. China's core authoritative media outlets, which Beijing uses to convey its positions and policies to domestic and international audiences, all followed the top leadership's lead in treating the outbreak as the country's most pressing issue. For example:

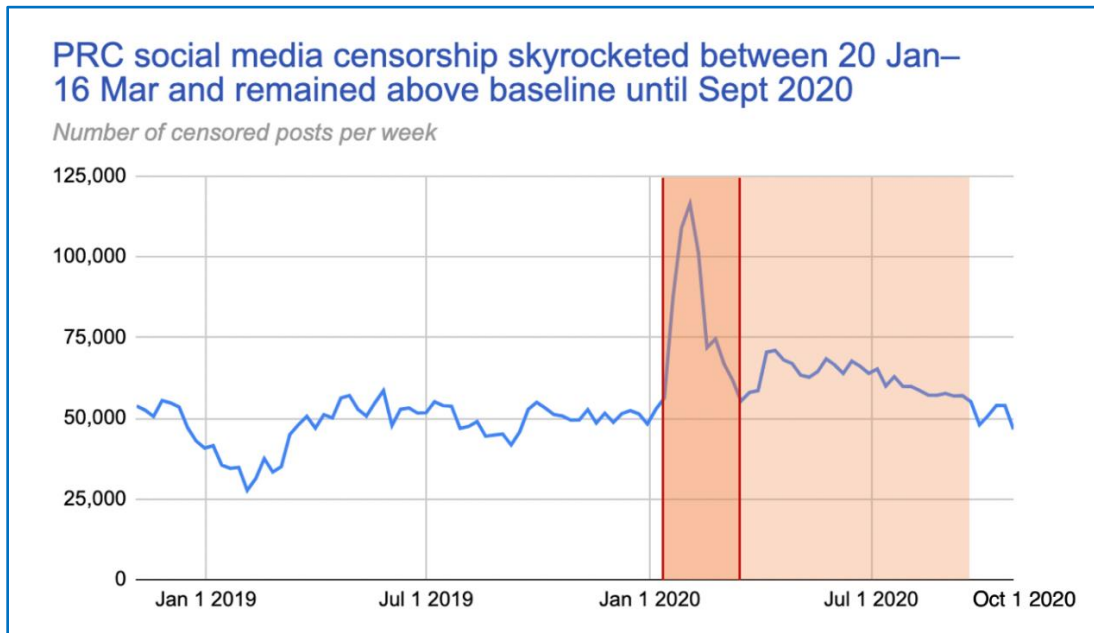
- China's most-watched news program, *News Hookup* (*Xinwen Lianbo*; 新闻联播), which airs nightly on China's official television station, CCTV, addressed the outbreak for the first time in its 20 January episode.²⁰ The high-profile fight against the virus in Wuhan and Hubei would continue to dominate the program's list of topics until mid-March.
- Similarly, after a brief pause for the Chinese New Year, the CCP's official mouthpiece, *People's Daily*, started producing daily "commentator" (*benbao pinglunyuan*; 本报评论员) articles on China's efforts to combat the virus. These articles are believed to represent the views of the Politburo and rank among the most authoritative sources of information on Beijing's views.

For the next two months, China's domestic battle with the novel coronavirus was the predominant focus of public PRC government activities and media coverage. The shutdown of Wuhan and Hubei province to the rest of the country consumed domestic media coverage for all of Stage II. The government also presented an image of itself as fully focused on combatting the outbreak. For example:

- On 24 February, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress announced that it would be postponing its annual session, which had previously been scheduled for March.²¹ The meeting of China's top legislature is one of the country's most important political events of the year and had not been postponed in decades.²²
- Throughout February and March, all but a handful of reports on Xi Jinping's activities published by China's official Xinhua News Agency centered on the epidemic.²³
- The PRC Foreign Ministry's press briefings in this period were largely devoted to fielding questions about the outbreak.

Despite its public posture on COVID-19, Beijing did not end its suppression tactics. Beijing's pivot to publicly discussing the outbreak did not mean it abandoned its Stage I tactic of suppressing information about the virus. On the contrary, data provided by a commercial data aggregator reveal that the Chinese government's manual censorship of domestic online discussion of the virus and related topics actually *increased* as the epidemic became the primary topic of attention nationwide.

Figure 1. Censorship on Weibo (Nov. 2018 – Oct. 2020)



Source: Commercial data aggregator. Weekly volume of removed posts from a targeted sample of 75,000 Weibo accounts, as measured by the commercial data aggregator.

Other COVID-19-relevant topics that were censored on social media during Stage II include:

- An 18 January New Year's banquet held by officials in Wuhan in disregard of the city's rapidly worsening situation. Discussion of this event was heavily censored to prevent a buildup of public anger at the government.²⁴
- Posts by netizens pleading for medical help for themselves or sick family members.²⁵
- Whistleblowing doctor Li Wenliang's death from COVID-19 in early February. Of note, the commercial data aggregator observed heavier censorship on this event than on any other topic in the past two years.²⁶

Revising history to make the government appear more timely. At this time, data suggest that Beijing began to actively rewrite the history of its response to the pandemic. This was evidenced by assertions in government statements and authoritative media that Beijing was prompt in tackling the virus in the first few weeks of the outbreak. For example:

- In the PRC Foreign Ministry's first remarks on the outbreak, spokesperson Geng Shuang stressed China's timeliness in informing the WHO and other nations of the situation as it unfolded.²⁷

- Official CCP journal *Qiushi* asserted in February that Xi Jinping had been personally overseeing top-level meetings about the outbreak as early as 7 January. However, state media did not report on the meetings at the time they supposedly occurred, which is uncharacteristic and implies that the Party either issued a gag rule on the meetings or they did not happen.^{iv}

The argument that China was prompt and transparent has continued to be a key part of Beijing's narrative on the outbreak, despite increasing evidence to the contrary.²⁸

The virus spreads abroad. Even before Beijing adopted its Stage II stance toward the outbreak, COVID-19 cases were spreading beyond China's borders. Although Beijing treated the COVID-19 outbreak as a predominantly domestic issue during this period, developments such as those below foreshadowed trends that would define Stage III, when the crisis became a truly global pandemic:

- The US was one of the first countries to evacuate its nationals from Wuhan (28 January)²⁹ and issue a travel ban on foreigners coming from China (31 January).³⁰ Both of these moves elicited strong criticism from Beijing.³¹
- The WHO declared COVID-19 to be a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" on 30 January.³²
- A team of WHO experts conducted a nine-day visit to China in mid-February.³³
- Although China's large-scale foreign aid efforts greatly increased in Stage III, it started offering aid to other countries battling their own outbreaks of COVID-19 in February.^v

^{iv} On 15 February, *Qiushi* published an article by Xi Jinping stating that he "issued requirements for the prevention and control of the new coronavirus" in a 7 January meeting of the Politburo, nearly two weeks before he commented on the situation publicly. See: Xi Jinping (习近平), "Speech Delivered at Politburo Standing Committee Meeting on Dealing with the Novel Coronavirus Situation," (*Zai Zhongyang Zhengzhiju Changweihui Huiyi Yanjiu Yingdui Xinxing Guanzhuang Bingdu Feiyan Qing Gongzuo de Jianghua*; 在中央政治局常委会会议研究应对新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情工作时的讲话), *Qiushi* (*求是*) 2020/04, no. February 15, 2020 (2020), http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-02/15/c_1125572832.htm. For more on the implications of this gap, see: James Griffiths, "Did Xi Jinping Know About the Coronavirus Outbreak Earlier than First Suggested?" CNN, Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/17/asia/china-coronavirus-xi-jinping-intl-hnk/index.html>.

^v On 25 February, China offered support and aid to countries including Japan and the ROK. It sent aid to Iran two days later. "China Ready to Strengthen Cooperation with Japan, ROK in Fighting COVID-19: Spokesperson," Xinhua, Feb. 25, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/25/c_138818098.htm. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2020," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Feb. 28, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1750624.shtml.

2.3 Stage III – Leading the global fight against the virus

Mid-March – Present

COVID-19 cases exploded around the world in the spring as China was making progress toward controlling its own outbreak. This contrast in fortunes was made clear as the WHO officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March, only a day after Xi Jinping had visited Wuhan in person in a display of his confidence in the outcome of the months-long “people’s war.”³⁴

These parallel developments—China declaring victory over its local epidemic and cases in the rest of the world surpassing the official number of cases within China—resulted in a significant shift in how Beijing would talk about the virus and its role in the pandemic. In this new, post-Wuhan-crisis world, Beijing recast itself from a victim in need of help to a crisis-hardened survivor providing help to others.

The nine-day period between 10 and 18 March saw a number of noteworthy developments that effectively ushered in this new stage, including the following:

- Xi Jinping made an in-person visit to Wuhan (10 March).³⁵
- The WHO officially designated COVID-19 a pandemic (11 March).³⁶
- The number of cases imported to China surpassed the number of new local infections for the first time (13 March).³⁷
- The US President declared a state of national emergency (13 March).³⁸
- Europe emerged as the new epicenter, surpassing the rest of the world combined in terms of cases and deaths (13 March).³⁹
- China reported no new local cases for the first time (18 March).⁴⁰

These developments foreshadowed trends that continued through the summer, including the following:

Beijing makes preventing imported cases the “top priority” in its COVID-19 response. As the number of cases in Wuhan and Hubei declined over the spring, the main COVID-19 threat to China became an external one. In the same week in March that Hubei’s lockdown was lifted, Xi Jinping instructed CCP leadership that “guarding against inbound infections should be the top priority for the country both now and in the foreseeable future.”⁴¹ Despite having criticized the US and other countries for closing their borders to China at the start of the year, the PRC implemented its own travel bans to keep foreign visitors from reintroducing the virus. With the exception of a brief outbreak in Beijing in June that was quickly extinguished, China appears to have been largely successful in preventing a mass resurgence.

Beijing positions itself as an international leader in the fight against COVID-19. Xi Jinping spoke to this vision of China on 26 March at the Group of Twenty (G20) Extraordinary Leaders' Summit on COVID-19, in one of the first of many addresses to the global community during the pandemic.⁴² In his speech, "Working Together to Defeat the COVID-19 Outbreak," Xi asserted that his country's methods of fighting the virus had been validated by its success in containing the outbreak in Wuhan and Hubei, and offered China's assistance to countries hit by the pandemic in the spirit of his "vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind." Beijing has since strived to make Xi's vision a reality through aid, contributions to the WHO, and public portrayals of itself as a champion of multilateralism, as well as by portraying Washington as defeated by the virus and an enemy of international health cooperation. These issues are discussed in Section 4 of this report.

Sino-US tensions intensify over COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major strain on the Sino-US relationship, with both Beijing and Washington accusing the other of mishandling the crisis. Top White House officials have asserted that the CCP is responsible for the pandemic, and starting in March, PRC officials and state media began publicly speculating that the virus could have originated in the US. As cases in the US skyrocketed over the summer, the US President blamed China for the country's woes, and this rhetoric only increased during the fall election season. To add to Beijing's troubles, Australia, the European Union (EU), and others have joined Washington in calling for an investigation into the initial outbreak in Wuhan, despite Beijing's best efforts to sow disinformation and doubt regarding the virus' origin.

Looking ahead. At the time of writing, China's public stance on the pandemic remains in Stage III. Although much has happened in the world since March, Beijing's overriding approach to the crisis is still to position itself as a leader in the ongoing fight against the virus. A hypothetical new stage could arise should:

- China suffer a major resurgence of COVID-19.
- The pandemic draw to a close (in the most likely scenario, because of widespread access to a vaccine).
- Some other domestic or international crisis supersede the pandemic in importance.

Regardless of how the pandemic develops going forward, Beijing will likely continue to promulgate the same narratives about its role in the pandemic that it has been pushing since January. The next section of the report will discuss the most prominent themes in the PRC's public narratives about the pandemic and illustrate how each is aimed at upholding an image of China as having responded competently to the COVID-19 crisis.

3. PRC Narratives on Chinese and US Domestic Responses to COVID-19

Nearly all of Beijing's narratives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic serve a larger "core" narrative: namely, that China rose to the challenge of the outbreak and has exemplified the role of a responsible great power on the international stage. Running parallel to this core message is a supporting narrative that portrays the United States as an irresponsible global actor that has let down its own people by failing to contain the virus. These mirrored portrayals are closely entwined, as Beijing has attempted to use Washington as a foil against which to highlight its own successes, whereas the US has been a leading voice in the international call for greater transparency from the PRC regarding the virus' origins. Since January, the governments of both countries have issued numerous public criticisms of the other's handling of the outbreak, and have strenuously contested the other's account of the past few months.

This section will analyze some of the main themes Beijing uses to argue that it has risen to the challenge presented by COVID-19 while Washington has failed to do so and is suffering the consequences. To do so, this section will compare two broad core elements of how Beijing has portrayed its response to COVID-19 as competent versus Washington's response as incompetent: the data presented and the reasoning for why China succeeded at combating COVID-19 while the US failed.

3.1 Beijing's comparison of US and Chinese domestic responses to COVID-19

Beijing has portrayed the Chinese and US responses to their respective outbreaks as diametrically opposed: China acted quickly to successfully contain and control the virus, whereas the US failed to do so. To support this narrative, the Chinese government has only publicized information that matches its version of events, and has also strived to clamp down on information that would undermine its narratives.

3.1.1 Beijing touts "official" numbers as evidence of success

The cornerstone of Beijing's narratives about its success in handling its domestic epidemic has been the sharp decline in infections and deaths after the initial surge in January and February. Beijing continues to point to that decline to argue that it competently beat the virus.⁴³

Time range of theme:
Continual

The PRC also highlighted these numbers in real time to assure the world that it was winning the fight against the virus. Beginning on 6 February, MFA spokespersons began their daily press briefings by announcing the latest figures of cases, deaths, and recovered patients, and continued to do so until late March.⁴⁴ This contributed to an illusion of transparency on the part of the Chinese government. Whether inadvertently or not, the WHO lent an air of credibility to Beijing's numbers by repeatedly defending the PRC's efforts to track the extent of the outbreak.⁴⁵

Silencing skepticism of official numbers. The CCP has a long history of using unsubstantiated statistics to bolster the legitimacy of its claims, whether it be data on China's GDP, annual economic growth, or death tolls in natural disasters.⁴⁶ Evidence suggests that the PRC's official data on the coronavirus are unreliable, both because Beijing struggled to get a grasp on the quickly developing situation on the ground, and because it actively downplayed the extent of the outbreak.⁴⁷ On 1 December, CNN published a report citing documents allegedly leaked from a source within the Hubei Provincial Center for Disease Control and Prevention showing that officials were knowingly releasing incomplete and inaccurate data during the first few months of the pandemic.^{vi}

Chinese officials have taken extensive measures to combat suggestions that their statistics are inaccurate. One way they have done so is by denouncing international skepticism about their official numbers as "rumors and lies" that are "worse than the virus itself."^{vii} For example, foreign-directed PRC media outlets such as CGTN denounced the aforementioned CNN report's allegations of efforts to hide the severity of China's outbreak as a fabricated attempt to smear Beijing.⁴⁸ The PRC also silenced domestic reporters whose coverage of events on the ground in Wuhan suggested that the severity of the outbreak was greater than the government was saying (for more, see Section 6.2.2). China's strong response to those who would question its data testifies to the importance of these figures as the foundation of Beijing's public narratives about the virus.

^{vi} Chinese statistics on case numbers were especially inaccurate in January and the first half of February due to officials not including cases that had been clinically diagnosed as COVID-19 but had not been confirmed as such by an X-ray or CT scan in their public tally. Paton Walsh, "The Wuhan Files." Adding to the confusion, the PRC National Health Commission repeatedly altered their methods for tallying new cases of the novel coronavirus during the initial outbreak in China, causing drastic swings in the official case count. See: Will Feuer, "'Confusion Breeds Distrust: China Keeps Changing How It Counts Coronavirus Cases,'" CNBC, Feb. 26, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/26/confusion-breeds-distrust-china-keeps-changing-how-it-counts-coronavirus-cases.html>.

^{vii} In fact, the very first question posed to the MFA spokesperson at the 6 February press briefing was a request for comment about the possibility that the actual number of confirmed cases and deaths was higher than the official statistics. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Daily Briefing Online on February 6, 2020," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Feb. 6, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1741546.shtml.

3.1.2 Beijing shines spotlight on US infection, death rates

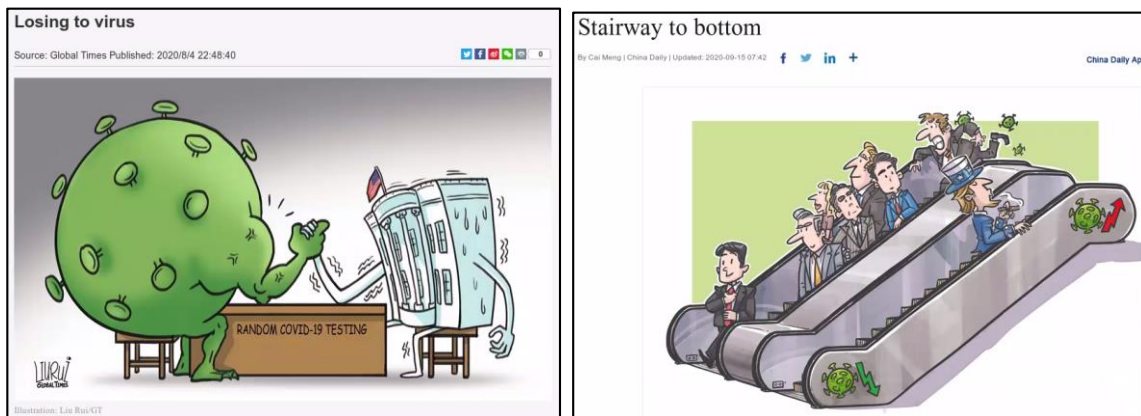
While only reporting sanitized statistics about China's own outbreak, the Chinese press has avidly covered the rising rates of infection around the world. These numbers reflect positively on

Time range of theme:
Continual

Beijing, as its relative success in combatting the virus allows it to enhance the Party's image in the eyes of the Chinese people and to position itself as a guiding voice for nations that are struggling to contain it.⁴⁹ To quote Xinhua, "It only takes a straightforward comparison of the death tolls to understand the US administration's awkward performance in handling the disease."⁵⁰

Since Washington State announced the first confirmed American to die of COVID-19 on US soil on 29 February, the Chinese press has consistently reported on the virus' spread through the United States.⁵¹ The US' rising death toll and rate of infection are constant news items, as are related woes such as the economic downturn and widespread unemployment. Beijing cites these developments to argue that Washington has failed to competently combat the outbreak, and uses them to further lampoon US leaders for their response as compared to China's, as seen in the below examples from PRC English-language media:

Figure 2. *China Daily* and *Global Times* cartoons mocking Washington's response to the coronavirus outbreak

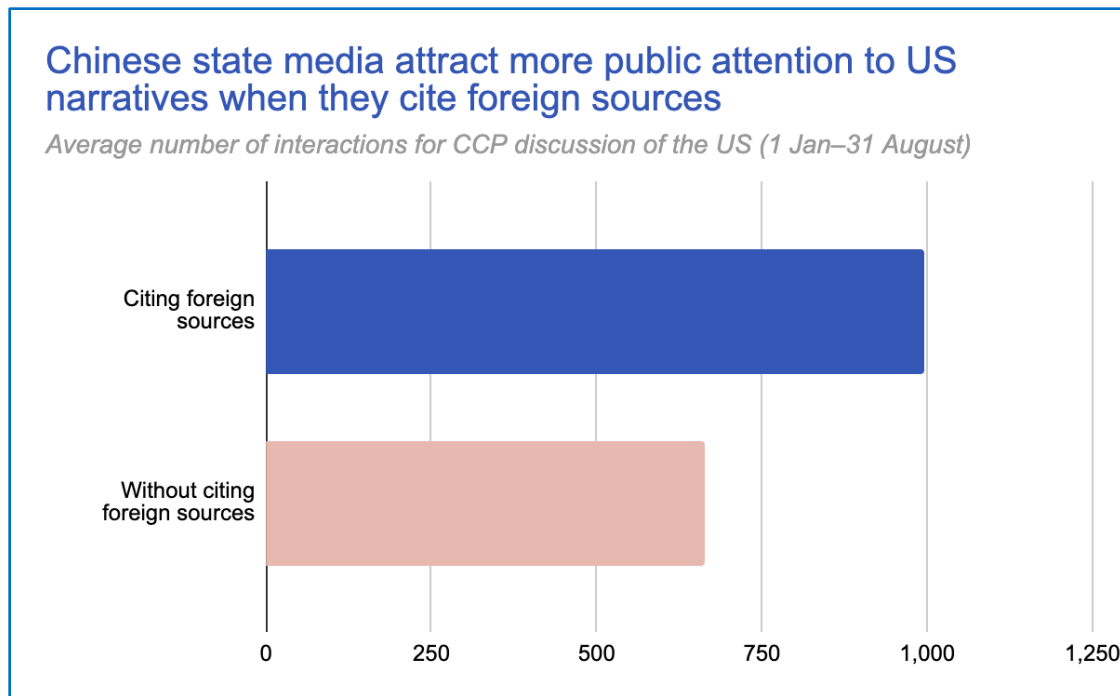


Sources: Liu Rui, "Losing to Virus," *Global Times*, Aug. 4, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1196717.shtml>; Cai Meng, "Stairway to Bottom," *China Daily*, Sept. 15, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202009/15/WS5f5ffeda3101ccd0bee051d.html>.

Citing domestic US criticism of US response. The Chinese press is quick to cite domestic US criticism of Washington's response.⁵² This allows PRC media to appear less biased in its coverage of the situation in America, and it also helps spread the negative portrayal of the US more widely on Chinese social media. A commercial data aggregator determined that PRC

media reports that cite Western news outlets generate a greater amount of social media interaction than reports that only rely on domestic sources.^{viii} This is illustrated in Figure 3:

Figure 3. Heightened social media attention to PRC media reports that cite foreign sources



Source: Commercial data aggregator, “Western Sources Play a Role in the Chinese Information Environment,” Sept. 4, 2020.

3.1.3 Beijing accuses US of hiding true extent of outbreak

Beijing has accused the US government of lying about the number of cases in the US on numerous occasions. For example:

- When the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) temporarily stopped disclosing the number of Americans tested for COVID-19 early in March, CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* posited that the move had “ignited public wrath amid the deteriorating COVID-19 epidemic situation in the US.”⁵³

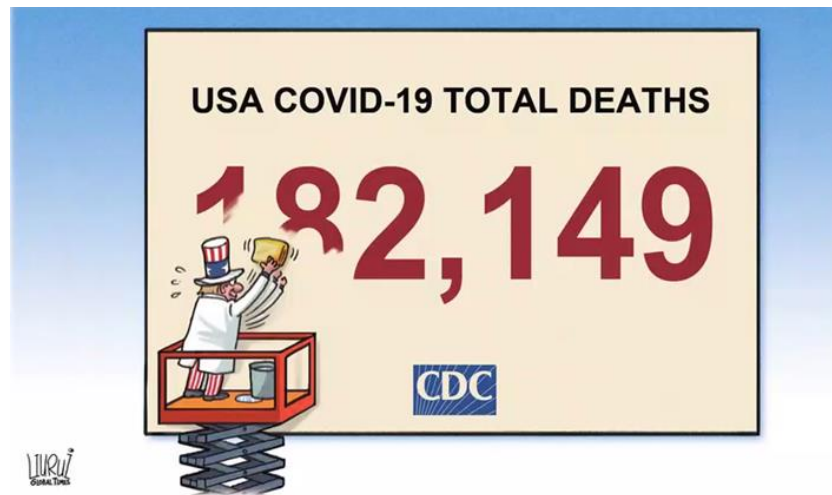
Time range of theme: sporadic, seems to be triggered by US news reports on the subject, or by US accusations of China hiding the extent of its outbreak

^{viii} Similarly, the commercial data aggregator found that non-government Weibo accounts that cited Western media outlets when discussing the US elicited more interaction than when they only cited domestic news sources. See: Commercial data aggregator, “Western Sources Play a Role in the Chinese Information Environment,” Sept. 4, 2020.

- In May, Xinhua turned US accusations of a Chinese “cover-up” back against Washington, arguing that the administration pursued a political agenda of smearing China “without telling the public the truth about the severity of the disease.”⁵⁴
- *Global Times* editor-in-chief Hu Xijin published an English-language report in June that slammed US officials for having “repeatedly denied the severity of the outbreak,” and declared it “shameful for the country’s government to deceive its people so much.”⁵⁵

In pushing the narrative that the US has been untruthful about the extent of its outbreak, PRC media has frequently drawn from US media criticism of Washington’s response. For example, in late April, Xinhua quoted reporting from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN suggesting that the true number of infections in the US was “much higher” than the approximately 1 million cases reported by Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Systems Science and Engineering.⁵⁶ Chinese media has also portrayed efforts by the US CDC to adjust its estimates and methods of counting cases as a deliberate cover-up, as seen in the cartoon below from *Global Times* mocking the US government for trying to scrub away the death toll.

Figure 4. *Global Times* cartoon mocking US government for “scrubbing” the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19



Source: Liu Rui, “Up, Up and Away,” *Global Times*, Aug. 31, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199467.shtml>. The *Global Times* cartoon is satirizing a CDC report that 94 percent of people in the US who died from COVID-19 had other health conditions. For more on the CDC report, see: Rebecca Falconer, “CDC Report on COVID Deaths Underlines Virus’ Danger,” *Axios*, Aug. 31, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/cdc-covid-deaths-contributing-health-conditions-3315196c-986f-4ae3-ba35-2075fd64bce1.html>.

Claiming Dr. Li Wenliang for the CCP

When Dr. Li Wenliang died on 7 February of COVID-19, it sparked a wave of public grief and anger in China. As one of the doctors silenced by the Wuhan police after warning others of the virus in late December, he was immediately transformed into a martyr for the fight for free speech, which the CCP views as a threat to its power.

After a clumsy attempt at censoring news of Dr. Li's death, Beijing changed tack and tried to claim Dr. Li as a pro-government symbol. Government officials and state-run media outlets blamed local police for responding "inappropriately" to his warnings, and stressed that the central authorities would "hold those responsible accountable." However, they also highlighted the fact that Dr. Li was a Party member, and denounced attempts by "hostile forces with ulterior motives" to cast him as "an anti-establishment figure." This effort to claim Dr. Li for the CCP also saw the Chinese government posthumously recognize him as one of the nation's "outstanding individuals" who made "extraordinary contributions to the country" in fighting the novel coronavirus.

Sources: David Bandurski, "Reclaiming Doctor Li," China Media Project, Mar. 19, 2020, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2020/03/19/reclaiming-doctor-li/>; "Virus Whistleblower Li Wenliang Among Outstanding Medics Posthumously Honored for Fighting Coronavirus," Global Times, Mar. 5, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1181669.shtml>; "Update: China Releases Investigation Report on Issues Concerning Dr. Li Wenliang," Xinhua, Mar. 19, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/19/c_138896212.htm; "China Awards May 4th Medal to Outstanding Individuals, Groups, Including Li Wenliang," Global Times, Apr. 28, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1187014.shtml>.

Accusing the US of silencing whistleblowers. Beijing has tried to turn Washington's accusations of silencing coronavirus whistleblowers against it. In the most high-profile example of this, the Chinese press widely seized on the removal from duty of the commanding officer of USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) in April after he sent a memo that was leaked to the press calling for stricter containment measures to handle the outbreak onboard the carrier.⁵⁷ In addition to the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*'s commanding officer, Beijing also portrayed a number of American medical professionals as "whistleblowers" who, according to the PRC's narrative, were silenced by the US government after trying to raise the alarm about the virus.^{ix} In numerous public remarks, PRC MFA spokespersons have argued that Washington punished

^{ix} The US medical professionals that Beijing labeled "whistleblowers" included an infectious disease expert at the University of Washington who was told to stop testing by the CDC and Food and Drug Administration after detecting community spread of COVID-19 in early February, the director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority at the Department of Health and Human Services, and the president of National Nurses United. For more information on these, see: Sheri Fink and Mike Baker, "It's Just Everywhere Already': How Delays in Testing Set Back the US Coronavirus Response," *The New York Times*, Mar. 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/us/coronavirus-testing-delays.html>; Sarah Fitzpatrick and Dareh Gregorian, "Whistleblower Rick Bright Says Trump Admin's Virus Approach Is 'Dangerous'," NBC News, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/hhs-whistleblower-rick-bright-resigns-n1242357>; Donald A. Promnitz, "Report: Failure to Track COVID Resulted in Nurse Deaths," *The Business Journal*, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://thebusinessjournal.com/report-failure-to-track-covid-resulted-in-nurse-deaths/>.

whistleblowers while Beijing honored whistleblowers such as doctors Zhang Jixian and Li Wenliang.⁵⁸

3.1.4 Beijing compares virus impact on US and Chinese militaries

One specific example of how Beijing has spun its narrative of competence is in the context of the US and Chinese militaries' experiences with the virus. As discussed in Section 6.3.5 of this report, China has praised the role of its military in battling the outbreak

Time range of theme: Peaked in the spring, has continued to emerge in coverage of US military

in Wuhan, and the Ministry of National Defense's official position is that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) emerged from the crisis completely unscathed. In a statement that has drawn skepticism from international observers, the health division director of the Logistic Support Department under the Central Military Commission (CMC) asserted in early March that there were zero infections among the PLA military barracks in Wuhan as a result of the military having "further strengthened its own prevention and control measures."⁵⁹ Similarly, PRC media asserted that zero COVID-19 infections were reported among the 2,000 officers and sailors from three PLA Navy (PLA(N)) escort groups operating in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean during the pandemic.⁵⁹ At the time of writing, the Chinese military has not updated or walked back this stance.

PRC media has highlighted COVID-19's impact on the US military. In contrast to its portrayal of the PLA as having emerged stronger from the encounter with COVID-19, the Chinese press has shone a glaring spotlight on the virus' impact on the US military, with some commentary going so far as to assert that US military readiness has been compromised as a result. This theme was most prevalent in the spring when USS *Theodore Roosevelt* experienced an outbreak while at sea and subsequently docked in Guam for two months.⁶⁰ For example, professor Major General Jin Yinan of the PLA National Defense University told China National Radio that the virus' spread through the US military was "a major blow to the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy," while

⁵⁸ Li Chun, "China Confirms No Cases of Coronavirus Infection in Military," *China Military Online*, Mar. 3, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-03/03/content_9758336.htm. Multiple foreign observers have expressed skepticism at this claim. For example, writing in *Foreign Policy*, PLA expert Joel Wuthnow of the US National Defense University asserted that the claim of zero infections among the PLA "beggars belief," and likely reflects "nervousness about [the PLA's] ability to complete other missions while consumed with a domestic crisis." See: Joel Wuthnow, "China's Military Claims to Be Virus-Free," *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 20, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/pla-coronavirus-invasion-chinas-military-claims-to-be-virus-free/>. For more instances of skepticism of China's claim of zero infections among its military, see: John Xie, "China Claims Zero Infections in Its Military," *VOA*, Apr. 6, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/china-claims-zero-infections-its-military#:~:text=%22China%20confirms%20no%20cases%20of%200%2Dstrong%20armed%20police%20force](https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/china-claims-zero-infections-its-military#:~:text=%22China%20confirms%20no%20cases%20of%200%2Dstrong%20armed%20police%20force;); Barnini Chakraborty, "China's Claim of Zero Coronavirus Infections in Military Is Bogus, Sign of Intimidating Rivals, Experts Say," *Fox News*, Apr. 15, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/china-zero-infections-military-bogus-coronavirus>.

Senior Colonel Du Wenlong of the CMC Political Work Department's Online Research Center for Chinese Military Culture speculated that the situation on USS *Theodore Roosevelt* was only "the tip of the iceberg," suggesting that the other branches of the military were also being affected by the virus in less visible ways.⁶¹ However, even after USS *Theodore Roosevelt* returned to sea, Chinese commentators continued to play up the assertion that the US military had been considerably impacted by the virus. For example, an op-ed in the Chinese military's official newspaper, *PLA Daily*, asserted that the 18 June crash of an F/A-18F Super Hornet operating off USS *Theodore Roosevelt* was a result of the ship's crew being "anxious to go to sea" after having "just recovered from severe illness."⁶²

Other instances of PRC media highlighting the virus' impact on the US military include the following:

- ***Cancellation of US-Republic of Korea (ROK) command post exercise (March):*** The Chinese press produced dozens of reports on the US and ROK militaries' announcement that they would suspend their annual spring exercises because of the spread of the novel coronavirus.⁶³ Two subject matter experts discussing the cancellation on CCTV-7, China's official television station for military affairs, contended that the decision could make US allies doubt the necessity of such exercises in the future.⁶⁴
- ***COVID-19 outbreak at US Marine Corps (USMC) facilities on Okinawa (July):*** The summer's outbreak of COVID-19 at several USMC facilities on Okinawa was a major media event in China, with PRC media outlets producing dozens of reports on the incident.⁶⁵ MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying slammed US military personnel who violated Japan's quarantine measures as having "breached the bottom line of morality."⁶⁶
- ***RIMPAC 2020 and US-ROK command post exercise (August):*** Chinese media commentators affiliated with the PLA attributed the scaled back scope of this year's Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and US-ROK command post exercises to the pandemic.^{xi} A PLA researcher asserted that the US insisted on exercising with the ROK for domestic political considerations, even though "COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc in the US and its military bases in the ROK."⁶⁷ PRC media also speculated that countries that

^{xi} For example, the Communist Youth League's official newspaper, *China Youth Daily*, described RIMPAC 2020 as a US effort to demonstrate its deterrence capabilities and show that it has been able to maintain its military might and operational readiness in spite of the pandemic. See: Tie Liu (铁流), "'RIMPAC' Exercise Under the COVID-19 Pandemic," (*Xinguan Yiqing Xia de 'Huan Taipingyang' Junyan*; 新冠疫情下的'环太平洋'军演), *China Youth Daily*, (*Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*; 中国青年报), Aug. 27, 2020, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2020-08/27/nw.D110000zgqnb.20200827_1-07.htm. For an in-depth analysis of the PRC media response to RIMPAC 2020, see: CNA, "PRC Media Brief: PRC Media Highlight COVID-19 Impacts on RIMPAC 2020 Scale, Training Events," Aug. 31, 2020, OSE Product ID: CHW2020083182450316.

chose to participate with the US in RIMPAC would see a subsequent spike in COVID-19 cases.⁶⁸

By questioning the resilience and efficacy of the US military, PLA-affiliated commentators are likely attempting to undermine ally and partner confidence in the US military.

3.2 Beijing's explanations for Washington's struggles with COVID-19

In its portrayal of China and America's differing fortunes in fighting COVID-19, Beijing has provided a number of explanations for why Washington has struggled to contain COVID-19. The most prominent of these are accusations of poor leadership, an inferior system of government, and a self-defeating inclination for competition over cooperation.

Of note, all of these themes first emerged in March as COVID-19 cases spread throughout the United States and the White House started blaming China for the pandemic.

3.2.1 Reason for US failure: poor leadership

Countless PRC government statements and media reports have praised Xi Jinping for having "personally" led the country's efforts to combat the novel coronavirus.⁶⁹ China's official record of its battle against the virus, the white paper *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*, identifies China's "centralized and efficient command" as the first factor behind its success in controlling the outbreak, and discusses at length how the system headed by Xi "made it possible for China to win its people's war against the virus."⁷⁰

In a clear contrast with the PRC's efforts to lionize its own leaders, China has placed a significant amount of blame for America's struggles with COVID-19 on the US government, with particularly strong rhetoric reserved for the US President and secretary of state.⁷¹ Both officials have repeatedly blamed China for allowing the virus to spread beyond its borders and trying to cover up its mismanagement, and it is likely that these efforts to hold Beijing accountable have at least in part motivated Beijing's sustained attempts to smear these officials as responsible for America's coronavirus woes.

A few specific tactics that Beijing has been using to counter the Trump Administration's criticisms include: (1) citing US and other non-Chinese criticisms of the White House to portray it as isolated in its positions, (2) using US officials' previous remarks to discredit them, and (3) dismissing US criticisms of China as politically motivated rather than based in fact.

3.2.1.1 Citing domestic US voices & the WHO to portray the White House as isolated in its posture against China

In an attempt to portray the White House as isolated in its positions, PRC officials and media outlets have repeated and repackaged many of the criticisms that domestic US voices and foreign actors such as the WHO and the EU have levied against the Trump Administration's response to the pandemic. These include allegations that White House officials downplayed the lethality of the virus, cast doubt on the efficacy of masks, and encouraged states to reopen while cases were still on the rise, as well as assertions that enacting a travel ban against China was counterproductive.⁷²

“Chinese virus”: One notable example of this tactic is Beijing's denunciation of the US President and secretary of state using terminology to describe the virus that links it to China, such as “Chinese virus,” “Wuhan virus,” or “kung flu.” When the US President first used the term “Chinese virus” in a 16 March tweet, PRC official spokespersons and media denounced the phrase as “slander” against China and were quick to point out that the WHO and numerous voices within the US also condemned such terminology as racist and xenophobic.⁷³ A spokesperson for the PRC MFA urged the US side to “respect the facts and the fair judgment of the international community, correct its mistake and stop its slanders against China at once.”⁷⁴

When the US President temporarily walked back from using the term “Chinese virus” in late March, *China Daily* published an editorial commending him for having “seen the error of his ways” and taking “a positive step in the right direction” that would help ease Sino-US tensions.⁷⁵ However, the US secretary of state's continued usage of these terms, along with the President's eventual re-adoption of such phrases in the summer, elicited further condemnation from Beijing, much of it drawn from the same pool of domestic US opposition. For example, one *China Daily* article written by a San Francisco-based correspondent quoted numerous Asian-American non-profit organizations as expressing their opposition to terms like “Chinese virus” and asserting that such language was contributing to a rise in anti-Asian racism in the US.⁷⁶ To further the impression that the White House's use of these terms is widely opposed, *China Daily* also produced a video featuring quotes from the WHO and US media condemning the language, narrated by an American actor who faults the phrases for having “exacerbated racism and discrimination against Chinese and Asian people.”⁷⁷

Figure 5. *China Daily* video with American narrator condemning the term “Chinese virus”



Source: “Just the Facts: Naming of Novel Coronavirus,” *China Daily*, June 1, 2020, <https://covid-19.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/01/WS5ed42fe8a310a8b241159b58.html>.

3.2.1.2 Seizing on past statements to delegitimize US officials

Beijing has repeatedly pointed to previous remarks by the US President and secretary of state to portray them as hypocritical and untrustworthy in a further attempt to delegitimize their criticism of China’s response.

“We lied, we cheated, we stole.” One remark that Beijing has frequently cited to dismiss his criticisms of China is the US secretary of state’s April 2019 quip that, as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, “we lied, we cheated, we stole.”^{xii} Chinese officials and media have quoted that line again and again to dismiss the secretary’s critiques of China as false charges.⁷⁸ In one unique example, CGTN produced a short animated video lampooning him for being deceitful by having him feature in a “credibility test” formatted like a video game (see Figure 6).

^{xii} The US secretary of state made these remarks in a Q&A discussion during a visit to Texas A&M University. Michael R. Pompeo, “Why Diplomacy Matters,” US Department of State, Apr. 15, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-texas-am-wiley-lecture-series/>.

Figure 6. Screenshots from a CGTN video portraying the US secretary of state as dishonest

The video portrays a number of the US secretary of state's criticisms of China as "lies" that diminish his credibility, visualized as a video game health bar. At the end of the video, he is prompted to "say something true" in order to avoid "game over"—the "true" quote he offers is, "When I was CIA director, we lied, we cheated, we stole."



Source: CGTN, "Pompeo's Credibility Test," YouTube, May 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3gfjgDg4Rg&ab_channel=CGTN. CGTN Français posted a French-language version of the video two days later. See: CGTN Français, "Video Game of 'Pompeo's Credibility Test'," YouTube, May 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X30q6H3vMs4&ab_channel=CGTNFran%C3%A7ais.

The following month, Xinhua's YouTube channel, New China TV, posted another video satirizing the US secretary of state for asserting that COVID-19 was leaked from a lab in Wuhan.

Figure 7. Screenshots from a Xinhua video titled "Once Upon a Virus 2"



Source: New China TV, "Once Upon a Virus 2," YouTube, June 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v67r5c2k6A0&ab_channel=NewChinaTV.

Using the US President's own remarks on COVID-19 to criticize him. Similarly, PRC media has frequently used the US President's own remarks on the novel coronavirus to question the US response to the pandemic. This can be seen in the numerous political cartoons and satirical videos that sources such as *China Daily*, *Global Times*, and CGTN have produced lampooning him for his comments on the effectiveness of masks, his responsibility for the crisis, and his 24 April speculation that disinfectants could be used to treat COVID-19. Of note, a commercial data aggregator discovered that Chinese bot networks amplified the US President's statements about disinfectants on social media, likely in an effort to chip away confidence in the US government's capability to handle the pandemic.⁷⁹

Figure 8. Foreign-directed PRC media satirizing the US President for his remarks on COVID-19



Sources: Liu Rui, "Trump's Narcissism," *Global Times*, Aug. 18, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1198140.shtml>; CGTN, "Symptoms of COVID-19 You May Not Know," YouTube, June 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z3eN1Rl8rc&ab_channel=CGTN.

PRC Public Discussion of the US President Catching COVID-19

China's public response to the US President contracting COVID-19 in early October was largely restrained, possibly out of a desire to avoid further exacerbating Sino-US tensions. Chairman Xi Jinping conveyed his "sympathy" and "wish for a speedy recovery" to the US President and First Lady after they tested positive for COVID-19 in early October. His message, which PRC media asserted was "the first message between the two leaders in months," was preceded by tweets of well-wishes from China's ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai, and MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying.

PRC media avidly covered the US President's stay at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Coverage predominantly consisted of factual reports providing updates on the situation, with little commentary observed in authoritative media outlets. Non-authoritative PRC media outlets offered some critical reactions, but even Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the nationalistic, non-authoritative daily *Global Times*, replaced a tweet in which he suggested the US President had "paid the price for his gamble to play down the COVID-19" with a retweet of MFA spokesperson Hua's wish for a speedy recovery.

According to *China Digital Times*, a US-based organization that provides uncensored insights into the Chinese media environment, Beijing issued a directive to Chinese media outlets on the subject of the US President's diagnosis, advising them to "only write brief reports based on the facts" and avoid "rejoicing in the misfortune of others." The intent behind this directive may have been to avoid sparking fresh anger against China in the US, given the tense state of the bilateral relationship, which likely explains Hu's deleted tweet.

Although these instructions were targeted at both Chinese news outlets and social media platforms, it appears that a degree of criticism was tolerated in online discussion of the US President's diagnosis. *The Washington Post* noted that the news went viral on PRC social media, and described Chinese netizens as expressing "a rare level of vitriol against a world leader for Chinese authorities to condone." Nonetheless, a commercial data aggregator observed only a handful of CCP-affiliated accounts on Chinese social media website Weibo reposting critical messages about the US President's diagnosis.

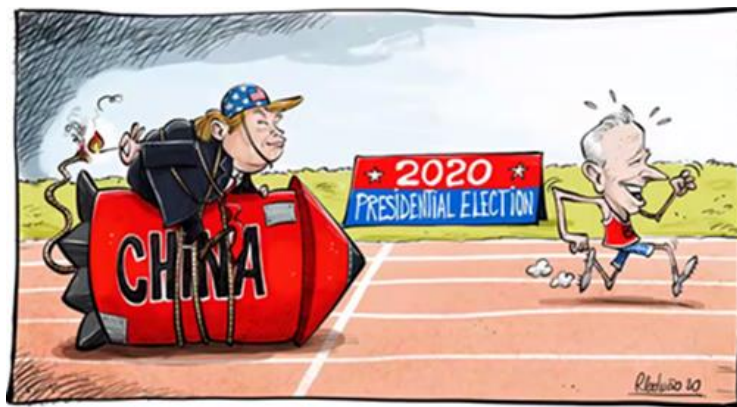
Sources: "Xi Wishes Trump, Melania Speedy Recovery," *Xinhua*, Oct. 3, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/03/c_139416546.htm; Cui Tiankai @AmbCuiTiankai, Twitter, Oct. 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbCuiTiankai/status/1312188720477478912>; Hua Chunying 华春莹 @SpokespersonCHN, Twitter, Oct. 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1312041413576585216>; Eva Dou, "China Had Mocked Trump for Not Taking the Pandemic Seriously. Now It's Very Personal," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/coronavirus-china-trump-xi/2020/10/03/b2b848e6-04b5-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec_story.html; Josh Rudolph, "Minitrue: Do Not Hype Trump's Coronavirus Diagnosis," *China Digital Times*, Oct. 7, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/10/minitrue-do-not-hype-trumps-coronavirus-diagnosis/>; Commercial data aggregator, "12 October Key Takeaways," Oct. 12, 2020.

Beijing has also frequently quoted the US President as praising China's response to the pandemic in its early stages, portraying him as hypocritically switching to criticizing China only after it became politically expedient to do so, as discussed in the following section.^{xiii}

3.2.1.3 Dismissing criticism as politically motivated

A key way that Beijing has publicly responded to much of the criticism it has faced from Washington for its role in the pandemic has been by dismissing US accusations as nothing more than attempts by the White House to improve the President's election chances.

Figure 9. CGTN cartoon portraying the US President as using China to boost his reelection race



Source: Ricardo Galvão, "Cartoon: Will Attacking China Give Trump a Boost?" CGTN, July 25, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-25/Will-attacking-China-give-Trump-a-boost--SomOnHzmTu/index.html>.

For example, in the two weeks following the US President's use of the term "Chinese flu" in March, *China Daily* published 10 editorials shaming the Trump Administration for what they asserted was an attempt to pin the blame for the pandemic on China for political gain. As summarized in an 18 March editorial titled "Futile Attempt to Deflect Domestic Pressure": "The United States administration is trying to divert attention from its own shortcomings by making China the scapegoat for the US' current troubles."⁸⁰

^{xiii} In one example of this, a 28 April *China Daily* editorial quoted the US President as saying in January that the US "greatly appreciated China's transparency" and that his administration was working "very closely with China" to argue that he was only calling for investigations into Beijing's handling of the outbreak because "disturbances, in the form of domestic criticism of his administration's tardy and flawed response to the pandemic, are prompting him to sing a different tune." See: "Washington Politicizing Pandemic as Part of Its Campaign Against China: China Daily Editorial," *China Daily*, Apr. 28, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/28/WS5ea82b4ba310a8b2411526bc.html>.

In that same period, Xin Qiang, deputy director of the Center for US Studies at Fudan University, told the *Global Times* that the US President was simply using China “as a lifesaver to buoy [him] during a storm of anxiety over his administration's inability to effectively deal with the coronavirus epidemic.”⁸¹ Later in June when the US President called COVID-19 the “kung flu” at a rally, Chinese analysts asserted that the remark showed that he was trying to win reelection by playing to white voters’ anxieties.^{xiv}

Chinese officials have similarly used this tactic to dismiss US accusations of mismanagement of the virus. MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian has waved off criticisms from US officials by declaring that their “responsibility is too heavy to shake off and their excuses are too lame.”⁸²

Similarly, when pressed in recent months to respond to Washington’s denunciations of Beijing’s policies vis-à-vis Taiwan, its treatment of Uyghurs in the western province of Xinjiang, and the dismantling of Hong Kong’s autonomy, Chinese officials have brushed the matters aside as the Trump Administration trying to demonize China and distract the American public from the health crisis.

Beijing plays the victim. Throughout the pandemic, Beijing has worked to portray itself as an innocent victim who has tried to help America navigate its current crisis. A 23 April *China Daily* editorial offered the following contrast between the US and Chinese responses to the virus:

With the US administration being berated at home for its response to the pandemic, it has opened two new fronts, trying to blacken China and to whitewash itself. While still combating the virus at home, now with the focus on imported infections, China too has opened two new fronts—reviving the economy and assisting other countries in their battles against the virus. That includes extending a helping hand to the US.⁸³

3.2.2 Reason for US failure: the US system of government

One of the key factors that Beijing publicly credits for its success in combating COVID-19 is the PRC’s unique system of governance. In contrast, it has maligned America’s democratic system as a factor that has made the country less capable of handling the pandemic.

It appears that this narrative was employed at least in part to counter US assertions that flaws in China’s governance system allowed the virus to initially spread beyond control, and that the shutting down of Wuhan was a “draconian” abuse of human rights.⁸⁴ Beijing has, of course, gone to great length to defend its response to the virus. One of the themes of its defense has been the abilities of the Chinese system to quickly mobilize resources and enact new policies

^{xiv} For example, Ni Feng, deputy director of the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, asserted that the US President had determined that he would not win many votes from minorities, and so was “obviously trying to win the election by stoking white US voters’ anxiety about their standing in a country that is growing more diverse.” Xu Keyue, “Trump Calls COVID-19 Kung Flu During Rally, Trick of Stoking Hate to Win Election,” *Global Times*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192343.shtml>.

that enabled it to contain its outbreak. For example, the PRC white paper on COVID-19 details China's "highly efficient system" in which "the central authorities exercise overall command, while local authorities and all sectors follow the leadership and instructions of the central authorities."⁸⁵ It further asserts that having gone through the crisis, the Chinese people "keenly realized" that the CCP's leadership "is the most reliable shelter against storms. Their trust and support for the Party have increased, along with their confidence in China's political system."⁸⁶ Numerous articles from across the PRC media spectrum have further expounded on this theme.⁸⁷

Not content with defending its own system of governance, Beijing has further asserted that America's democratic system inhibited it from containing the virus. Some of the specific arguments they have pushed through foreign-directed media include the following:

- ***The US federal system is too slow:*** A common theme was that the US division of power between the federal and state governments hinders it from responding to emergencies with decisive actions like the lockdown of Wuhan.⁸⁸ One *Global Times* report mocked the US' shortage of medical supplies as creating "a farce" in which the federal and state governments were forced into "a catfight for supplies."⁸⁹ Asserting that uncooperative states hindered Washington's response to the crisis, one CGTN commentator declared that when a pandemic arises, "the time to fly the flag of local freedom is over."⁹⁰
- ***The US political environment is too polarized:*** In a not-so-subtle defense of China's one-party system, Sun Chenghao, a researcher at the Ministry of State Security-affiliated China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, identified polarization between the Republican and Democratic parties as one of the main obstacles to defeating the virus in the US. Quoting a US political theorist, Sun asserted that America is mired in a "vetocracy" in which separate parties are more interested in stymieing each other's policies than in cooperating.⁹¹
- ***The US health care system is too expensive:*** PRC media outlets have also faulted the US' lack of universal health care as a factor in its relatively high number of cases. CGTN quoted a British analyst who frequently defends PRC talking points in the Chinese press as denouncing the US' privatized health care system for having "severely delayed and hindered" the country's response.⁹² *Global Times* quoted an Australian professor of international politics as pointing out that many Americans do not have access to medical care, and asserted that this and the inability of many workers to take time off work made it "highly likely that the coronavirus will spread even more quickly."⁹³

3.2.3 Reason for failure: the US is too focused on competing with China

As discussed above, Beijing's criticisms of Washington's response to the pandemic align in many ways with those voiced by other domestic US actors. However, a relatively unique feature of China's narrative is the assertion that the US has failed to defeat its outbreak because the administration has been too focused on trying to use the pandemic to attack China. This message appears to be mainly targeted at a US audience, as evidenced by the fact that the main PRC voices pushing this argument are foreign-directed media outlets and the Foreign Ministry.

There are two common lines of reasoning behind this argument: (1) the Trump Administration is so intent on competing with China that it failed to heed China's warnings and advice about the virus at the start of the year and has refused to learn from China's example in the months since, or (2) the US government is failing to contain the virus because it is so consumed with trying to smear China that it lacks the time and energy to properly address its domestic situation. Although less common, PRC media commentators have also occasionally asserted that the US military's desire to engage in competition with China in the Indo-Pacific directly contributed to the outbreak of COVID-19 among its ranks.

3.2.3.1 Washington is unwilling to cooperate with China

As early as February, Chinese media commentators were warning that Washington's inclination to see Beijing as an adversary would hinder it from responding rationally to an outbreak on its own shores. For example, while US case numbers were still in the double digits, international relations professor Li Haidong of China Foreign Affairs University predicted that the virus would seriously affect the country because American leaders were unwilling to learn from China's experience with the virus "due to ideological and political prejudice against China."⁹⁴

This theme continued through the spring and into the summer as US cases surpassed those of any other country. PRC media pushed the narrative that countries that heeded China's guidance on how to deal with the virus were more successful in doing so than the US, which they portrayed as too stubborn to listen to Beijing's advice. An 8 May *China Daily* editorial summarized the argument well, remarking that given the rising number of cases in the US, "one would think...the US government would be focusing its attention and concentrating its efforts

"Stopping its blame game, and engaging with China, the most likely partner able to help the US get control of the pandemic, would be the most practical and effective way for the US administration to protect its people and economy from further unnecessary grief and torment." – *May 8 China Daily editorial*

on the pandemic,” but “instead, rather than acting to correct their earlier mistakes, they are doubling down on their misreading of the situation by ramping up their China-bashing.” The same article advised that “the most practical and effective way for the US administration to protect its people and economy from further unnecessary grief and torment” would be “stopping its blame game, and engaging with China, the most likely partner able to help the US get control of the pandemic.”⁹⁵

3.2.3.2 Washington is not focused on domestic outbreak

A somewhat more abstract version of this argument is that the Trump Administration is so preoccupied with trying to contain China that it has neglected its responsibility to handle the domestic outbreak of COVID-19. This has become a standard talking point used by MFA spokespersons when responding to questions about US criticisms of China.⁹⁶

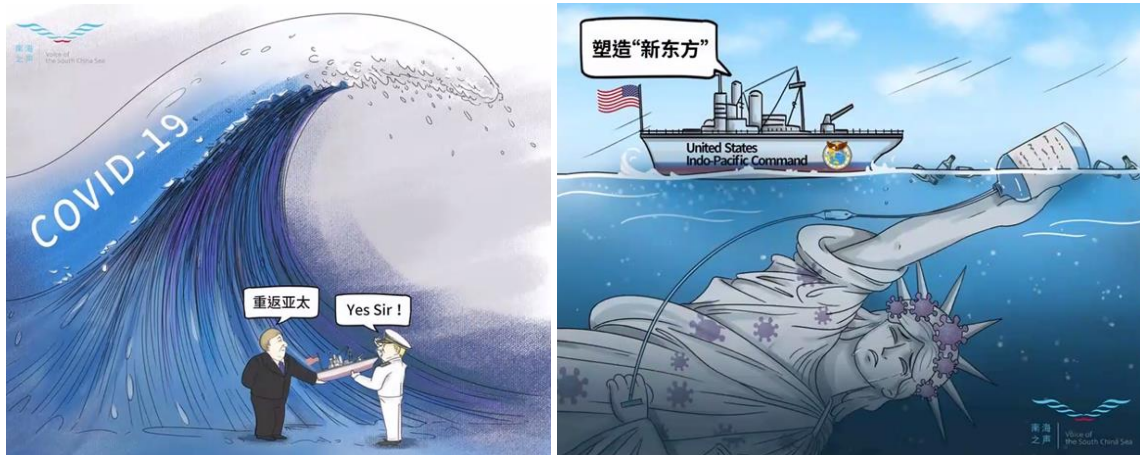
For example, when asked in May about the possibility that the US would sanction China if it failed to provide a full account of the virus’ initial outbreak, MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian expressed Beijing’s “firm opposition” and offered the following “word of advice”: “These US politicians should focus their attention and energy on fighting the outbreak and protecting American people, do what they are supposed to do and contribute constructively to the global cooperation against COVID-19, instead of racking their brains to distract attention and deflect responsibility.”⁹⁷

Considering how Chinese officials have used this reasoning in the context of a variety of issues across the political spectrum, it is likely that Beijing will continue to respond to US criticisms by publicly advising the White House to “focus instead on defeating the virus” and on “saving more lives” for as long as COVID-19 continues to spread in America.⁹⁸

3.2.3.3 US military is harmed by insisting on competition with China

Some Chinese media commentators have attributed the outbreak of COVID-19 in the US military to what they have portrayed as an unhealthy obsession with strategic competition with China. In a prime example of this, Hu Bo, director of the Peking University Center for Maritime Strategy Studies, published an op-ed in the *Global Times* in April portraying the US military as facing an “impossible” dilemma in which it has to simultaneously protect itself from the virus and “intensify military competition with China and Russia.” Describing the US military as “the most vulnerable to the pandemic” given its global presence, Hu contended that the Pentagon’s “unwillingness to show weakness” combined with a “preoccupation of the ‘China threat’ theory” prevented it from taking necessary precautions against the virus, leading to the multiple outbreaks onboard USN vessels and at US military bases throughout the Indo-Pacific.⁹⁹

Figure 10. Cartoons lampooning the US military for conducting operations during the pandemic, from *Voice of the South China Sea*, a multimedia outlet affiliated with China Radio International directed at audiences in ASEAN member states



Sources: "Orders Under the Pandemic," (Yiqing Xia de Zhiling; 疫情下的指令), *Voice of the South China Sea* (Nanhai Zhi Sheng; 南海之声), June 8, 2020, <http://vscs.cri.cn/20200708/f5436781-8985-4e91-da07-af8b8ce4e447.html>. Translation of caption: "Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific." "Shape the 'New East'," (Suzao 'Xin Dongfang'; 塑造'新东方'), *Voice of the South China Sea* (Nanhai Zhi Sheng; 南海之声), July 14, 2020, <http://vscs.cri.cn/20200714/5760c439-ddfb-86a9-8443-3e119873ec28.html>. Translation of caption: "Shape the 'New East'."

This assertion that the US military is unable to maintain its operational tempo in a safe manner during the pandemic is only the latest development in an enduring theme in PRC media commentary on the US military: the portrayal of the US Navy as overstretched by its global missions. This theme has appeared in the context of many different US military operations and activities over the past three years, dating back to the two fatal collisions in the summer of 2017 involving USS *Fitzgerald* (DDG 62) in June and USS *John S. McCain* (DDG 56) in August.¹⁰⁰

Even events with no direct connection to the pandemic have been used to support this narrative. Writing on the fire that damaged USS *Bonhomme Richard* (LHD 6) in July 2020, two authors from the PLA Naval Research Academy argued in a piece for *China Military Online* that the US Navy was "so severely hit" by the pandemic that it "obviously cannot meet the country's ingrained objective of being dominant on the sea." They concluded their article by positing that the pandemic and the USS *Bonhomme Richard* fire were warnings to the US Navy that "if the US military still holds on to its outdated hegemonic mindset and pursues the so-called 'absolute superiority,' it will not only continue to face the severe personnel shortage but also be doomed to walk from boom to bust."¹⁰¹

4. PRC Narratives on Chinese and US International Responses to COVID

China has put considerable effort into turning the pandemic into an opportunity to expand its role on the international stage and demonstrate that it is a “responsible member of the international community.”¹⁰² In this effort, Beijing has tried to deny culpability for the virus while also positioning itself as a leader in the global struggle to defeat it.

To quote the foreword of the PRC’s white paper on COVID-19:

Having forged the idea that the world is a global community of shared future, and believing that it must act as a responsible member, China has fought shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the world. In an open, transparent, and responsible manner and in accordance with the law, China gave timely notification to the international community of the onset of a new coronavirus, and shared without reserve its experience in containing the spread of the virus and treating the infected. China has great empathy with victims all over the world, and has done all it can to provide humanitarian aid in support of the international community’s endeavors to stem the pandemic.¹⁰³

This stance is aligned with Xi Jinping’s concept of a “health silk road,” an idea that emerged in 2015 as a plan for setting up “health cooperation networks” throughout countries participating in Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰⁴ The WHO gave its official support to China’s health silk road initiative two years later, with Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus hailing the concept as “immensely encouraging” and “visionary,” and declaring that “China has much to teach us” about health care.¹⁰⁵ The PRC has used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to demonstrate and proclaim the value of a global “health silk road,” led of course by Beijing.¹⁰⁶ Throughout the pandemic, PRC government officials and state media outlets have framed Chinese aid efforts as parts of this project.¹⁰⁷

To bolster its image as a global leader on the health silk road, Beijing has again sought to contrast its activities with those of Washington. According to PRC official statements and authoritative media commentary, the US has been pursuing self-serving policies that actively harm global efforts at cooperating to defeat the pandemic.¹⁰⁸

This section will analyze some of the main themes supporting Beijing’s argument that it has embodied the role of a responsible great power through the global pandemic, whereas Washington has acted irresponsibly and attempted to exploit the crisis for unilateral gains.

4.1 Foreign aid

Throughout January and most of February, the PRC was virtually the only recipient of foreign aid for combatting the novel coronavirus. However, as the virus quickly spread beyond China's borders, medical supplies started flowing around the globe in all directions, and countries like Italy that had sent aid to China at the start of the year found themselves in need of material and testing kits.¹⁰⁹

A Blurred Definition of Aid

Beijing appears to be intentionally trying to inflate its global contributions during the pandemic by stretching the meaning of "aid." PRC officials and authoritative media outlets have consistently used the term "aid" as a catch-all to describe not only donated materials and funds, but also material sold by Chinese companies to other countries. Furthermore, US media reporting suggests that many shipments of medical supplies were part of commercial agreements between Chinese contractors and foreign companies that predated the pandemic. When possible, this report distinguishes whether PRC "aid" was donated or sold to the recipient country.

For reporting on China's efforts to blur the lines between donations and business transactions, see: Valbona Zeneli and Federica Santoro, "China's Disinformation Campaign in Italy," The Diplomat, June 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/chinas-disinformation-campaign-in-italy/>; Edward Wong and Paul Mozur, "China's 'Donation Diplomacy' Raises Tensions with US," The New York Times, Apr. 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/politics/coronavirus-china-trump-donation.html>.

From the start of the pandemic, the US government has made significant aid contributions to countries around the world, as have private US citizens and organizations.¹¹⁰ In March, the US State Department issued a fact sheet highlighting US contributions to the COVID-19 response as well as international aid organizations in general, and repeatedly pointed out that Washington's contributions consistently dwarfed those of Beijing.¹¹¹ When asked about this claim, PRC MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying claimed that Beijing had "no intention to compete with anyone" and was happy to see Washington contributing to the fight against the pandemic.¹¹² However, as the sections below illustrate, Beijing has been actively pushing implicit and explicit comparisons between its aid efforts and Washington's in order to shape the public narrative in its favor.

4.1.1 Beijing casts itself as a major provider of international aid

The PRC started providing medical equipment such as masks and testing kits to its neighbors in late February, and it intensified these efforts as cases in Wuhan declined while infection rates exploded overseas.¹¹³ In a 4 November speech,

Time range of theme: Emerged in late February, peaked in the spring, continued through the summer and into the fall

Xi Jinping stated that China had exported over 179 billion masks, 1.73 billion protective suits, and 543 million testing kits to countries around the world over the course of the pandemic.¹¹⁴

“Mask Diplomacy”

As COVID-19 spread around the globe, Beijing waged a campaign of “mask diplomacy,” a term that has been used to describe its efforts to curry favor abroad by providing medical equipment to countries in need. China’s “mask diplomacy” has taken many forms, including donating and selling medical equipment such as personal protective equipment (PPE), masks, testing kits, and respirators; sending health professionals to afflicted countries; and providing funds for food and relief supplies.

China’s public relations blitz has been met with plenty of skepticism and accusations that Beijing’s aid efforts are at their core a propaganda campaign. The Trump Administration was wary of this possibility from the outset, with a senior administration official stating: “If China or any other country has some masks, gloves, or other products we need for the American people, we welcome that with open arms. What we don’t need is some kind of propaganda exercise during a crisis that the actions of the Chinese Communist Party have made far more serious than it otherwise would have been.”

Sources: Brian Wong, “China’s Mask Diplomacy,” *The Diplomat*, Mar. 25, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-mask-diplomacy/>; Keith Bradsher and Ana Swanson, “The US Needs China’s Masks, as Acrimony Grows,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/business/coronavirus-china-masks.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

One reason that the PRC has been such a major source of equipment throughout the pandemic is that it has long been a leading producer of such materials. However, Beijing also pushed the country’s factories to ramp up production as quickly as possible to meet international demand.¹¹⁵ A 31 March *China Daily* editorial proudly declared: “It is now a consensus among the Chinese people that until the virus is defeated around the world, they will do all they can to combat it. So, knowing that the more they produce, the more they contribute to the global battle, it is with a great sense of urgency and responsibility that they are getting back to work.”¹¹⁶

Although China has undeniably played a role in alleviating the global crisis by donating and providing aid, equipment, and experts to countries in need, shaping public opinion has always been one of Beijing's key aims. To quote a *China Daily* op-ed, China's aid during the pandemic "has won millions of hearts and minds as it has helped in saving millions of lives in the face of the deadly virus."¹¹⁷

As discussed further in Section 6.1.2 of this report, China's media outlets have been closely involved in the PRC's overseas aid efforts by documenting and publicizing Beijing's good deeds via television, radio, and print in dozens of languages targeted at audiences around the world. Some of the specific ways that Beijing has tried to influence public opinion of its international aid efforts are detailed below.

4.1.1.1 Conveying gratitude expressed by foreign officials

Beijing has proudly quoted expressions of thanks from leaders around the world for its help in combatting the virus. It has used these quotations to support its portrayal of China as leading a unified global fight against the pandemic, for both an international and domestic audience.

One common iteration of this effort has been the release of official government readouts of conversations between Xi Jinping and heads of state of other countries. These readouts generally carry Xi's remarks on the PRC's dedication to helping the world defeat the virus, and quote the other head of state as expressing thanks to Xi for the PRC's assistance.¹¹⁸ In a few instances, foreign leaders even traveled to China to express their gratitude in person. For example, during a March trip to Beijing, Pakistani president Arif Alvi thanked the PRC for its assistance in fighting the novel coronavirus and posited that the CCP's "outstanding leadership" would provide "useful lessons for other countries."¹¹⁹

Figure 11. Xinhua photo of Xi Jinping meeting with Pakistani president Arif Alvi in Beijing (March)



Source: “Xi Holds Talks with Pakistani President to Deepen Ties amid Fight Against COVID-19,” Xinhua, Mar. 17, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/17/c_138888328.htm.

Beijing has also loudly amplified unilateral expressions of gratitude from foreign leaders. PRC state-run media highlighted the Italian prime minister’s declaration that “China has come to us in our hour of need” upon delivery of PRC aid in mid-March,¹²⁰ the Czech president’s description of China as “the only country that has helped us deliver these supplies,”¹²¹ and the New York governor’s tweet of thanks to the Chinese government for 1,000 ventilators in April.¹²² Furthermore, statistics from a commercial data aggregator show that the PRC pushed these expressions of gratitude from foreign countries on the Chinese web. For example, between 20 February and 29 April, the company observed over 18,000 posts by government and state media accounts highlighting Italy’s appreciation of China for its help.¹²³

Exacting Gratitude

There is evidence that Beijing has at times tried to exact thanks from local leaders, usually in exchange for aid. *The New York Times* talked to multiple Western sources who recounted how Chinese officials told their foreign counterparts that “they must publicly thank China in return for the shipments.” For example, according to a US ambassador, Poland’s president Andrzej Duda was compelled to call Xi Jinping and personally thank him in order to receive aid from China. His expression of gratitude was reposted across the Chinese media spectrum, appearing in Xinhua, *People’s Daily*, CCTV, CGTN, and other national outlets. It is unclear how widespread this practice is.

Beijing’s pressure for thanks has at times backfired. When a PRC diplomat stationed in Chicago directly contacted a US state senator asking that he pass a resolution—drafted by Chinese consulate staff—that would commend China’s efforts to fight the virus, the senator refused and instead introduced a resolution denouncing the CCP for its actions during the pandemic. A commercial data aggregator discovered very heavy censorship of this story on Chinese social media. Chinese censors similarly moderated discussion of the news that German officials had rejected PRC requests for public praise of China’s management of the pandemic.

Sources: Edward Wong and Paul Mozur, “China’s ‘Donation Diplomacy’ Raises Tensions with US,” *The New York Times*, Apr. 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/politics/coronavirus-china-trump-donation.html>; Steven Erlanger, “Global Backlash Builds Against China over Coronavirus,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/03/world/europe/backlash-china-coronavirus.html>; Commercial data aggregator, “China Using Aid to Build ‘Mask Alliance’ and Deflect Blame for Mishandling the Outbreak,” May 1, 2020.

Below is an illustration of the varied ways that PRC media has used foreign leaders to bolster China’s international reputation, using Serbia as an example, which Xinhua described as “among the greatest beneficiaries of the Health Silk Road.”¹²⁴ Serbia—which is also a participant in China’s Belt and Road Initiative—was hit hard by the virus in March, and its leaders were frustrated by a lack of aid from its EU neighbors.¹²⁵ China found the country to be a willing recipient of aid, with both its president and prime minister expressing gratitude to Beijing multiple times, including in remarks to PRC media and on Twitter.

Figure 12. PRC media coverage of Serbian politicians thanking China for aid



CCTV coverage of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić kissing the PRC flag and thanking China for aid.

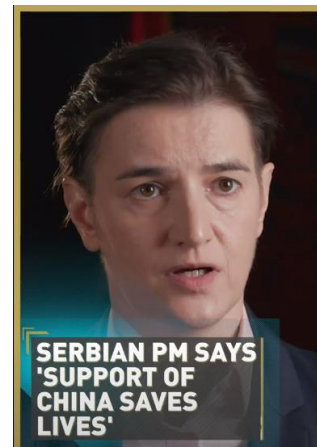
Left caption reads: “Vučić gave a passionate kiss to the PRC national flag to show his gratitude.”

Bottom caption quotes Vučić’s saying “China has always been our friend.”



CGTN coverage of a tweet by Serbian President Vučić thanking China for its aid.

Serbian text says: “We are proud of our friendship. We will never forget the help of our Chinese friends.”



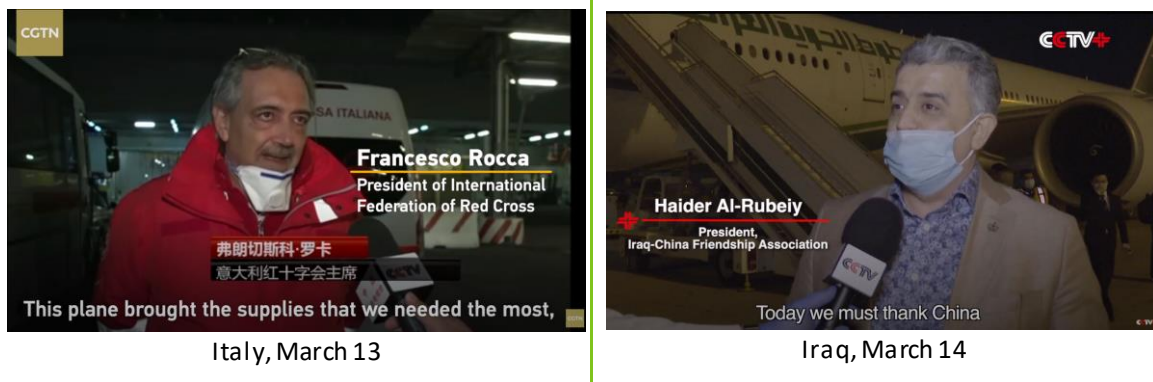
CGTN exclusive interview with Serbian PM Ana Brnabić praising China

Sources: CCTV, “Chinese Medical Professionals Arrive in Serbia,” *Weibo*, Mar. 21, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4485204473246390>; CGTN, “Serbia Thanks China for Aid, Blasts Lack of EU Help,” YouTube, Mar. 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GR-LJaGI9XU&ab_channel=CGTN; CGTN Europe, “Exclusive: Support from ‘Natural Ally’ China Is Saving Lives, Says Serbian PM,” YouTube, Mar. 29, 2020, <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-29/Support-from-natural-ally-China-is-saving-lives-says-Serbian-PM-PeDtjI17m0/index.html>.

4.1.1.2 Quoting thanks from foreign aid recipients

Another near-constant feature of PRC media reporting on Beijing’s aid efforts is quotes from foreign recipients of Chinese aid expressing their gratitude. As cases skyrocketed around the globe in mid-to-late spring, these remarks were often delivered by local officials and medical experts on the tarmac as supplies arrived or in meetings with newly arrived Chinese experts.

Figure 13. International recipients of PRC medical aid and advice expressing thanks



Sources: CGTN, "Positive Vibes - Chinese Experts Arrived to Help with COVID-19 in Rome," YouTube, Mar. 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huEIH0uliTM&ab_channel=CGTN; CCTV, "Chinese Experts Assist Iraqis in Containment of COVID-19 Outbreak," YouTube, Mar. 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSPT2Bq8EqM&ab_channel=CCTVVideoNewsAgency.

Even after China's shipments of aid slowed down over the summer, PRC media continued to feature international workers expressing their appreciation for the Chinese medical teams dispersed around the world.

Figure 14. International medical workers expressing appreciation to China



Source: New China TV, "Chinese Medical Experts Start Working in ICUs in Venezuela to Cure COVID-19 Patients," YouTube, Apr. 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwwYeC4eqJw&ab_channel=NewChinaTV; CCTV, "Chinese-Funded Hospital Dedicated to Fight Against COVID-19 in Ethiopia," YouTube, May 28, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNl26pkhwzs&list=PLsFTQBUCVH1t3e5f_URCEY458wxyQOM3F&index=19&t=0s&ab_channel=CCTVVideoNewsAgency.

The Chinese press has also been full of pieces detailing thanks from foreign netizens. For example, *Global Times* quoted Spanish netizens as tweeting “China now does more for Spain and Italy than our own governments,” and “The US treats us as pests, but China is helping us.”¹²⁶ In just one of many such pieces on the impact that Chinese aid has had on the world, Xinhua quoted an Ethiopian doctor assaying “we are lucky because we are the only hospital in Ethiopia that has the Chinese medical team at the moment.”¹²⁷

Doctored Gratitude

Shortly after China began shipping much needed medical material to Italy in mid-March, MFA spokespersons Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian retweeted videos that appeared to show Italians shouting thanks to China and singing the PRC national anthem from their balconies during quarantine.

Subsequent investigations into the authenticity of these videos, however, concluded that the footage was likely doctored. Italian news coverage of the same scene showed that the video Hua Chunying shared actually featured locals applauding Italian medical workers. It is unclear whether Hua and Zhao knew that the videos were doctored.



Sources: Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 @zlj517, Twitter, Mar. 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1239112822908276736?lang=en>; Hua Chunying 华春莹 @SpokespersonCHN, Twitter, Mar. 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/spokespersonchn/status/1239041044580188162?lang=en>.

Beijing’s seeming objective is to shape international views of its role in the pandemic. It is also likely intended to bolster domestic confidence in the CCP, as evidenced by the prevalence of this theme in Chinese-language media. For example, Party mouthpiece *People’s Daily* published a seven-part series in mid-May praising China’s role on the international stage called “Join

Hands with the World in Fighting the Virus, Highlight China's Undertaking" (*Xieshou Quanqiu Kangyi, Zhangxian Zhongguo Dandang; 携手全球抗疫 彰显中国担当*). Each article highlighted a different Chinese contribution to the global battle against the pandemic.¹²⁸

4.1.1.3 Positive images

By covering the delivery of PRC aid at the scene, authoritative Chinese media outlets such as CGTN, CCTV, and Xinhua have used their visual medium to convey an image of China as a force for good to the world. In videos broadcast on television and uploaded to YouTube, Chinese medical experts and soldiers are shown being greeted by enthusiastic welcome parties upon their arrival. Pre-made flags are unfurled on the tarmac. Boxes of supplies from China are displayed prominently, marked with the national flags of the PRC and the recipient country along with an encouraging slogan in both Chinese and the local language.

Figure 15. PRC media coverage of Chinese foreign aid delivery



PRC medical team arriving in Bangladesh



PLA personnel delivering aid to Laos



The PRC Embassy in the Republic of Congo donating medical supplies to the Organization of African First Ladies for Development



Screenshots from a CCTV feature on Chinese doctors working in African countries



Xinhua report on a Chinese doctor treating COVID-19 patients in Sierra Leone

Sources: CCTV, "Chinese Medical Expert Team Arrives in Bangladesh to Help Fight COVID-19," YouTube, June 9, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJHEka1if1o&list=PLsFTQBUCVH1t3e5f_URCEY458wxyQOM3F&index=152&t=0s&ab_channel=CCTVVideoNewsAgency; CCTV, "China Sends More Medical Supplies to Laos, Syria Against COVID-19," YouTube, June 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4XjAzcnmFw&list=PLsFTQBUCVH1t3e5f_URCEY458wxyQOM3F&index=157&t=0s&ab_channel=CCTVVideoNewsAgency; CCTV, "Chinese Embassy Hands over Donation to African First Ladies' Organization," YouTube, July 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7Qof9rQ7tE&list=PLsFTQBUCVH1t3e5f_URCEY458wxyQOM3F&index=30&t=0s&ab_channel=CCTVVideoNewsAgency; CCTV, "China and Africa Fighting COVID-19 Together," YouTube, June 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oYGmOJjZLQ&list=PLsFTQBUCVH1t3e5f_URCEY458wxyQOM3F&index=8&t=0s&ab_channel=CCTVVideoNewsAgency; "Chinese, Sierra Leonean Doctors Help Cure 3 Coronavirus-Infected Children," Xinhua, June 3, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/03/c_139111536.htm.

4.1.1.2 Suppressing criticism

A stumbling block to China's efforts to win over the world through its aid efforts has often been the material itself. Officials of over a dozen countries have openly complained about PRC aid and medical material being defective. Dutch officials recalled hundreds of thousands of Chinese-produced masks for faulty filters, Spain and Turkey discovered that tens of thousands of testing kits from China were ineffective,¹²⁹ and the Slovakian prime minister lambasted the 1.2 million antibody tests purchased from China as useless, saying they should "just be thrown straight into the Danube."¹³⁰

Beijing has generally responded to such public shaming through a rebuke from an ambassador or MFA spokesperson over the perceived "ingratitude" of the recipient nation. Censorship of these events has been observed on Chinese social media, but PRC media does tend to report on the accusations in order to counter them.¹³¹ For example, *People's Daily* noted that when doctors in the Czech Republic reported problems with Chinese-made testing kits, the Czech minister of the interior suggested that the issues were the result of improper use, and dismissed all such criticism as "attempts to politicize China's assistance."¹³²

Table 1 provides an incomplete list of countries that have expressed frustration with material from China, along with an example of how the PRC responded to the criticism.

Table 1. Countries that have expressed complaints with faulty PRC COVID-19 aid

Country	Complaint	PRC response
Belgium	3,000,000 defective masks ¹³³	A spokesperson for the PRC embassy in Belgium stated that the supplies were procured by Belgium through intermediaries, and expressed hope that Belgium would "settle this commercial issue fairly through legal procedures." ¹³⁴ Responding to complaints from the Netherlands and Belgium, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying stressed that China "has always placed great emphasis on the quality of their export products," and criticized those who were "hyping up" quality issues before knowing all the facts. ¹³⁵
Canada	1 million unfit respirators ¹³⁶	The PRC embassy in Canada blamed "a misunderstanding" between Canadian cities and the Chinese vendors, and called for such disputes not to be "interpreted politically." ¹³⁷
Czech Republic	Media reported that test kits purchased from China proved faulty; Czech government denied. ¹³⁸	The PRC embassy in Czech Republic quoted Czech government statements defending the kits' quality. ¹³⁹

Country	Complaint	PRC response
Finland	Substandard face masks ¹⁴⁰	The PRC embassy in Finland stated that China “verified the facts in a highly responsible manner” and determined that Finland purchased the masks through an “intermediary on business channels.” The statement also claimed that the masks were declared as non-medical products to Chinese customs.¹⁴¹ PRC MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian repeated the embassy’s statement that the masks were purchased through an intermediary and declared as non-surgical masks to Chinese customs.¹⁴²
Germany	Substandard face masks ¹⁴³	PRC officials appear not to have commented on the matter.
India	Faulty test kits	The PRC embassy in India denounced the decision to stop using the kits as “unfair and irresponsible” and blamed operator error. ¹⁴⁴
Nigeria	The Nigerian Medical Association expressed opposition to the government’s invitation of PRC medical experts. ¹⁴⁵	PRC MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian argued that Chinese medical personnel were dispatched to Nigeria with medical supplies, and repeated remarks from Nigeria’s health minister that Chinese support “effectively relieved Nigeria’s urgent need and greatly enhanced its confidence in dealing with the pandemic.” ¹⁴⁶
Philippines	Faulty test kits The Philippine health department later said faulty kits were not from the PRC government and that the Chinese test kits were of good quality.	The PRC embassy in the Philippines and MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying both quoted the Philippine health department defending the quality of the Chinese kits. ¹⁴⁷
Slovakia	1.2 million faulty tests ¹⁴⁸	PRC MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying asserted that Slovak medical workers used the kits incorrectly. ¹⁴⁹
Spain	Faulty test kits ¹⁵⁰	The PRC embassy in Spain pointed out that the flawed kits were provided by a company that had not received a license from the Chinese government. ¹⁵¹
Sweden	Faulty test kits ¹⁵²	No official PRC response; Chinese media quoted PRC and Swedish scientists as defending their quality. ¹⁵³

Country	Complaint	PRC response
The Netherlands	600,000 defective masks ¹⁵⁴	Chinese Ambassador to the Netherlands Xu Hong said the embassy “paid high attention” to these reports and contacted the Dutch government for verification. ¹⁵⁵ PRC MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying repeated the claims of the PRC embassy, and that the masks were labeled clearly as “non-surgical.” ¹⁵⁶ She also stressed that China “has always placed great emphasis on the quality of their export products,” and criticized those who were “hyping up” quality issues before knowing all the facts. ¹⁵⁷
Turkey	Faulty test kits ¹⁵⁸	No official PRC response observed; PRC media pointed out that Turkey purchased the faulty kits from the same manufacturer that provided inaccurate tests to Spain. ¹⁵⁹
United Kingdom	2 million faulty tests ¹⁶⁰	No official PRC response observed; however, the test manufacturer Wondfo dismissed UK complaints as “inaccurate” and asserted that its exports comply with the regulations of China and the EU. ¹⁶¹
US	Mislabeled and defective masks ¹⁶²	A spokesperson for the PRC Ministry of Commerce pointed out that the flawed kits were provided by a company that had not received a license from the Chinese government. ¹⁶³

Source: CNA.

4.1.2 Beijing disparages Washington’s role in international aid efforts

In order to make its own aid efforts appear more competent by contrast, Beijing has consistently disparaged Washington’s contributions to the international pandemic fight. Three specific charges the PRC has leveled against the US in this realm include (1) asserting the US lied about its aid commitments to China, (2) portraying US aid to other countries as insufficient, and (3) accusing the US of trying to steal masks from other countries.

4.1.2.1 Accusing the US of not providing promised aid to China

When the international community responded to the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, the Chinese government was quick to express gratitude to the dozens of countries that provided aid. However, Beijing publicly accused Washington of lying about its contribution.

Time range of theme: Emerged in early February, continued sporadically through the spring

The first instance of this came after the US President said on 2 February that his government had offered “tremendous help” to combat the epidemic.¹⁶⁴ In the PRC Foreign Ministry’s press briefings on 3 and 4 February, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying expressed that the “tremendous help” had not materialized.^{xv} She did, however, acknowledge later that week that “American companies, institutions, organizations and individuals” had offered support and assistance to China’s epidemic battle.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, in late January and early February, the State Department carried privately donated medical and humanitarian supplies from the US to China on planes chartered to evacuate US citizens from Wuhan. However, US private organizations stated that the shipments would have been made whether or not the State Department had helped, and it appears that the State Department did not provide government aid to China at this time.¹⁶⁶

\$100 million for China? The issue of US aid to China became a more serious point of contention after Beijing accused the US State Department of walking back a promise of \$100 million to support China’s fight against the virus. On 7 February, the US secretary of state tweeted that he was “proud to announce an additional \$100M of existing funds to support #China in combating the #coronavirus.”¹⁶⁷ However, three days later, another US official clarified that the funds in question represented “a ceiling of which...we’re prepared to spend,” and that it would be distributed among other countries on the frontline of the pandemic.¹⁶⁸

In press briefings held in February, March, and April, MFA spokespersons asserted that China never received any of this aid package.¹⁶⁹ PRC media reposted the spokespersons’ remarks,

^{xv} When asked at a 3 February press briefing about the US President’s promise of “tremendous help” to China, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying responded by claiming that “as far as I know, the US government has not provided any substantive help to the Chinese side yet.” She went on to condemn Washington for being the first to withdraw consulate and embassy staffs from China and to enact a travel ban against Chinese citizens. The following day, Hua was asked again about US aid to China. She did not confirm or deny the delivery of such aid, instead only expressing Beijing’s hope that “such assistance will materialize at an early date.” In standalone remarks made the same day, Hua said of the US President’s promise of “tremendous help” that “the US has said many times that it wants to help China. We would like to see early arrival of such help.” See: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Daily Briefing Online on February 3, 2020.” “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Daily Briefing Online on February 4, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Feb. 4, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1740278.shtml; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Remarks on US Comments Regarding the Pneumonia Outbreak,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Feb. 4, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1739985.shtml.

and published commentary portraying this as evidence of Washington's "hypocrisy."¹⁷⁰ For example, in a CGTN op-ed titled "No, American Government Did Not Help China," a British contributor to the Chinese outlet asserted that the US State Department did not provide help to China but rather "pretended to for the sake of good public relations." He further dismissed the US insistence that Beijing had rejected offers of experts and aid as "outright misinformation," claiming that the US government had never offered direct aid and that the American officials were using "PR spin" to give the impression that Washington was responsible for US civilian assistance.¹⁷¹

It should be noted that Beijing repeatedly expressed thanks to American non-governmental organizations,¹⁷² businesses,¹⁷³ and communities¹⁷⁴ for donating money and material to China's epidemic control efforts. However, the Chinese press was observed to use these contributions as a means to criticize the US government, as seen in the *People's Daily* piece "US Society Knows How to Help China amid Epidemic Better than American Politicians."¹⁷⁵ The report in the CCP mouthpiece praised American non-government organizations for donating more than those of most countries, and acknowledged that the US State Department had coordinated the equipment's delivery to China, but complained that the "up to \$100 million of assistance" promised by the department had still not materialized. Beijing has continued to use this as ammunition for criticizing the US government, as seen in the below screenshots from a satirical CGTN animated video posted in May.¹⁷⁶

Figure 16. CGTN animated video satirizing the US secretary of state's offer of aid to China as a lie



Source: "Pompeo's Credibility Test," CGTN, May 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-20/Pompeo-s-Credibility-Test-QDDxd6K5sk/index.html>.

4.1.2.2 Accusations of insufficient international aid

In a further attempt to portray the US as having failed to display global leadership during the pandemic, Beijing has disparaged Washington's aid efforts as insufficient.

Time range of theme: Emerged in late February, peaked in the spring, continued through the summer

This narrative appears to have been targeted at international audiences. For example, a Xinhua article titled "Experts Voice Concerns over US Inaction in Assisting Africa amid Pandemic" was reposted by news outlets in Ghana,¹⁷⁷ Zimbabwe,¹⁷⁸ and multiple separate news outlets in Uganda.¹⁷⁹ The report cited a former director of the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as describing the US as "missing in action on the global front," as well as a former US ambassador to Kenya who criticized Washington for refusing to join international partners in assisting Africa.¹⁸⁰

Other instances of PRC media accusing the US of having failed to provide sufficient aid to countries impacted by the pandemic include:

- A *Global Times* editorial published in English asserted that as "the leader of the West, the US is expected to aid the Western world," but that it had "failed" to live up to the responsibility and had "paid nothing but lip-service" to its allies.¹⁸¹
- A *People's Daily* article penned by "Zhong Sheng," a pseudonym used by the paper to express its views on foreign policy, accused the US ambassador to Israel of having falsely promised to give \$5 million in COVID-19 aid to Palestinian families and hospitals.¹⁸²
- Another *People's Daily* article dismissed the US secretary of state's 8 April assertion that "America remains the world's leading light of humanitarian goodness" by asserting that the US is "holding back the global fight" against the crisis and "has not provided any aid to its allies in Europe."¹⁸³

4.1.2.3 Accusations of hindering aid to other countries

Beijing has also portrayed Washington as having actively interfered in other countries' efforts to fight the virus. This theme was most prevalent in April after French and German

Time range of theme:
April–May

officials accused Washington of diverting hundreds of thousands of face masks bound for their countries to the US in what Berlin's interior minister described as "modern piracy."¹⁸⁴ The Chinese press highlighted these and similar incidents as yet another illustration of Washington's isolationism during the pandemic. Foreign-directed media outlets were particularly vocal in pushing this narrative, with an op-ed penned by a British columnist for CGTN denouncing the US for "willfully undermining" other countries as it carries out "brutalist 'survival politics'" in service of its "America First" policy.¹⁸⁵ A *People's Daily* article penned by

“Zhong Sheng,” a pseudonym used by the paper to express its views on foreign policy, asserted that the US “even ditched its allies” by “intercepting medical materials ordered by other countries,” and asserted that US officials’ “cold-bloodedness is way beyond people’s recognition.”¹⁸⁶

Figure 17. PRC media accusations of US “mask piracy”



CGTN segment alleging that the US diverted medical supplies intended for other countries



Political cartoons from *Global Times* and CGTN parodying the accusation that the US redirected mask deliveries meant for other countries

Source: CGTN, “The Point: Missing Masks, US Piracy?” Apr. 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyTPaWYmUs&ab_channel=CGTN; Zhao Minghao, “US ‘Mask Piracy’ Unmasks Its Selfishness,” *Global Times*, Apr. 9, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185147.shtml>; “Is ‘America First’ the ‘Modern Piracy’?” CGTN, Apr. 19, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-19/Is-America-First-the-modern-piracy--POMPKcKI00/index.html>.

Other ways that the Chinese press portrayed the US as hurting other countries' efforts to combat the virus included the following:

- Highlighting remarks from US mask manufacturer 3M that the White House had ordered it to stop exporting respirator masks to Canada and Latin America.¹⁸⁷
- Quoting Cuban officials decrying the US blockade for hindering the delivery of Chinese aid.¹⁸⁸
- Criticizing the US for enhancing sanctions on Iran, Syria, and Venezuela during the pandemic.¹⁸⁹
- Accusing the US military of rejecting a plea for help from the Italian government in March, and instead having the US Air Force fly millions of testing kit swabs from Italy to the US.¹⁹⁰

However, China's strongest charge against the US in terms of international aid has been in the context of Washington's withdrawal from the WHO, which is discussed in the following section.

4.2 Participation in the WHO

During the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions between Washington and the WHO reached a breaking point that culminated with the US President declaring plans for the country's official withdrawal from the organization on 7 July.^{xvi} China has used the US withdrawal from the organization to paint the US as a selfish actor that is working against the international fight against the virus. In contrast, Beijing has portrayed itself as an ardent ally of the WHO, despite having kept crucial information from WHO officials in the early days of the crisis.¹⁹¹

Time range of theme:
Continual since emerging in
February

4.2.1 PRC officials denounce US withdrawal as weakening the international fight against the pandemic

Throughout the year, Beijing has worked to use Washington's move away from the WHO to its advantage, exploiting the US' vacuum to reposition China as a global health leader. Chinese officials have repeatedly condemned the US for pulling its support from the WHO, and have argued that doing so during the pandemic actively harmed global efforts to defeat the virus. For example:

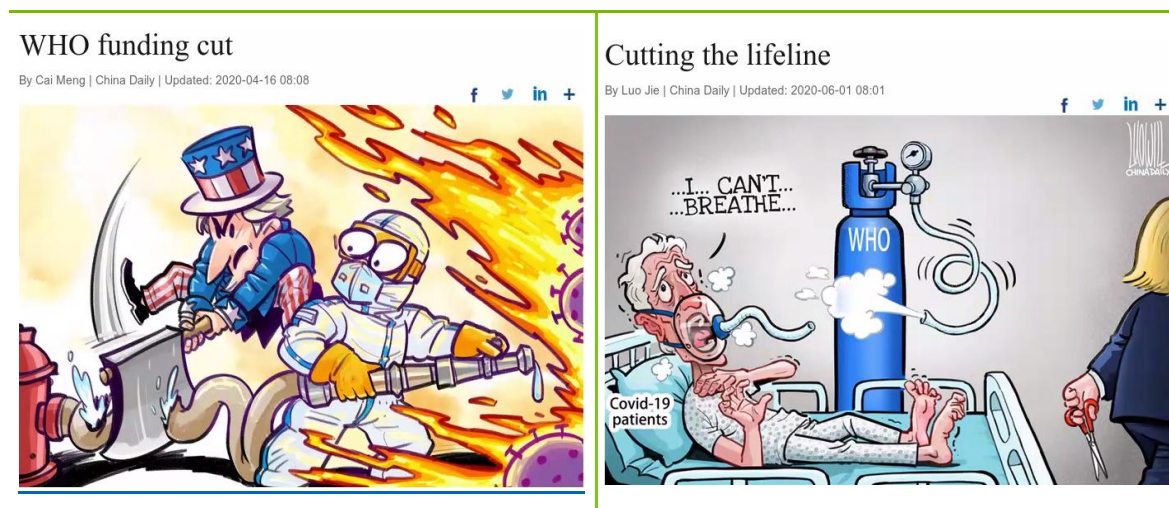
^{xvi} The process of withdrawal will take one year, making it effective on 6 July 2021. Katie Rogers and Apoorva Mandavilli, "Trump Administration Signals Formal Withdrawal from WHO," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-who.html>.

- After the Trump Administration formally began the process of withdrawing the US from the WHO, Zhao Lijian warned that the move would “undercut international combat against the virus, which will have particularly severe impact on developing countries” and urged the US to “behave as a responsible major country.”¹⁹²
- In an August interview with Xinhua, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi cited the US withdrawal from the WHO as evidence of how it has “gone [to the] extreme to pursue unilateralism and bullying, even at the cost of international responsibilities and multilateral rules.”¹⁹³
- Zhang Jun, China’s ambassador to the UN, accused the US of “weakening the UN, the WHO, and other UN bodies” at a time when “the international community needs a strong United Nations.”¹⁹⁴

4.2.2 PRC media condemns US for breaking with the WHO

PRC media echoed the Chinese government’s criticism of the US break with the WHO with numerous editorials, op-eds, and political cartoons.

Figure 18. Chinese political cartoons satirizing the US decision to pull its support from the WHO



Source: Cai Meng, “WHO Funding Cut,” *China Daily*, Apr. 16, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/16/WS5e97a1e2a3105d50a3d16858.html>; Luo Jie, “Cutting the Lifeline,” *China Daily*, June 1, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/01/WS5ed4456ca310a8b241159bcb.html>.

Some of the specific tactics that the Chinese press has used to condemn the US break from the WHO are detailed the following sections.

4.2.2.1 PRC media highlights foreign, domestic US criticism

Beijing has found plenty of American and international critics of the decision to leave the WHO, and has cited these non-PRC voices to boost the legitimacy of its platforms. For example:

- CGTN responded to the US' halting of funding to the WHO in April by quoting more than a dozen American and foreign public figures who expressed opposition to the decision.¹⁹⁵
- Similarly, CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* published an article in July titled "US Withdrawal from WHO: A Globally 'Unsupported' Decision" that cited multiple US congresspersons as warning that leaving the WHO would have dire consequences for Americans.¹⁹⁶
- Multiple authoritative media reports cited condemnation of the move by medical journal *The Lancet*, which argued that the move "would have dire consequences for US security, diplomacy, and influence" and make Americans "far less safe."¹⁹⁷

Of note, Beijing appears to have been pushing these criticisms on Chinese social media outlets. For example, when the editor-in-chief of *The Lancet* denounced the White House's cutting of WHO funding as "a crime against humanity" on 14 April, a commercial data aggregator observed Chinese bot accounts to have amplified the story more than any other news item that week.¹⁹⁸

4.2.2.2 PRC media commentary portrays withdrawal as a political move

PRC media commentary's general assessment for why the White House decided to leave the WHO was that the move was a political one aimed at benefiting the US President's reelection campaign. The argument is that the move would kill two birds with one stone by deflecting blame for the pandemic and making the US President appear tough on China and on the international organizations that his political base distrusts.¹⁹⁹ For example:

- A Xinhua report on the US President's 18 May letter to the WHO quoted the chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh as asserting that the letter was "written for his base and to deflect blame."²⁰⁰
- Zeng Guang, described by *Global Times* as "China's top epidemiologist," dismissed the US' move against the WHO as the White House "only trying to divert attention from its failure to handle its domestic epidemic."²⁰¹
- China's official English-language newspaper *China Daily* published a scathing editorial in response to the Trump Administration's announcement of plans to withdraw from the WHO that portrayed the decision as proof that "the White House is willing to callously gamble with people's lives to secure votes."²⁰²

4.2.2.3 PRC media commentators assert US withdrawal from WHO is abdication of global leadership

PRC media commentators also speculated on the implications of the US' split from the WHO. Commentary on the long-term implications widely portrayed the move as a sign that Washington has abdicated its role as leader of the international system. For example:

- Song Guoyou, deputy director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University, asserted in the English-language version of the *Global Times* that the Trump Administration's "refusal to effectively lead" and its "intentional disruption of global cooperation" had "totally undermined US soft power."²⁰³
- Xinhua conducted an interview with a Tanzanian professor of economics who declared that the withdrawal meant that "the world will not trust the US again" as it reflects the US' "failure to be a global leader."²⁰⁴
- Diao Daming, a US studies expert with the Renmin University of China in Beijing, told the *Global Times* that Washington's break with the WHO was further evidence that the world "can't rely on the US in any global crisis or challenge."²⁰⁵
- Yuan Sha, a researcher at official MFA think tank China Institute of International Studies, argued that the US decision to "abdicate from the leadership role in the global fight" against COVID-19 "shattered the myth" that the US was a global leader.²⁰⁶

4.2.3 Beijing portrays itself as a supporter of the WHO

In its many criticisms of Washington's break with the WHO, Beijing has consistently reaffirmed its own support for the international body. Through actions and public statements, China's leaders have attempted to fill the US vacuum by portraying the PRC as a champion of multilateralism, despite having rebuffed WHO requests for transparency and coerced them into defending China's actions.²⁰⁷

Time range of theme:
Continual

In one noteworthy example of Beijing trying to move closer to the WHO while Washington moved further away, Xi Jinping delivered a speech highlighting the WHO's importance in fighting the pandemic at the opening of the 73rd World Health Assembly on 18 May, the same day that the US President sent a letter to the WHO warning that the US would permanently freeze its contributions to the organization. In his speech, Xi posited that the WHO should "lead the global response" to the pandemic, and called on the international community "to increase political and financial support for WHO so as to mobilize resources worldwide to defeat the virus."²⁰⁸

5. PRC Disinformation on the Virus' Origin

As mentioned in Section 3.1.4, Beijing has pushed a disinformation campaign aimed at sowing uncertainty about the origin of the novel coronavirus. It has done so by insisting that the virus' origin is either unknowable, needs further investigation, or even that it could have been brought to China from the US. The following section discusses some of the key elements of this particular disinformation campaign.

5.1 What

Rather than promoting one singular narrative regarding the source of COVID-19, Beijing has presented multiple pieces of disinformation that share the underlying idea that the novel coronavirus did not originate in China. The main variations are:

- Asserting that the true origin of the novel coronavirus is either (1) as of yet unknown because of a lack of sufficient time and research, or (2) simply unknowable.²⁰⁹
- Asserting that wherever the novel coronavirus originated, it was not China. Possible sources cited by PRC actors include Italy, Southeast Asia, and, of course, the US.²¹⁰

This last variant—that the US could be the original source of the virus—features a few subthemes, including:

- Suggestions that the US Army brought the novel coronavirus to Wuhan during the fall 2019 Military World Games held in the city—either intentionally or unintentionally.²¹¹
- Suggestions that the US Army is “trying to cover something up” at Fort Detrick in Maryland that may be related to the novel coronavirus.²¹²

All of these narratives are accompanied by the insistence that attempts to link the virus with China are inappropriate or immoral. This assertion is based on longstanding WHO guidance against labeling infectious diseases with names that stigmatize certain countries, as well as on the recognition that the international scientific community still has much to learn about when and where the virus first made the zoonotic leap from animals to humans.^{xvii}

^{xvii} This guidance was issued in May of 2015, and also recommends against using terms that refer to geographic locations, people's names, species of animal or food, cultures, populations, industries or occupations, and “terms that incite undue fear (e.g., *unknown*, *fatal*, *epidemic*).” See: “WHO Issues Best Practices for Naming New Human Infectious Diseases,” World Health Organization, May 8, 2015, <https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2015/naming-new-diseases/en/>.

Although the opposition to linking the novel coronavirus with China is not disinformation per se, Beijing has used this “moral” argument to support its efforts to deny responsibility for its role in the pandemic.

5.2 Why

Beijing’s ultimate objective in pushing this disinformation campaign is to avoid being blamed for unleashing the pandemic on the world. It is likely that the Trump Administration’s attempts to hold the PRC accountable for its role in the pandemic have only highlighted for China’s leaders the potential political, diplomatic, and economic damage that they could face if the rest of the world were to rally behind Washington and declare them responsible for mishandling the initial outbreak. As MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying noted in October, US efforts to blame China for the virus could “seriously mislead” people and “poison the atmosphere for China to develop relations with other countries.”²¹³

Beijing’s disinformation campaign suggests that the CCP has assessed that it can deflect blame for the pandemic by sowing doubt and confusion about the true origin of the novel coronavirus. Whether China’s disinformation efforts cause people around the world to believe that the virus actually came from a US lab or from somewhere in Europe or Southeast Asia is of relatively low importance: the main objective is to simply make people *unsure* of its origin so that they will not try to blame the Chinese government.

Beijing’s attempt to sow doubt regarding the virus’ origin appears to have been at least partially motivated by US allegations that the virus was leaked from a Chinese biolab. The first time that the issue of the virus’ origin was addressed by a PRC government official was in response to a question about the allegation from “certain Western individuals and media” that COVID-19 had originated from China’s biological warfare program. During the MFA’s routine press conference on 20 February, spokesperson Geng Shuang denounced the idea as “sensational hearsay.” He then cited assessments from the WHO and a joint statement signed by over two dozen public health scientists from around the world concluding that the virus was likely not engineered in a lab, before stressing the need to “combat conspiracy theories and other ‘political viruses.’”²¹⁴

Beijing may be pushing false information about US responsibility for the virus to deter Washington from calling for investigation into its source. China may have selected the US as the main subject of its disinformation regarding the virus’ origin in an attempt to dissuade Washington from further efforts to hold Beijing accountable for the pandemic. By responding to US calls for accountability with tit-for-tat efforts to shine a spotlight on sensitive US government affairs such as bioweapons research, Beijing is likely signaling that it will respond to US scrutiny by spreading false information that could negatively affect the US.

PRC MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian seems to have confirmed as much after his attention-grabbing tweet in mid-March suggesting that the US Army could have brought the virus to Wuhan. When asked about the post in a subsequent press briefing, Zhao stated that “the questions raised on my personal Twitter account are a response to US politicians’ stigmatization of China, which also reflects the righteous anger of many Chinese people over these stigmatizing acts.”²¹⁵ In further evidence that Beijing’s efforts to sow disinformation about the US military being responsible for the pandemic could be a countermeasure to US attempts to hold China accountable for the outbreak, all eight instances of PRC MFA spokespersons discussing Fort Detrick in official press briefings in the first 11 months of 2020 were in response to assertions by US officials or media outlets that the PRC was covering up facts about the virus’ origin.²¹⁶

5.3 Who

Beijing has pushed this series of disinformation through multiple voices and platforms over the course of the pandemic. These have included:

- Government officials, in both official and unofficial channels.
- Media outlets directed at domestic and foreign audiences, ranging from authoritative Party and state-run platforms to non-authoritative outlets and blogs.
- Chinese and foreign social media platforms.

MFA spokespersons have been the most vocal of Beijing’s officials in arguing that the novel coronavirus may not have originated in China. CNA analysts observed MFA spokespersons cast doubt on the novel coronavirus’ origin in 51 of the 203 routine MFA press briefings between 1 February and 30 November. MFA spokespersons have also played a visible role in trying to tie Fort Detrick to the novel coronavirus, bringing it up in eight separate press briefings. In addition to MFA spokespersons, a handful of other PRC officials within the MFA have also attempted to sow false information about Fort Detrick. For example:

- In June, the PRC’s consul general in Rio de Janeiro published an essay on the Portuguese, English, and Chinese versions of the consulate’s website provocatively titled “How Long Will the Evil of Fort Detrick Sustain [sic]?” Beyond asserting that “more and more people suspect an association between the COVID-19 outbreak and Fort Detrick...and strongly demand an international investigation,” the consul general also demanded the fort “be held to account for the heinous historical crimes and the real international concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic!”²¹⁷
- After NBC reporters were given a tour of the Wuhan Institute for Virology in August, the official Twitter account of the PRC embassy in France posted a link to the story along with a call on the US to “open up the Fort Detrick base to the media” and “invite

WHO experts to investigate the origin of the virus, so that the United States has a chance to explain the truth and be accountable to the American people and the international community.”²¹⁸

It is more common, however, for CCP officials to simply push the broader line of disinformation that the virus’ origin is unknown. Chinese officials above the level of MFA spokesperson have not been observed to push or defend the conspiracy theory that the virus came from the US. In fact, when the PRC ambassador to the US—a former assistant minister of foreign affairs and one of the most senior officials in the ministry—was asked about this particular claim, he dismissed it as “crazy.”^{xviii} Higher ranking CCP officials, such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi and PRC Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun, have avoided asserting that the virus could have originated in the US, and have instead argued that the virus’ origin is unknown and that attempts by the US to blame China for the outbreak are “baseless.”²¹⁹

5.4 When

Beijing’s disinformation campaign on the origin of the novel coronavirus has evolved over time. Some key inflection points in this campaign are highlighted below.

January to mid-February: Low-level speculation on virus’ origin. There was plenty of speculation as to the virus’ origins among Chinese netizens and foreign observers in the first month and a half of the outbreak. Western media outlets including *Radio Free Asia* and the British tabloid *Daily Mail* noted the proximity between the seafood market and the Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory, and *The Washington Times* quoted an Israeli analyst who posited that the virus “may have originated” in a Chinese bioweapons lab.²²⁰ Meanwhile, Chinese netizens spread rumors that the virus could have been brought to China by the US military, either unintentionally or as part of a broader conspiracy to undermine the PRC.²²¹ However, neither PRC officials nor media were observed to endorse such speculation, with CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* even reposting a *Global Times* report that dismissed the idea that the US brought the virus to China as “conspiracy theories.”²²² Other Chinese media discussion at this time on the virus’ possible origins speculated on what animal the virus may have jumped to humans from and what role Wuhan’s Huanan Seafood Market played, but there was not a concerted effort to dispute that the virus came from China.²²³

^{xviii} Ambassador Cui Tiankai first dismissed the idea that the virus came from a military lab in the US as “crazy things” in an interview on CBS’ “Face the Nation” in February. He later expressed that he stood by that position in a March interview with *Axios* on HBO. See: “Transcript: Ambassador Cui Tiankai on ‘Face the Nation,’ February 9, 2020,” CBS News, Feb. 9, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-cui-tiankai-on-face-the-nation-february-9-2020/>; Jonathan Swan and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Top Chinese Official Disowns US Military Lab Coronavirus Conspiracy,” *Axios*, Mar. 22, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/china-coronavirus-ambassador-cui-tiankai-1b0404e8-026d-4b7d-8290-98076f95df14.html>.

Late February: Renowned Chinese scientist asserts virus “not necessarily” from China. PRC state-run media appears to have adopted the idea that the virus may not have come from China on 27 February, when renowned Chinese respiratory specialist Dr. Zhong Nanshan declared at a press conference that “although the virus first appeared in China, that does not necessarily mean it originated here.”²²⁴ Although Dr. Zhong also cautioned that “we cannot say that [the] virus comes from abroad,” *Global Times* quoted another Chinese scientist as countering that it “might have multiple birthplaces co-existing around the globe.”²²⁵ Additionally, a commercial data aggregator observed that CCP-aligned bot networks began to suggest that Fort Detrick was connected to the novel coronavirus as early as the week of 23 February.²²⁶

Early March: MFA officials denounce suggestions of Chinese origin as “political virus.” In March, Beijing started labeling the mere suggestion that COVID-19 originated in China at all a “political virus.”²²⁷ During the MFA’s 4 March press briefing, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson asserted for the first time that “no conclusion has been reached yet on the origin of the virus,” and denounced Western media’s usage of the term “China virus” because it “suggests [COVID-19’s] origin without any supporting facts or evidence.”²²⁸ This argument appeared in approximately half of the PRC MFA press briefings held in March, April, and May, as well as just under a third of the press briefings in June and July. Authoritative PRC media outlets also started pushing the narrative that any assertions that the virus came from China were politically motivated attempts to smear Beijing.²²⁹

Mid-March: US conspiracy theories appear increasingly acceptable to Beijing. Also in March, PRC media began speculating on a possible US origin of the novel coronavirus. The first such report appears to have been an 11 March *Global Times* piece on a petition posted the day before to “We the People,” a public petition platform on the official White House website, calling for the US government to release information on the Fort Detrick (discussed more in Section 5.5.1).²³⁰ The next day, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian sent out a tweet from his personal Twitter account claiming that the US Army may have introduced the novel coronavirus to Wuhan.²³¹ US media widely reported on this,²³² and the US President subsequently cited Zhao’s claim as a reason to call COVID-19 the “Chinese virus.”²³³

In the immediate aftermath of Zhao’s tweet, other MFA spokespersons and more senior PRC officials such as PRC Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai distanced themselves from this specific allegation.^{xix} However, it appears that Zhao’s comments were within the government’s

^{xix} When asked to comment on Zhao’s allegation at the MFA’s daily press briefing on 13 March, ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang declined to either confirm or deny the rumor. Instead, he asserted that there are “different opinions” on the origin of the coronavirus, and stressed that the question of where the virus originated requires a “science-based assessment.” See: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on March 13, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mar. 13, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1755613.shtml. When Ambassador Cui was asked by *Axios* for comment on his MFA colleague Zhao Lijian’s suggestion that the US was responsible for the virus, he declined to comment, stating “I’m not in the position, and I don’t have the

boundaries of acceptable discourse, since state-run media outlets such as *People's Daily* and Xinhua reposted his remarks, and online censors were observed to have removed social media posts that criticized Zhao as out of line.²³⁴

In another indication that pushing conspiracy theories linking the US to COVID-19 was becoming more acceptable to Beijing, *Global Times* picked up a rumor being discussed on US and Chinese social media platforms in late March alleging that a US Army officer who had participated in the 2019 World Military Games in Wuhan was COVID-19's "patient zero."²³⁵

May: MFA spokespersons, authoritative media begin drawing attention to Fort Detrick as possibly linked to COVID-19. On May 6, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying responded to the US secretary of state's claim there was "enormous evidence" that COVID-19 originated in a Wuhan lab by insinuating a link between the virus and Fort Detrick.²³⁶ Even before that, CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* asserted that the US must "respond to the international concerns" and "tell the truth to its citizens" about why it shut down Fort Detrick in July 2019.²³⁷ And on 11 May, China's official English-language newspaper *China Daily* published an editorial condemning US efforts to blame the PRC for the pandemic in which it argued that Washington:

Is not only trying to deflect criticism at home by trying to create the presumption that China is guilty of wrongdoing or negligence, it is also trying to dodge some pertinent questions that could be asked of it. Such as, what are the circumstances surrounding its shutting down of the army biological warfare lab at Fort Detrick in Maryland last year? Was the laboratory conducting research on coronaviruses? Was there a leak? And when did the first novel coronavirus infection appear in the US?²³⁸

June through November: Calls for US to be transparent about Fort Detrick become a standard PRC response to US accusations of a Chinese cover-up. Beijing continued its attempts to redirect international attention from Wuhan to Fort Detrick through the summer, with MFA spokespersons raising the topic in press briefings once in June and three times in July.²³⁹ Although the issue dropped off somewhat—MFA spokespersons discussed Fort Detrick only twice between August and November—these instances were all in response to questions about US accusations of Chinese responsibility for the virus, suggesting that PRC disinformation about Fort Detrick has become a standard means of countering US attempts to hold Beijing responsible for the outbreak.²⁴⁰

November: PRC media suggest COVID-19 first entered China via frozen food imports. In yet another attempt to discredit the notion that the novel coronavirus originated within China, PRC media outlets started suggesting in November that frozen food imported from abroad may have introduced COVID-19 to the country.²⁴¹ These reports cited Chinese medical

responsibility, to explain everybody's view to you." Swan and Allen-Ebrahimian, "Top Chinese Official Disowns US Military Lab Coronavirus Conspiracy."

professionals who argued that frozen food packaging can carry the virus, despite the WHO and US Food and Drug Administration stating that there is currently “no evidence of food, food containers, or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19.”²⁴² One report posted to the official Facebook page of CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* noted that the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s chief epidemiologist believed the virus could have entered China through frozen food imports, and declared that “all available evidence suggests that the coronavirus...did not start in central China’s Wuhan.”²⁴³

5.5 How

Beijing has used a variety of tactics to push its disinformation campaign about the virus’ origin. A few of the most notable tactics are listed below.

Beijing has countered US calls for transparency on COVID-19 by accusing Washington of hiding secrets about the virus’ origin. This strategy of whataboutism is largely behind China’s efforts to push false narratives about Fort Detrick—it is possible that if US officials and media did not voice theories suggesting the novel coronavirus escaped from a Wuhan lab, Beijing would not have tried to make an issue out of US military laboratories. This connection is apparent when looking at when China’s MFA spokespersons have chosen to discuss the topic. As mentioned above, every time a PRC MFA spokesperson raised the issue of Fort Detrick in a press briefing, they were responding to a question about US assertions that the PRC was responsible for the pandemic.

Whataboutism defined: “A reversal of accusation, arguing that an opponent is guilty of an offense just as egregious or worse than what the original party was accused of doing, however unconnected the offenses may be.”

Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary

In another example of how Beijing has raised Fort Detrick to rebut criticisms of its own medical research, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying attempted to deflect scrutiny over China’s mishandling of the outbreak by arguing that the international community should be more concerned about US bioweapons research. In her lengthy response to the US secretary of state’s assertion that the virus came from a Chinese lab, she pointed to multiple past safety incidents that occurred at US biolabs around the world, and noted that Fort Detrick had been shut down by the US CDC for safety concerns as recently as July 2019. She further claimed that “calls have been growing in the United States and internationally for the US government to disclose the reasons for the closure of the Fort Detrick biological base and to find out the relationship between the closure of the base and...the COVID-19 outbreak.”²⁴⁴

Multiple PRC media outlets have published articles listing “questions Washington needs to answer” regarding the pandemic.²⁴⁵ These articles were clearly intended to sow doubt and suspicion about the virus’ origin, and included questions such as:

- “Why did the US shut down the Army laboratory at Fort Detrick that studies deadly infectious materials?”²⁴⁶
- “Did US response lead to wider spread worldwide?”²⁴⁷
- “The US Department of Health and Human Services ran a scenario last year that was similar to the COVID-19 outbreak. Is this just a coincidence?”²⁴⁸

5.5.1 Citing allegedly American sources

Chinese media has attempted to bolster the appearance of legitimacy around its narratives on the virus’ origin by citing netizens who at least appear to be American. Some examples include:

Playing up an online petition demanding answers on Fort Detrick. Since March, multiple authoritative and non-authoritative PRC media outlets have drawn attention to a petition posted to “We the People,” a public petition platform on the official White House website, requesting information from the White House about Fort Detrick.²⁴⁹

PRC reporting mischaracterized the petition to make it appear more significant. For example:

- Multiple outlets misleadingly described the number of signatories as “many” Americans, despite the fact that the petition garnered less than 1,500 signatures.²⁵⁰
- After describing the petition, CGTN concluded: “Unsurprisingly, US authorities and politicians have remained silent on the issue.” However, the petition failed to reach even two percent of the necessary 100,000 signatures to receive a response from the White House.²⁵¹

Of note, it is possible that the petition itself had Chinese origins. Although the lack of any publicly available information on the author of the petition beyond their online name—“B.Z.”—makes it impossible to know anything certain about the petition’s origin, its clunky English makes it worthy of scrutiny (for example, “the epidemic in world broke out”). It is also somewhat suspicious that *Global Times* reported on the petition within a day of it going live on “We the People.”²⁵²

Citing English-language tweets spreading virus origin conspiracies. PRC media has also cited ostensibly American Twitter users expressing suspicion of Washington’s connection to the virus’ origin. See below for just one example of China’s official television network CCTV using English-language tweets to convey the impression that American citizens have been demanding the US government “make public” supposedly sinister details about Fort Detrick.

Figure 19. Screenshot of CCTV program using English-language tweet pushing Fort Detrick conspiracy theory



Source: "National Defense and Military at Noon - Suspicions Multiply as US Army's Fort Detrick Biological Laboratory Arouses Public Concern," ('Zhengwu Guofang Junshi' - Yidian Chongchong, Meijun Detelike Bao Shengwu Shiyan Yinfu Yulun Danyou; '正午国防军事'疑点重重 美军德特里克堡生物实验室引发舆论担忧), CCTV-7, May 18, 2020, <https://tv.cctv.com/2020/05/18/VIDEuxlbd3S5Sa28giwv2p3n200518.shtml>. The orange text is a Chinese translation of the tweet's second sentence. The chyrons read: "US military's Fort Detrick biolab sparks public concerns," and "Safety incidents previously occurred, US citizens demand the real reason for 'closure' be made public."

5.5.2 Tailoring content to audience

PRC media outlets have tailored their content on the virus' origin to reach specific audiences. For example:

Pushing disinformation through foreign-directed media. In addition to pushing its disinformation campaign in Chinese and English, Beijing's foreign-directed media outlets have been observed pushing false information about COVID-19's origin in languages including French, Spanish, Thai, and others.²⁵³ The screenshot below is of "Miss V," a Chinese social media personality who speaks fluent Arabic and posts content to Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, asserting in a vlog that the novel coronavirus likely originated in America. Of note, at the time of writing, CGTN Arabic's post of this video on YouTube had garnered nearly 400,000 views.²⁵⁴

Figure 20. PRC foreign-directed media pushing disinformation about virus' origin



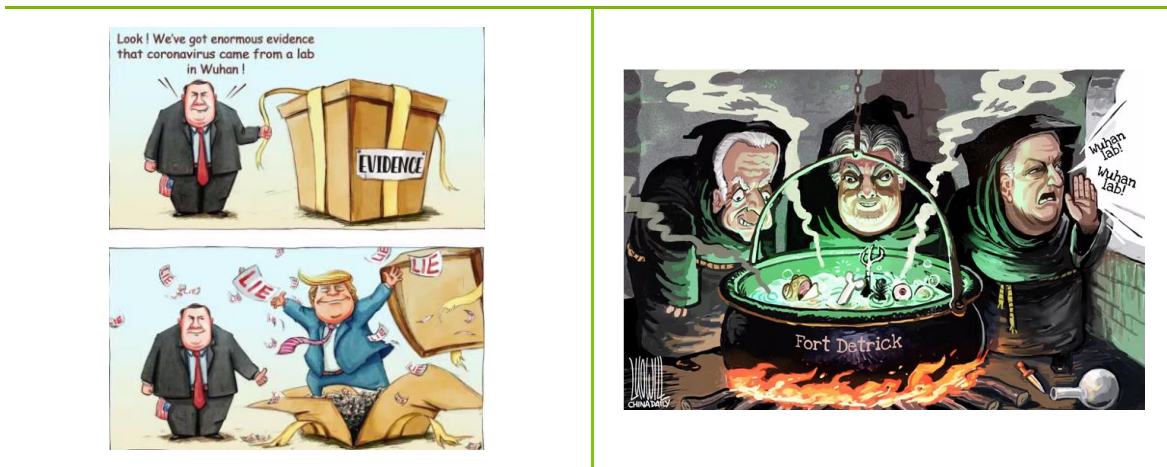
Source: CGTN Arabic, "Did the United States Make the Novel Coronavirus?" (الولايات صنع من الجديد كورونا فيروس هل), YouTube, Mar. 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIGj1RdUHUM>.

Implying sinister WWII connection to Fort Detrick for a domestic audience. The vernacular version of *China Daily* reposted a lengthy blog article suggesting a connection between Fort Detrick and COVID-19 that also compared the US laboratory to Imperial Japan's notorious Unit 731.²⁵⁵ Although Unit 731 may not be a well-known piece of WWII history in the US, it is synonymous with biological warfare in China, and the association is likely intended to heighten domestic Chinese suspicions of US bioweapons research and Washington's role in the novel coronavirus' origin.²⁵⁶

5.5.3 Belittling US talking points with humor

Beijing has also attempted to belittle US talking points on the origin of the novel coronavirus through humor. The Chinese press has produced numerous political cartoons lampooning the Trump Administration's assertion that COVID-19 escaped from a lab in Wuhan, such as those in Figure 21.

Figure 21. PRC political cartoons satirizing US assertions that the novel coronavirus originated in a Chinese lab



Source: "'Enormous Evidence' About Coronavirus Turns Out to Be a Box of Lies," CGTN, May 7, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-07/-Enormous-evidence-about-coronavirus-turns-out-to-be-a-box-of-lies-Qi8Ss5D9UQ/index.html>; Luo Jie, "Shifting the Blame," *China Daily*, June 4, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/04/WS5ed83ae5a310a8b24115ab83.html>.

In another attempt to make light of serious US accusations of PRC responsibility for the pandemic, CGTN produced an animated video titled "Whack a Wacko" that depicts a boy representing China playing the arcade game "whack-a-mole," in which the moles represent "rumors and conspiracies made up by some US politicians."

Figure 22. Screenshots from a CGTN video titled “Whack a Wacko” satirizing “rumors and conspiracies” about China’s handling of COVID-19



In this CGTN video, a boy representing China plays a version of the arcade game whack-a-mole in which the moles shout different accusations the White House has made about the PRC’s responsibility for the virus and its origin. After hitting a number of the moles, the boy realizes that Uncle Sam is underneath the game controlling the moles, and the system breaks because of “rumor overload.”

Source: “Whack a Wacko,” CGTN, June 22, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-22/Whack-a-wacko-RipicFzjbi/index.html>.

6. Beijing's Tools and Tactics for Shaping Public Narratives on COVID-19

In waging a battle for the narrative on both the domestic and international front, Beijing has used its sizeable toolkit to influence public opinion. The three broad categories of tools at Beijing's disposal discussed in this report are (1) public messaging platforms and tactics, (2) means of suppression, and (3) actions that support its narratives.

6.1 Public messaging platforms and tactics

Beijing has a diverse messaging toolkit that it uses to shape public opinion at home and abroad on countless issues. Three broad categories are examined in the following section: government statements, media, and social media. Each category encompasses a range of tools and tactics, including the relatively new tactics of disinformation and misinformation, and humor and satire, which are discussed separately at the end of the section.

6.1.1 Government statements

The most authoritative vehicles that Beijing uses to shape the narrative on any issue are the voices that speak directly for the Party and government. These include official white papers, which formally articulate China's stance on important matters, statements by senior Chinese officials, and remarks by government spokespersons.^{xx}

White papers. One of the most authoritative explanations of Beijing's stance on the pandemic was the white paper issued in June by the PRC State Council Information Office (SCIO), titled *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*.²⁵⁷ In addition to laying out a timeline of China's response to the outbreak, this document also features sections that expound on China's methods of combatting the virus within its borders and on Beijing's vision of "building a global community of health for all."

^{xx} For a thorough analysis of these voices and their corresponding level of authoritativeness, see: Heidi Holz, *Decoding the Message: A Guide to PRC Signaling*, CNA, DCD-2017-U-015331-Final, 2017.

A Failed Attempt at Propaganda

One noteworthy case of Beijing's propaganda backfiring during the pandemic was the government-published book *A Battle Against Epidemic* (*Da Guo Zhan 'Yi'*; 大国战疫). Released to much fanfare in China in late February, it was meant to be a definitive record of the PRC's initial response to the outbreak, and featured a massive compilation of state media reporting on "key moments, individuals, and events" in China's fight against the virus to that point. To showcase "the strength of the CCP and China's socialist system" to the wider world, the book was to be published in English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic.

Within days, however, *A Battle Against Epidemic* had apparently been taken off shelves and was no longer available for purchase online. Although no official explanation was ever given as to why, it is possible, if not likely, that the book was pulled because of domestic backlash against what some Chinese netizens attacked as a "shameless" rush to celebrate despite the ongoing crisis. As evidence of this, PRC media did not put out subsequent reporting on the book, nor was it mentioned in the exhaustive SCIO white paper, which would certainly have noted the publication of such a definitive record of China's fight against its epidemic.

Sources: "Book on China's Fight Against COVID-19 Epidemic Published," Xinhua, Feb. 26, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/26/c_138820429.htm; "A Battle Against Epidemic' to Be Published Soon." CCTV, Feb. 26, 2020, <http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/02/26/ARTIXA78qD53Y0q6qMWrsJWc200226.shtml>; Yang Danxu, "Government-Endorsed 'Epidemic Textbook' Taken Off the Shelves: A Celebration Too Soon?" Think China, Mar. 4, 2020, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/government-endorsed-epidemic-textbook-taken-shelves-celebration-too-soon>.

Statements from top government officials. China's top leaders have issued numerous public remarks on the coronavirus crisis to directly communicate Beijing's narratives about the pandemic to the Chinese people and the wider world. A few significant examples of such speeches include:

- Xi Jinping during the G20 Leaders' Summit on COVID-19 (March).²⁵⁸
- Xi Jinping during the 73rd World Health Assembly (May).²⁵⁹
- Premier Li Keqiang during the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 (April).²⁶⁰
- Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the UN Security Council summit on post-COVID-19 global governance (September).²⁶¹

In their speeches, China's leaders have consistently stressed the need for international cooperation in combatting the virus, while also positioning the PRC in a leadership role. They have pushed the idea that China successfully defeated the virus and "acted with openness,

transparency and responsibility” to argue that the world should look to Beijing as a guide for beating COVID-19, rather than as an irresponsible actor whose actions should be scrutinized.²⁶²

Foreign ministry press briefings. One of Beijing’s main vehicles for conveying its messages to an international audience is the PRC MFA’s near-daily press briefings.^{xxi} MFA spokespersons’ comments have high international visibility, as reporters from foreign media outlets such as CNN and the BBC are often permitted to ask questions at these press conferences. Since MFA spokesperson Geng Shuang first commented on the novel coronavirus in the ministry’s 20 January press briefing, COVID-19 was raised as a topic in one form or another in the subsequent 129 press briefings, with the 6 August briefing being the first one where the topic was not addressed.²⁶³

6.1.2 News media

Perhaps the most visible arm of China’s propaganda machine is its state-controlled media apparatus. Some of the key tactics that Beijing has used to convey its narratives about the pandemic via the media are highlighted below:

Communicating through many channels, formats, and languages. Despite the controlled nature of its media environment, China has an ever-growing number of news outlets that range considerably in terms of authoritativeness, audience, and style. This wide range of platforms enables Beijing to communicate its messages to diverse audiences across the country and around the world.^{xxii} China’s official Xinhua News Agency, for example, produces content not only in Chinese and English, but also in Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian, Japanese, Portuguese, German, and Korean.^{xxiii}

Spreading PRC messages via foreign media channels. Not only do Chinese media outlets produce foreign language content directed toward international audiences, Beijing also uses

^{xxi} MFA spokespersons are not considered to be in the upper echelons of the CCP, so their pronouncements on an issue should not be considered as authoritative as those made by top Chinese officials; however, their remarks are nonetheless legitimate representations of Beijing’s stance on an issue. The relatively low level of authoritativeness of PRC MFA spokesperson remarks is in part due to the comparatively low institutional rank of the two ministries within the Chinese bureaucracy. In contrast to their US counterparts, both of whom are cabinet members, neither China’s foreign or defense minister has a seat on China’s governing Politburo. Holz, *Decoding the Message: A Guide to PRC Signaling*.

^{xxii} According to the PRC’s National Bureau of Statistics, as of 2018, the PRC had approximately 1,900 newspapers, 2900 radio stations, 3,500 television programs, and over 10,000 magazines, not to mention an ever-growing list of online news sites and blogs. As a result of Beijing’s desire to influence global discourse to make it more favorable to China, the PRC’s major media outlets produce content not only in Chinese, but increasingly in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and other foreign languages that enable it to communicate directly to audiences around the globe. EB’s study about diversity of media. China Statistics Press, “China Statistical Yearbook 2019,” National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2019/indexeh.htm>.

^{xxiii} For an in-depth analysis of China’s foreign-directed media, see: Elizabeth Bachman and James Bellacqua, *Black and White and Red All Over: China’s Improving Foreign-Directed Media*, CNA, DRM-2020-U-027331 –FINAL, 2020.

other countries' communication channels to deliver PRC narratives around the world in the following ways:^{xxiv}

- *Spreading Chinese media reports through content sharing agreements.* Beijing has established relationships with foreign news organizations all over the world that allow it to publish its own content in local media outlets.²⁶⁴ For example, *Daily News Egypt*, which signed a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua in October 2019, has posted numerous articles over the past few months from the PRC news agency that praise China's response to the pandemic and portray Beijing as a beneficial global leader.²⁶⁵
- *Having foreign media outlets publish signed opinion pieces by PRC diplomats and leaders.* This tactic allows Chinese officials to speak directly to foreign readers. For example, PRC ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai has published multiple opinion pieces arguing Beijing's perspectives in top US newspapers over the course of the pandemic.²⁶⁶
- *Carrying paid inserts from Chinese media.* Another way that Beijing takes advantage of pre-existing platforms to spread its narratives is by paying reputable foreign media outlets to publish inserts, such as *China Daily's* widespread "China Watch" supplement that has appeared in some of the most prominent newspapers in the US and Europe.^{xxv} For example, between February and April of this year, the online version of British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* carried over 50 paid articles from CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* that pushed the narrative that Beijing responded well to the pandemic.^{xxvi}

Communicating through foreign faces and voices. A tactic that Beijing has employed extensively during the COVID-19 pandemic is the use of foreign individuals to push and bolster PRC propaganda. Sometimes these foreigners are complicit in repeating Chinese talking points, as is the case with local employees of China's overseas media outlets, foreign contributing

^{xxiv} This strategy is called "borrowing a boat to go out on the ocean" (*jiechuanchuhai*; 借船出海). Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Between the Lines on Chinese Strategy: 'Borrowing a Boat to Go Out on the Ocean'," *Axios*, Feb. 26, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/china-foreign-media-borrowing-boat-ocean-635145c4-a189-425f-b65a-676a7754b248.html>; Bachman and Bellacqua, *Black and White and Red All Over: China's Improving Foreign-Directed Media*.

^{xxv} For example, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* in the US; *The Daily Telegraph* in the UK (up to April 2020); and *Le Figaro* in France have all carried "China Watch" inserts. However, it appears that the US outlets at least had stopped carrying "China Watch" inserts by 2020. Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, "Inside China's Audacious Global Propaganda Campaign," *The Guardian*, Dec. 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>.

^{xxvi} After other Western media outlets started publicly scrutinizing *The Telegraph* for its relationship with the CCP's official newspaper, the website removed the "*People's Daily Online*" feature from its website entirely. Dean Sterling Jones, "A British Newspaper Has Given Chinese Coronavirus Propaganda a Direct Line to the UK," *Buzzfeed News*, Apr. 1, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/deansterlingjones/coronavirus-british-newspaper-chinese-propaganda>.

“experts” who argue pro-Beijing points in PRC media, and non-Chinese actors who appear in government-produced videos.

Figure 23. Foreigners in PRC media



Anchors at CGTN Africa and CGTN Europe



A British actor in a video produced by *China Daily* defending Beijing’s response to the coronavirus

Sources: CGTN Africa, “Talk Africa: America Burns,” YouTube, June 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjnJShEpnt8>; CGTN Europe, “COVID-19 Vaccine Hunt,” May 4, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SE-QeR2kAQ&list=PLC-ls89EnG7CMfYZFH8X9ADG_G50s3Pnm&index=28&t=0s&ab_channel=CGTNEurope; “China in Words: Whole Nation Fights as One,” *China Daily*, May 18, 2020, <http://covid-19.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/18/WS5ec1fadfa310a8b241156723.html>.

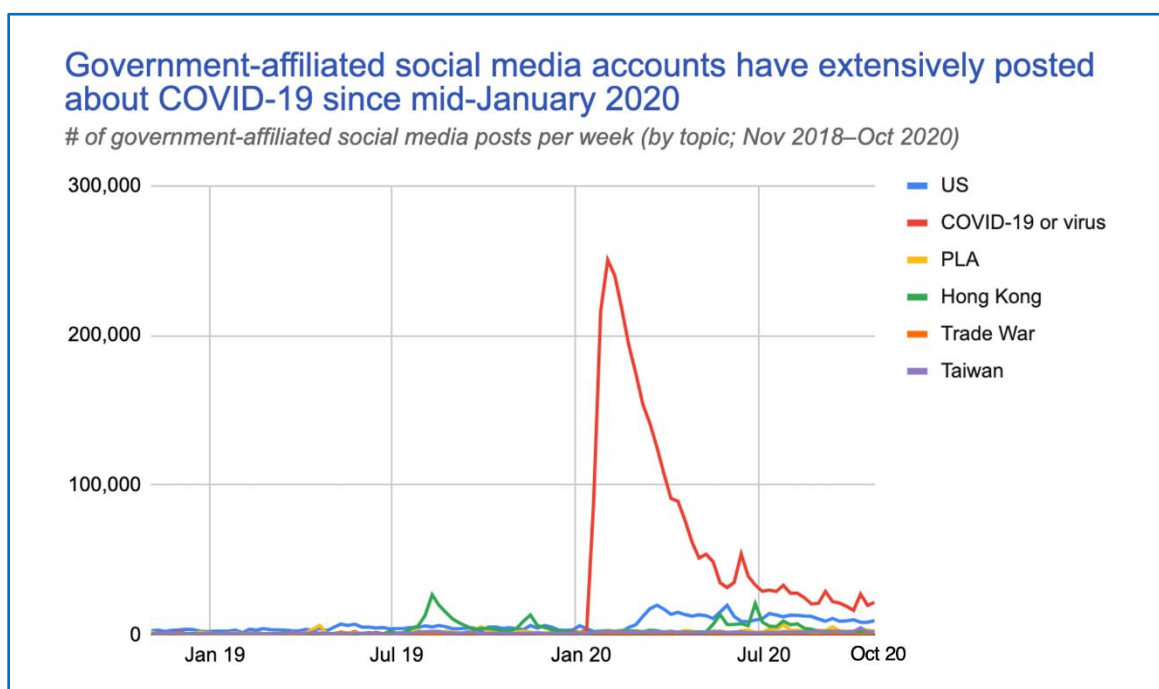
Other times, Beijing simply uses foreigners as props by citing statements made by them to defend Chinese talking points. Examples of the latter in the context of the coronavirus pandemic include PRC government spokespersons and media reports citing academic publications such as *The Lancet* to counter US accusations that the virus leaked from a Chinese laboratory, quoting unspecified foreigners as having expressed thanks for Chinese aid, and

pointing to US domestic criticisms of the White House’s response to the pandemic to bolster their own arguments.^{xxvii}

6.1.3 Social media

In addition to traditional media platforms and online news sites, Beijing has also used social media to shape the public narratives on the pandemic. One of the main social media tools that the CCP uses to communicate its positions to the Chinese public is Weibo, a microblogging site similar to Twitter. As Figure 24 illustrates, government-affiliated Weibo accounts were extremely active in pushing Beijing’s narratives on COVID-19, producing more posts on the outbreak in the first three months of 2020 than they did on other sensitive topics such as Taiwan and Sino-US trade tensions over the past two years.

Figure 24. PRC government-affiliated Weibo account activity by topic (Nov. 2018 – Oct. 2020)

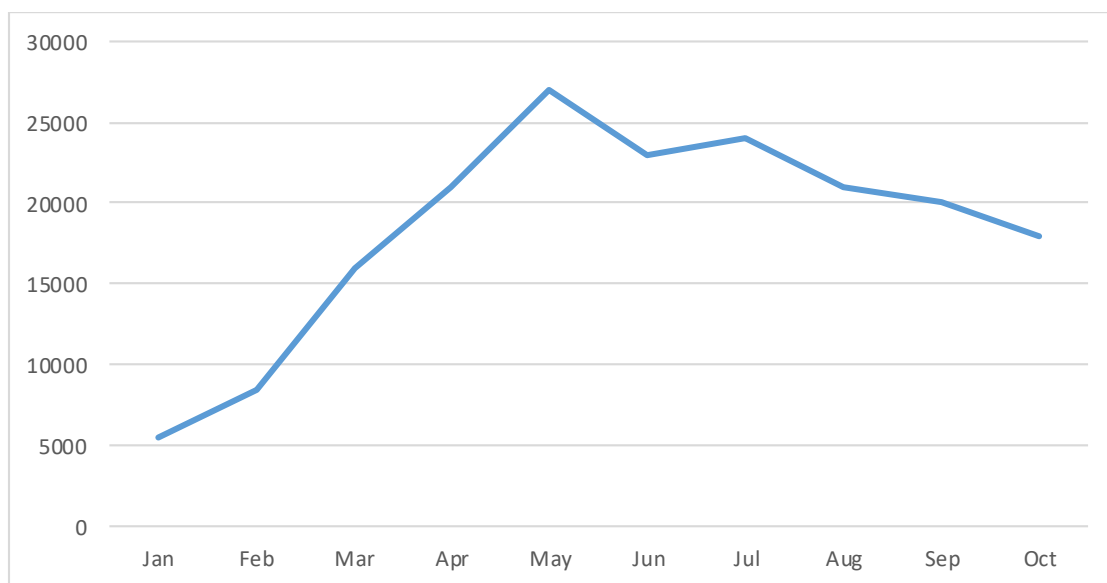


Source: Commercial data aggregator. From a sample of 10,500 Weibo accounts affiliated with the Chinese government and state media.

^{xxvii} For more on these, see Sections 4.1.3, 4.1.1, and 3.2.1 of this report, respectively.

Not only do China's key government organizations and media outlets publish material on domestic platforms such as Weibo, but they have also made a considerable effort to reach international audiences via foreign social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.^{xxviii} The adoption of these platforms, which are banned within the PRC, is a relatively recent development, and has grown dramatically over the past year.^{xxix} These accounts have been extremely active in broadcasting PRC talking points about the virus, as illustrated by Figure 25, which shows the number of tweets from accounts affiliated with the PRC government over the first 10 months of 2020. As evidence of the extent to which these accounts served to amplify messages related to the pandemic, "COVID19," "Coronavirus," and "Wuhan" were the three most frequently used hashtags by PRC government-affiliated accounts in this period.²⁶⁷

Figure 25. Tweets from PRC government-affiliated accounts (Jan. – Oct. 2020)



Sources: "Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard," Alliance for Securing Democracy, accessed Nov. 19, 2020, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>; CNA.

^{xxviii} This is a prime example of the "borrowing a boat to go out on the ocean" tactic mentioned in the preceding section.

^{xxix} According to the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD), an initiative dedicated to countering adversary efforts to undermine US democracy under the think tank German Marshall Fund of the United States, Twitter accounts with direct PRC government affiliations more than doubled between April 2019 and March 2020. Although PRC-affiliated Twitter accounts became much more active over the first half of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, it appears that the spike in *number* of such accounts had its roots in the pro-democracy protests that occupied Hong Kong for most of 2019. It is likely that this increase was a calculated effort to spread Beijing's narratives about the protests to a global audience. "Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard," Alliance for Securing Democracy, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>.

PRC government bodies, such as the Foreign Ministry and Chinese embassies around the world, also have official accounts on Facebook where they repost government announcements and pro-Beijing media reports in English alongside more benign content, such as pictures of Chinese scenery and animals. Nearly all of China's national news outlets also have accounts on Facebook, and similarly use these accounts to spread PRC narratives to foreign audiences. The fact that these outlets speak to varying degrees for Beijing is not always apparent.^{xxx}

6.1.4 Disinformation and misinformation

In a concerning development, the PRC has actively engaged in spreading a combination of disinformation and misinformation throughout the coronavirus pandemic, a tactic that Beijing has only recently been observed to adopt on a large scale.^{xxxi} The most notable instance has

A Note on Terminology

This report defines *disinformation* as information that is being spread by a source that knows the information to be false in order to “manipulate public opinion in pursuit of political objectives.” The specific objectives can vary, but disinformation is often intended to “degrade public trust in media and state institutions” and “amplify social division, resentment and fear.”

In contrast, this report defines *misinformation* as false information that a source is sharing without knowing it to be false.

Sources: Dean Jackson, “Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and ‘Fake News,’” National Endowment for Democracy, Oct. 17, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/>; Dean Jackson, “Issue Brief: How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics,” National Endowment for Democracy, May 29, 2018, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-how-disinformation-impacts-politics-and-publics/>.

been the PRC's insistence that the virus' origin is either unknowable, is in need of further investigation, or even that it could have been brought to China from abroad (as discussed in

^{xxx} For example, nowhere on the “About” page of Xinhua News Agency's Facebook account does it note that it is a state-run organization, let alone that it is a ministry-level institution directly under the PRC State Council. Rather than acknowledging its affiliation with the Chinese government, Xinhua's “About” section on Facebook describes it as “public media for the public good” on a “quest for facts and truth.” It further asserts: “We don't pursue corporate interests, nor will we ever yield to the pressure of ideological stigmatization and political bias.” See: China Xinhua News, “About,” Facebook, Accessed Nov. 30, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/pg/XinhuaNewsAgency/about/?ref=page_internal.

^{xxxi} For more on Beijing's relatively new adoption of disinformation as a propaganda tactic, see: Jessica Brandt and Torrey Taussig, “The Kremlin's Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing,” Brookings, May 19, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/19/the-kremlins-disinformation-playbook-goes-to-beijing/>.

Section 5 of this report). However, Beijing has also knowingly pushed other false narratives, some of which are detailed below and throughout this report.

The voices and actors that China has used to sow disinformation have varied considerably, to include the following:

Government officials. PRC officials have actively spread COVID-19-related disinformation throughout the pandemic. They have done this in a variety of ways, from citing inaccurate statistics and pushing misleading ideas in press briefings to sharing fabricated stories on social media. One of the most consistent platforms for PRC disinformation has been the MFA's near-daily press briefings, as well as spokespersons' personal Twitter accounts (see Sections 5.3 and 5.4 of this report). However, other PRC officials have also engaged in Beijing's disinformation campaign. For example, in a 27 August press conference in Norway, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi cited unspecified reports "showing that the virus emerged in different parts of the world" to argue that it "may have emerged earlier than in China."²⁶⁸ In April, the PRC ambassador to France was accused by French lawmakers of sowing fake news after posting a French language article on the embassy's website that alleged French medical professionals were abandoning nursing home residents to die.²⁶⁹

Media reporting. PRC media faithfully echoes and expounds on the talking points issued by government officials, and Beijing's disinformation campaign has been no exception. Major outlets such as *People's Daily's* popular non-authoritative subsidiary *Global Times* have also sowed the seeds of some pieces of disinformation that were only later adopted by government officials. For example, reporting in the *Global Times* suggested that the US Army was hiding information on COVID-19 at Fort Detrick as early as 11 March, whereas the US installation was not raised in a PRC MFA press conference until nearly two months later on 6 May.²⁷⁰

Social media users. Both Chinese and foreign social media accounts have been rife with PRC disinformation throughout the pandemic. Not only do PRC officials and media outlets post disinformation to their domestic and foreign social media accounts, Chinese netizens, government-employed trolls, and bots all spread disinformation as well. For example, Chinese netizens flooded Weibo, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in late February with false claims that Taiwan's government was covering up the true scale of the outbreak on the island.²⁷¹

Covert operatives. US media reporting suggests that Beijing has also been pushing disinformation through covert means. According to *The New York Times*, Chinese agents were assessed to have helped spread text and social media messages to millions of Americans in mid-March falsely alleging that the White House was about to initiate a nationwide lockdown.²⁷² Rather than trying to convince targets of any particular viewpoint, the goal of this particular effort appears to have been to spread confusion and distrust in the US government.²⁷³

Beijing has adamantly denied engaging in any efforts to spread disinformation, and has responded to criticism of its behavior in this regard by throwing the same charge back at its accusers. PRC officials have repeatedly accused US officials and media outlets of lying on a wide range of topics, including the pandemic. For example, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying asserted in a tweet on 20 August that the US State Department “has become a Department of Disinformation.”²⁷⁴

“#US Department of State has become a Department of Disinformation. It has been fabricating rumors to discredit other countries, which will only result in eroding its own reputation and credibility.” – PRC MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying, Twitter

6.1.5 Humor and satire

Another less conventional tactic that Beijing has employed to shape the narrative around the pandemic has been the use of humor and satire.^{xxxii} One of the main goals of this effort has been to belittle US criticisms of Beijing and mock Washington’s response to the virus. To quote a British political cartoonist interviewed by CGTN Europe, political humor is about “trying to get a point across [and] disturb people’s points of view...to show what’s really going on.”²⁷⁵ Three of the main tools that Beijing has used to this end are political cartoons, satirical videos, and internet memes.

6.1.5.1 Political cartoons

PRC media outlets targeted at foreign audiences—such as *China Daily*, CGTN, and the English-language version of *Global Times*—have put out dozens of satirical political cartoons since the start of the pandemic that convey Chinese talking points in a lighthearted fashion. These cartoons often ridicule Washington and dismiss its criticism of Beijing’s response to the virus as foolish and laughable. These cartoons are published on the outlets’ websites, to their Twitter feeds, and (in the case of *China Daily* and *Global Times*) in their print newspapers, which can be

^{xxxii} The use of humor is not an entirely new phenomenon in PRC media. Recent years have seen Chinese newspaper increasingly adopt humor as a means of discourse by lampooning Washington and other targets through political cartoons. This is part of a larger trend in China toward improving the “readability” of its media, particularly outlets that are targeted at foreign audiences, by making their content more eye-catching and sophisticated. Speaking about China’s usage of political cartoons in the context of the pandemic, Ma Xiaojun, a professor at the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at the Central Party School of the CCP, described cartoons as a “universal way” of communicating with the Western world that allowed Beijing to express “in-depth message[s] in a way that everyone will get it.” Dong Feng, “Chinese Embassy’s Humorous Satirical Taste Delights Social Media Users,” *Global Times*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188535.shtml>. For more on this, see: Bachman and Bellacqua, *Black and White and Red All Over: China’s Improving Foreign-Directed Media*.

found in newsstands across the US and the world.^{xxxiii} Looking specifically at *China Daily*, 60 percent of the 168 political cartoons it published to its English-language website in the first eight months of 2020 were about the pandemic. Half of those either countered US narratives or portrayed the US as struggling to handle its own outbreak. See below for examples.

Figure 26. *China Daily* cartoons lampooning US response to COVID-19



Sources: Luo Jie, "Too Busy Blaming China," *China Daily*, May 19, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/19/WS5ec31dd1a310a8b24115697d.html>; Luo Jie, "Fall off the COVID-19 Cliff," *China Daily*, July 17, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/17/WS5f10e58ea31083481725a0d7.html>; "Politics over Help," *China Daily*, May 27, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/27/WS5ecdac12a310a8b241158a9d.html>; Cai Meng, "Surrender to Chaos," *China Daily*, Oct. 27, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202010/27/WS5f9773d3a31024ad0ba81293.html>.

^{xxxiii} PRC government accounts have also been observed to repost such political cartoons. See, for example: Ambassade de Chine en France @AmbassadeChine, "Il tire, elle tire," Twitter, May 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ambassadechine/status/1261297747921076224?lang=en>.

6.1.5.2 Satirical videos

In another testament to the diversity of the PRC's messaging toolkit, China's foreign-directed media has released a number of animated video clips over the course of the pandemic that seek to use humor to counter US talking points and lampoon Washington for its response to the virus. These videos are often posted to YouTube and translated into foreign languages to reach a broader audience. See, for example, the screenshots below, which are from the English, French, and Russian versions of a three-minute video satirizing the US President's response to the pandemic.

Figure 27. Screenshots from English, French, and Russian versions of an animated CGTN video lampooning the US President's response to the pandemic.



Sources: CGTN, "US Democracy or US Hypocrisy?" YouTube, Aug. 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5cl-KNlnCl>; CGTN Français, "La démocratie américaine ou l'hypocrisie américaine?" YouTube, Aug. 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNZK1Pu0UQo>; CGTN на русском, "Демократия США или лицемерие США?" YouTube, Aug. 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll7Kd8hc43c>. French caption reads: "Oh my God!" Russian caption reads: "No, our economy is more important."

"Once Upon a Virus." One such video that generated a significant amount of attention in Western media was a short animation produced by China's official news agency Xinhua called "Once Upon a Virus..." that featured Lego-like caricatures engaged in an argument about the virus. Terracotta warriors representing China warn a dismissive Statue of Liberty, who grows sicker as the clip goes on and announces: "We are always correct, even though we contradict ourselves."²⁷⁶ The video, which is a clear critique of how the White House downplayed the virus before blaming China for unleashing it, elicited coverage in numerous US media outlets, including Reuters, *Business Insider*, and NBC, and has been viewed over 2 million times as of mid-November.²⁷⁷

Figure 28. Screenshots from a Xinhua video mocking the US response to the pandemic



Source: New China TV, "Once Upon a Virus..." YouTube, Apr. 30, 2020, accessed Nov. 23, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5BZ09iNdvo&ab_channel=NewChinaTV.

Although Western media was quick to call the video out as PRC propaganda, the fact that it garnered such wide attention means that Beijing succeeded in getting its narrative about Washington's response to China's warnings regarding the virus into the public conversation. Xinhua followed up "Once Upon A Virus..." with two more videos in the series, published in June and August, respectively, although neither elicited anywhere near the amount of international attention as the first.²⁷⁸

6.1.5.3 Memes

The increasing sophistication of Beijing's foreign-directed propaganda efforts has seen it adopt one of Moscow's tried-and-trusted means of influencing public opinion: memes.²⁷⁹ Although the term encompasses a wide variety of concepts, this report will use the extremely narrow definition of a *meme* as an often humorous image or video shared online.^{xxxiv} Though this does not appear to have been a widespread tactic, a few examples of note are listed below.

In early February, *Global Times* retweeted a "countryball" meme created by a Peruvian netizen showing dozens of nations showing support to a figure in the hospital representing China.²⁸⁰

^{xxxiv} In contrast to the Chinese political cartoons discussed in the previous section, the online memes referenced here were not produced by PRC sources.

Figure 29. *Global Times* retweet of Peruvian “countryball” meme



Source: Global Times @globaltimesnews, Twitter, Feb. 7, 2020,
<https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1225674964721782784>.

The following month, *Global Times* published an interview with the creator of the image in which he explained his intent to “express the international community’s support for the Chinese people.”²⁸¹

In May, the PRC Embassy in France reposted a cartoon mocking the US response to COVID-19 (see Figure 30).²⁸² The English-language version of *Global Times* then reported on the tweet, claiming that it had gone viral on Twitter (despite having only been retweeted a few hundred times and receiving less than 2,000 likes at the time the article was published).²⁸³ The *Global Times* article also noted that the embassy’s Twitter account had reposted a *China Daily* political cartoon satirizing US criticism of China, and claimed that the account’s “humorous satirical taste delights social media users.”

Figure 30. PRC embassy in France tweet mocking US response to COVID



Source: Ambassade de Chine en France @AmbassadeChine, Twitter, May 15, 2020, accessed Nov. 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ambassadechine/status/1261230671848235009?lang=en>. The PRC embassy tweet translates to “Why has Trump fled?”

While the usage of memes to convey talking points related to the pandemic is a noteworthy example of the PRC’s willingness to diversify its methods of public discourse, Beijing does not appear to have adopted this tactic on anywhere near the scale that Moscow has in recent years.

6.2 Suppression

In its efforts to win the war of public opinion around the pandemic, Beijing has not been content with putting its own narratives out into the world. It has also strived to suppress information that conflicts with its version of history. This report defines *suppression* as trying to “prevent the dissemination of information,”²⁸⁴ and will examine three tools that the PRC uses to achieve this: censorship, the silencing of domestic critics through legal action, and economic and diplomatic pressure.

6.2.1 Censorship

The most direct tool that Beijing uses to suppress undesirable information is censorship. This is how the CCP tries to control what is and is not permitted in its domestic media environment. Censorship in China takes multiple forms, including:

- **Self-censorship.** In China, the inherent risk in expressing a viewpoint that deviates from what the government deems acceptable means that people often self-censor when approaching controversial topics, either by hewing close to the Party line or by staying quiet.

- **Removal of information.** When a Chinese media outlet or netizen puts out information that Beijing finds fault with, it is usually removed by government censors who constantly monitor the online flow of information. Although this is often because the content in question crosses the line of acceptable discourse, it can also happen when public backlash spurs a media outlet to remove its own content, as has occasionally happened during the pandemic.^{xxxv}
- **Banning information.** PRC censors try to mute public discussion of sensitive topics by issuing instructions to media outlets on what they can and cannot report on, and by co-opting social media companies into instituting bans on online keywords.^{xxxvi} As early as 31 December, Chinese social media platforms were censoring terms connected to the unfolding emergency in Wuhan.²⁸⁵
- **Banning sources.** China bans most foreign media outlets and social media platforms within its borders, meaning that Chinese citizens interested in a Western perspective on the pandemic have to rely on VPNs to get over the “great firewall.”

^{xxxv} For example, when *Beijing Youth Daily*, the daily newspaper of the Communist Youth League of the Beijing CCP Committee, published an interview with one of the Wuhan doctors disciplined by police for sharing information about the virus, the resulting public backlash saw government authorities order that the article be deleted, which it quickly was. Samuel Wade, “Minitrue: Delete ‘Disciplined Doctor Now in Isolation Ward,’” *China Digital Times*, Jan. 30, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/01/minitrue-delete-disciplined-doctor-now-in-isolation-ward/>.

^{xxxvi} For an example of the government issuing a censorship directive during the pandemic, see: Sophie Beach, “Minitrue: Do Not Transmit Video and Images of Law Enforcement Actions Around COVID-19 Prevention,” *China Digital Times*, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/03/minitrue-do-not-transmit-video-and-images-of-law-enforcements-actions-around-covid-19-prevention/>. According to the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, Beijing generally pushes censorship responsibility down to specific social media companies. This means that the companies themselves monitor the content on their websites, knowing that a failure to comply with the Party line can lead to negative consequences. See: Lotus Ruan, Jeffrey Knockel, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, “Censored Contagion - How Information on the Coronavirus is Managed on Chinese Social Media,” *The Citizen Lab*, Mar. 3, 2020, <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/03/censored-contagion-how-information-on-the-coronavirus-is-managed-on-chinese-social-media/>.

Figure 31. A sample of keywords censored on Chinese livestreaming platform YY

Keyword	Language	Translation	Date Found Censored
武汉不明肺炎	Simplified Chinese	Unknown Wuhan pneumonia	December 31, 2019
爆發sars疫情	Traditional Chinese	SARS outbreak in Wuhan	December 31, 2019
武汉海鲜市场	Simplified Chinese	Wuhan Seafood Market	December 31, 2019
武汉卫生委员会	Simplified Chinese	Wuhan Health Committee	December 31, 2019

Source: Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Jakub Dalek, Jeffrey Knockel, Nicola Lawford, Caroline Wesley, and Mari Zhou, "Censored Contagion II," *The Citizen Lab*, Aug. 25 2020, <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/08/censored-contagion-ii-a-timeline-of-information-control-on-chinese-social-media-during-covid-19/>.

As mentioned in Section 2.2, Beijing enacted heavy censorship of online discussion of COVID-19, especially during the height of China's outbreak between January and March of 2020. To circumnavigate the government censors, Chinese netizens adopted innovative means of sharing information about the situation. For example, after censors tried to prevent people from reposting an interview with Dr. Ai Fen, the first doctor to warn colleagues about the then-unknown illness spreading through Wuhan, users of the Chinese messaging app WeChat started sharing the interview in ways that would fly under the censors' radar. This included translating the text into telegram codes, fictional languages such as Elvish and Klingon, and emojis.²⁸⁶

outbreak.^{xxxvii} After being held for four months, he was formally arrested for “incitement to subvert state power” in June.²⁸⁹

- Ren Zhiqiang, a famous property tycoon and CCP member who went missing in March after an article attributed to him gained attention online for its scathing take on the government’s handling of the outbreak.²⁹⁰ A month after he disappeared, officials announced that he was being investigated for “serious violations of discipline and law.”²⁹¹ He was subsequently expelled from the Party, charged with a series of crimes, and sentenced to 18 years in jail.²⁹²
- Xu Zhangrun, an outspoken law professor at Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University, who was arrested in July on (likely fabricated) charges of soliciting prostitutes after having penned multiple essays criticizing the government’s response to COVID-19.^{xxxviii}

Additionally, there have been reports that multiple civilian journalists were arrested for covering the true extent of the suffering. These include Chen Qiushi and Fang Bin, whose whereabouts have been unknown since early February;²⁹³ Li Zehua, who livestreamed his arrest in late February only to reappear two months later in a video in which he thanked the police for “caring” for him while in “quarantine”^{xxxix}; and Zhang Zhan, who was arrested in May and formally charged the following month with “picking quarrels and stirring up trouble.”²⁹⁴ Additionally, authorities have threatened and harassed Chinese citizens who have sought compensation for family deaths caused by government mismanagement of the outbreak.²⁹⁵

^{xxxvii} In a 4 February article, Xu Zhiyong went so far as to call on Xi Jinping to step down for his handling of the crisis. His last blog post prior to his arrest mourned the passing of whistleblowing doctor Li Wenliang. For more on Xu Zhiyong, see: Emily Feng, “Rights Activist Xu Zhiyong Arrested in China amid Crackdown on Dissent,” NPR, Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/17/806584471/rights-activist-xu-zhiyong-arrested-in-china-amid-crackdown-on-dissent>.

^{xxxviii} Early in 2020, Xu had been placed under informal house detention and cut off from the outside world shortly after the release of his essay “When Fury Overcomes Fear” in February. After his July arrest, he was detained for six days (during which he was fired by Tsinghua University), and has since announced plans to sue to police for false charges. For more on this, see: Christian Shepherd, “Fired Chinese Professor Defies Party with Lawsuit Against Police,” *Financial Times*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/c11d7de2-f0d3-4cce-ac4c-c059e19bc108>.

^{xxxix} Yew Lun Tian, “Chinese Citizen Journalist Resurfaces After Going Missing in Wuhan,” Reuters, Apr. 23, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-journalist/chinese-citizen-journalist-resurfaces-after-going-missing-in-wuhan-idUSKCN22515X>. Although it is unknown whether he filmed his 22 April video of his own volition or not, the neutral tone and positive comments about the police suggest that the authorities may have either ordered it or at least given their approval. Lily Kuo, “Missing Wuhan Citizen Journalist Reappears After Two Months,” *The Guardian*, Apr. 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/missing-wuhan-citizen-journalist-reappears-after-two-months>.

Table 2. Chinese journalists reportedly arrested for covering the situation in Wuhan

Journalist	Reason for Arrest	Date of Arrest	Current Status
<i>Chen Qiushi, in a video uploaded a week before his disappearance</i>²⁹⁶ 	No official charges have been brought against Chen	Feb. 6	Location unknown; rumored by friends to be “under government supervision” ²⁹⁷
<i>Fang Bin, in a video posted two days before his arrest</i>²⁹⁸ 	No official charges have been brought against Fang	Feb. 9	Location unknown
<i>Li Zehua, in a livestream video posted 10 days before his arrest</i>²⁹⁹ 	Says he was forcibly quarantined by police for having been to “sensitive epidemic areas” ³⁰⁰	Feb. 26	Reappeared in April claiming he had been well taken care of during quarantine, and that the police “cared about me very much” ³⁰¹
<i>Zhang Zhan, in her last live-stream on social media</i>³⁰² 	Arrested for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”; ³⁰³ formally charged in June with “public disturbance” ³⁰⁴	May 14	After months in prison, Zhang was indicted in November for sending “false information” about the virus ³⁰⁵

Source: CNA. “Current Status” is as of Dec. 2, 2020.

6.2.3 Economic and diplomatic pressure

Beijing also has means of quieting international critics. The COVID-19 crisis has seen the PRC levy its considerable economic and diplomatic clout to pressure other global actors into sticking to the official Chinese narrative. For example, when the EU was about to publish a report on governments engaging in disinformation about the novel coronavirus in April, Chinese officials expressed opposition to the document's discussion of PRC efforts to blame the US for spreading the disease.³⁰⁶ The EU subsequently revised the document to be less critical of Beijing, likely to avoid angering its largest trading partner.^{xl}

This strategy does not always work. Australia has continued to call for an international inquest into the origin of the virus despite considerable pressure from China. In one particularly blatant instance of Beijing trying to coerce Canberra into silence, the PRC ambassador to Australia warned that continuing calls for the investigation could trigger a boycott of Australian exports and a drop in Chinese tourists and students going to the country.³⁰⁷ Speaking to a reporter from the *Australian Financial Review*, Ambassador Cheng Jingye asserted that the Chinese public was “frustrated, dismayed, and disappointed” with Canberra’s inquiry, and suggested that “tourists may have second thoughts” about going to a country that “is not so friendly to China” and could start wondering “why they should drink Australian wine or eat Australian beef.” The Australian foreign minister denounced these remarks as an attempt at “economic coercion,” and Canberra has continued to be a vocal proponent of conducting a transparent international investigation into the virus’ origin.³⁰⁸ However, there is little doubt that Beijing will continue to try to use its economic might to pressure other governments to keep quiet on matters it does not want discussed. A *China Daily* editorial

“The Chinese public is frustrated, dismayed and disappointed with what you are doing now... people would think why we should go to such a country while it's not so friendly to China... maybe the ordinary people will think why they should drink Australian wine or eat Australian beef.”

– PRC Ambassador Cheng Jingye warning against further inquests into the coronavirus’ origin, in an interview with the Australian Financial Review

^{xl} Kathy Gilsinan, “How China Is Planning to Win Back the World,” *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/china-disinformation-propaganda-united-states-xi-jinping/612085/>. Of note, the EU reversed course in June, accusing Beijing along with Moscow as a source of disinformation related to COVID-19. Jennifer Rankin, “EU Says China Behind ‘Huge Wave’ of Covid-19 Disinformation,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/10/eu-says-china-behind-huge-wave-covid-19-disinformation-campaign>.

declared of Ambassador Cheng's remarks, "This is not economic coercion. This is cause and effect."^{xi}

6.3 Actions

In trying to win the public opinion battle over COVID-19, Beijing has used its media apparatus to highlight a wide range of activities to support its rhetorical narratives. These include China's domestic battle against the virus, its efforts to develop a viable vaccine, and the delivery of PRC medical aid and equipment to foreign countries. Of course, China has conducted all of these activities to achieve objectives beyond simply spreading propaganda—indeed, conveying public messages to the world about the PRC response to COVID-19 may not even be a priority goal in some cases. For example, there can be no doubt that the Chinese government's main objective in constructing two entirely new hospitals in Wuhan and deploying thousands of medical professionals to the city was to stamp out the virus. Nonetheless, the actions detailed below provided Beijing with valuable propaganda ammunition that it has used to shape the global narrative about the pandemic.

6.3.1 Domestic medical work

The fight to defeat the virus within China's borders is perhaps the clearest example of an action meant to accomplish a set objective that nonetheless holds an undeniable power for shaping the narrative about the outbreak. The city of Wuhan and its battle with the coronavirus was the biggest news story for much of the first three months of 2020. China's leaders knew that the eyes of the entire world were on them, so it is hardly surprising that they not only invested extraordinary effort into defeating the virus but also into presenting the best possible face to the world while doing so. Two key focal points of this include:

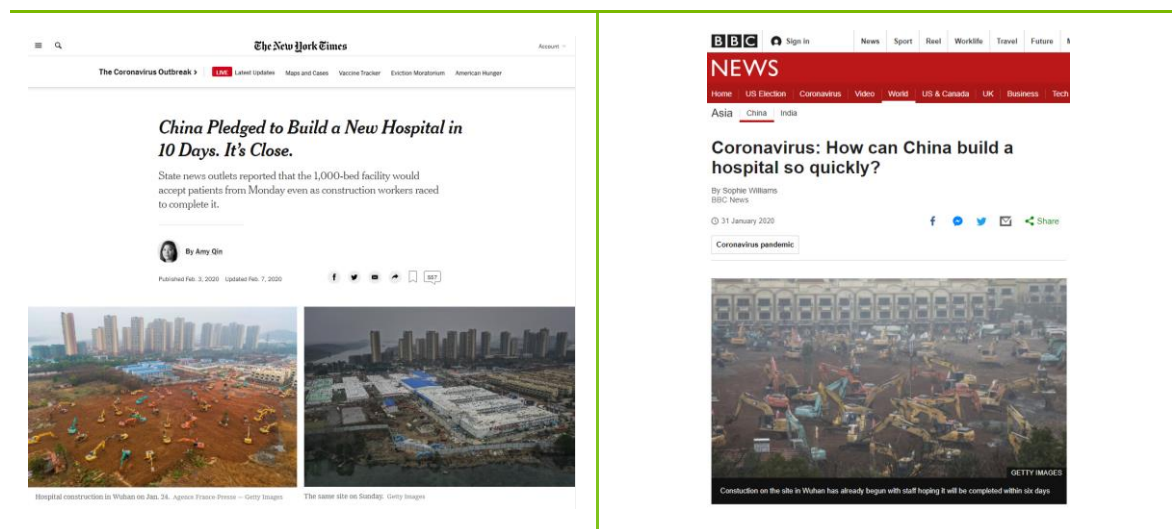
PRC medical workers. Few themes were as dominant in PRC media coverage of China's epidemic as praise for the country's medical workers. Beijing has strategically co-opted them into its global narrative that China should be commended rather than criticized for its handling of the outbreak. This was seen in numerous articles, news stories, and even documentaries glorifying the sacrifices of the people of Wuhan and portraying them as loyal servants of the Party whose efforts should be seen as testaments to the strength of the communist system.³⁰⁹ The Chinese government even bestowed the honorary title of "People's Hero" on three of the nation's most prominent medical experts for their role in combatting the virus, and awarded

^{xi} The editorial concluded with a warning to Australia to "stop dreaming that it can continue to reap economic benefits from China while repeatedly trying to harm it with its political provocations." "Coercion Claim Divorced from Reality: China Daily Editorial," *China Daily*, Apr. 29, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/29/WS5ea98136a310a8b241152b98.html>.

the country's top respiratory disease expert the top national honor of the "Medal of the Republic."³¹⁰

Construction of Wuhan hospitals. Three days after Beijing announced its "all-out battle" against the coronavirus on 20 January, construction began in Wuhan on the first of two new temporary hospitals devoted to treating COVID-19 patients. These facilities would not only help relieve the city's overwhelmed medical centers, they would also be held up by the Chinese press as "a symbol of Chinese spirit" and concrete proof of the country's timely response.³¹¹ To convey this message to the world, PRC media outlets livestreamed the construction of the Huoshenshan and Leishenshan emergency hospitals to millions of viewers in China and beyond.³¹² The development was well covered in the foreign press—below are just a few examples of foreign media outlets' coverage of the hospitals' construction.

Figure 33. Screenshots of foreign media coverage of Wuhan hospital construction



Source: Amy Qin, "China Pledged to Build a New Hospital in 10 Days. It's Close." *The New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/world/asia/coronavirus-wuhan-hospital.html>; Sophie Williams, "Coronavirus: How Can China Build a Hospital So Quickly?" BBC, Jan. 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51245156>.

Even after closing the temporary structures in April, Beijing has repeatedly pointed to this undertaking to argue that it reacted rapidly and forcefully to the outbreak.³¹³

6.3.2 Vaccine research

As with the construction of the Wuhan hospitals, China's research into a vaccine for the coronavirus has a clear practical objective—attain a means of eradicating the virus—as well as undeniable propaganda value. In May, Xi Jinping announced in a speech to the WHO that China

would make its vaccine a “global public good” as part of his vision of “building a global community of health for all.”³¹⁴ Since then, PRC officials and media outlets have adopted this talking point to argue that China is a responsible member of the international community.

Figure 34. Screenshot of *China Daily* op-ed on China-Africa cooperation during the pandemic

Shared picture of health

By LIU HONGWU | China Daily | Updated: 2020-06-30 07:44



JIN DING/CHINA DAILY

All countries are facing severe challenges and suffering as a result of the novel coronavirus outbreak. In the face of this challenge, China and Africa are standing together, giving full play to the fine tradition of their friendly relations, strengthening their cooperation in the medical field and enhancing their policy coordination.

Source: Liu Hongwu, “Shared Picture of Health,” *China Daily*, June 30, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/30/WS5efa7cc6a310834817255f8c.html>.

This assertion has only grown louder since China joined COVAX—an international WHO-backed initiative to ensure global access to COVID-19 vaccines—in October.³¹⁵ PRC government officials and authoritative media outlets hailed the move as a testament to Beijing’s commitment to Xi’s vision, and have been quick to point out that the US is not among the 180-plus participating countries. For example, a commentary piece in China’s official Xinhua News Agency decried the US decision to not join COVAX as “vaccine nationalism,” whereas a *China Daily* editorial accused the US of choosing to “sabotage international solidarity in the fight against the common enemy” by not participating in the initiative.³¹⁶

In addition to highlighting its participation in the international effort to make COVID-19 vaccines globally accessible, China has also striven to emphasize its progress in developing a viable vaccine. The director of China's Science and Technology Development Center of the National Health Commission announced on 22 August that the PRC had been testing an experimental vaccine on people at "high risk" of exposure, such as medical personnel, since July.³¹⁷ Since then, Chinese pharmaceutical companies have begun conducting human subject tests with multiple trial vaccines, circumventing international safety norms in doing so.³¹⁸ It is likely that should a Chinese company succeed in developing a viable vaccine for COVID-19, Beijing will loudly herald it as a victory for the PRC.

6.3.3 Leadership activities

Over the course of the pandemic, Beijing has used the public activities of its leaders to portray them as engaged in combatting the virus. This is aimed both at bolstering the CCP's legitimacy with the Chinese people and at projecting an image of competent governance to the world. Some of the most noteworthy examples include:

- Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Sun Chunlan traveling to Hubei in late January to supervise the work being conducted at "ground zero" of the outbreak.³¹⁹
- Xi Jinping's (virtual) discussions with medical experts and interactions with the Beijing public in February.³²⁰
- Xi Jinping's trip to Wuhan in mid-March, which was hailed by the Chinese press as a "moment of truth" and a demonstration of "a nation's leadership dealing effectively with the COVID-19 issue."³²¹

These visits provided Beijing with photo-ops that they have used to push the idea that China's leaders were acting responsibly to combat the virus.

Figure 35. Images of Chinese leaders visiting the front lines of the Wuhan epidemic



PRC Premier Li Keqiang visiting Wuhan, Jan. 27



PRC Vice Premier Sun Chunlan visiting the Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan, Feb. 2



PRC President Xi Jinping talking with locals in Beijing, Feb. 10



PRC President Xi Jinping waves to Wuhan residents, Mar. 10

Sources: "Chinese Premier in Wuhan, Demands All-Out Efforts in Epidemic Prevention, Control," Xinhua, Jan. 27, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/27/c_138737735.htm; "Chinese Vice Premier Inspects Newly-Delivered Hospital to Combat Coronavirus," Xinhua, Feb. 3, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/03/c_138750379.htm; "Xi Focus: Xi Vows to Win People's War Against Novel Coronavirus," Xinhua, Feb. 11, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/11/c_138771934_6.htm; "Xi Visits Patients, Medics at Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan," Xinhua, Mar. 10, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/10/c_138862268_16.htm.

Xi Jinping's Low Visibility During the Height of China's Outbreak

Despite efforts to play up the involvement of the PRC's top leaders in combating the virus, the reality is that Xi Jinping was far less visible in the Chinese press during the height of China's outbreak than he is normally. For example:

- In the one-month period between 22 January and 22 February, when the number of confirmed cases on the mainland ballooned from 571 to 79,936, Xinhua published only 16 articles on Xi's activities with respect to COVID-19. Most of these showed Xi governing from afar (e.g., issuing instructions to CCP officials, approving the deployments of additional medics to Wuhan, and holding video teleconferences and phone calls).
- In the 14-day period between 29 January and 11 February, when the number of confirmed cases jumped from 7,711 to 44,653, Xi made only three public appearances, two of which were meetings with foreign dignitaries.
- During a 29-day stretch beginning on 30 January, Xi's image appeared on the *People's Daily* front page three times, far below his average appearance of once every 2.5 days.
- Of the 85 English-language Xinhua reports on Xi's activities during the first three months of 2020, over two-thirds were published in March once the outbreak on the mainland was largely under control.
- Xi did not visit Hubei Province, the epicenter of the outbreak in China, until 10 March, by which time the epidemic was largely under control on the mainland.

Xi's low profile in authoritative PRC media was likely intended to shield the Chinese head of state from responsibility and to deflect blame onto lower ranking officials at a time when the outbreak had yet to be contained on the mainland and the CCP's ability to do so was uncertain. Conversely, subsequent efforts to raise his media profile in relation to COVID-19 were likely intended to credit his leadership with the CCP's success in fighting the virus and to portray him as a leading figure in the larger global effort to combat the pandemic.

Source: "PRC Media Brief: PRC Media Portrayals of Xi Jinping During COVID-19 Outbreak (Jan-Mar 2020)," May 5, 2020, OSE Product ID: CHW2020050584672788.

6.3.4 Providing foreign aid

As discussed in Section 4.1.1, Beijing has engaged in an extensive aid campaign that has seen it send medical equipment and experts around the globe. According to the PRC MFA, China has provided assistance to over 150 countries and international organizations in the fight against COVID-19 as of mid-November.³²² Chinese medical experts have also shared their experience

with the virus in dozens of video teleconferences with foreign counterparts.³²³ It is almost certain that one of the key aims of this campaign is to shift international opinion surrounding China's role in the pandemic and convince the world that the PRC is a force for good and a responsible member of the international community.

The type of material that China has delivered has varied—including masks, goggles, thermometers, ventilators, and test kits, as well as monetary aid. What has not varied is Beijing's efforts to publicize its aid efforts. Many of its deliveries have been covered in the media in multiple languages by Xinhua, often with accompanying photos of happy locals receiving the clearly marked Chinese aid from PRC representatives. As with the activities of China's leadership, PRC media has used these deliveries as photo-ops to present a positive image of China to the world, as seen in the below examples.

Figure 36. PRC media photos of foreign aid deliveries



Sources: "Chinese Medical Team Arrives in Cote d'Ivoire to Help Fight Against COVID-19," Xinhua, May 2, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/02/c_139025915.htm; "Third Batch of Chinese Aid Arrives in Baghdad to Assist COVID-19 Fight," Xinhua, Apr. 20, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/20/c_138993133.htm; "Chinese Medical Team Arrives in Pakistan to Help Fight COVID-19," Xinhua, Mar. 28, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/28/c_138926489_4.htm; "China Donates Medical Supplies to Bangladeshi Hospitals in Dhaka," *China Military Online*, Apr. 9, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-04/09/content_9788042_2.htm.

In an example of how China has improved the sophistication of its foreign-directed propaganda in recent years, China's international television station, CGTN, has put out a number of well-produced news segments highlighting China's medical assistance to countries around the world.³²⁴ These pieces tend to feature footage of Chinese medical personnel interacting with local patients, delivering supplies, and conducting exchanges with their host nation counterparts.

Figure 37. CGTN Africa coverage of COVID-19



Sources: CGTN Africa, "LIVE: #AfricaLive 17GMT 30/04/2020," YouTube, Apr. 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWboV1jmf20>; CGTN Africa, "Over 12 Chinese Medical Experts Arrive in Ethiopia," YouTube, Apr. 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmQ_ubbC_rl.

Beijing Using COVID-19 Equipment as Leverage

It also appears that China is willing to threaten cutting off medical cooperation with other countries should they express viewpoints unrelated to the pandemic that nonetheless go against the Party line. For example, after the Netherlands changed the name of its de facto embassy in Taiwan from “Netherlands Trade and Investment Office” to the more comprehensive “Netherlands Office Taipei,” China lodged solemn representations to the Dutch foreign ministry over the issue, and PRC foreign-directed media warned that by “playing with fire” on one of Beijing’s core policy concerns, the Netherlands could see a halt to its import of Chinese medical supplies. The Netherlands Office Taipei posted a livestream announcement of their name change, which was then taken down within a few hours. The office asserted that the video was only meant to be up for a short period of time, and was not a response to PRC pressure.

Two days after the name change, China’s official English-language newspaper *China Daily* published an op-ed by the PRC ambassador to the Netherlands in which he asserted that “friendly relations between China and the Netherlands are blooming as they fight hand in hand against the pandemic.” In his op-ed and in a subsequent “open letter to the Dutch Friends” posted to the embassy’s website, Ambassador Xu Hong detailed the ways that the PRC had come to the Netherlands’ aid in its fight against the virus, noting that China had been sharing medical information with the country’s doctors, sending medical supplies such as masks and protective gear, and protecting Dutch citizens in China. While he avoided the topic of Taiwan, it is possible that Xu intended to implicitly warn Dutch authorities against further steps toward Taiwan by highlighting the value of Sino-Dutch cooperation.

Sources: “Chinese Embassy in Netherlands Lodges Solemn Representations After Netherlands Changes Its Office Name in Taiwan Island,” *Global Times*, Apr. 28, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1186958.shtml>; Central News Agency, “Netherlands Office in Taipei Pulls Name-Change Video,” *Focus Taiwan*, Apr. 30, 2020, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202004300002>, “Ambassador Xu Hong, Hope Springs Eternal,” *China Daily*, Apr. 30, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/30/WS5eaa0b5fa310a8b241152c0f.html>; Xu Hong, “Chinese Ambassador’s Open Letter to the Dutch Friends,” *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands*, May 1, 2020, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1775542.htm>.

6.3.5 Military aid operations

Beijing has praised the PLA for its role in the pandemic to support its larger narrative of China's victory over the virus. PRC media coverage of the situation in Wuhan often highlighted the role of the PLA, where over 4,000 military medical personnel helped deliver supplies, treat patients, and assist in construction projects.³²⁵ The official narrative is that not a single member of China's military contracted the virus during China's epidemic.³²⁶ Since the PLA is the military of the CCP, not the state, this portrayal of the military was almost certainly intended to bolster the Party's image in the eyes of the people.

Not only has the Chinese press portrayed the PLA as unscathed by the virus, it has also frequently highlighted military engagement with other countries to portray China as leading the way in the fight against the virus. Such engagement has included the delivery of aid abroad, as well as numerous videoconferences with the militaries from countries around the world.³²⁷

Figure 38. Chinese military personnel engaging in medical exchanges with counterparts from around the world



Chinese and Kuwaiti military medical experts hold a video conference on COVID-19



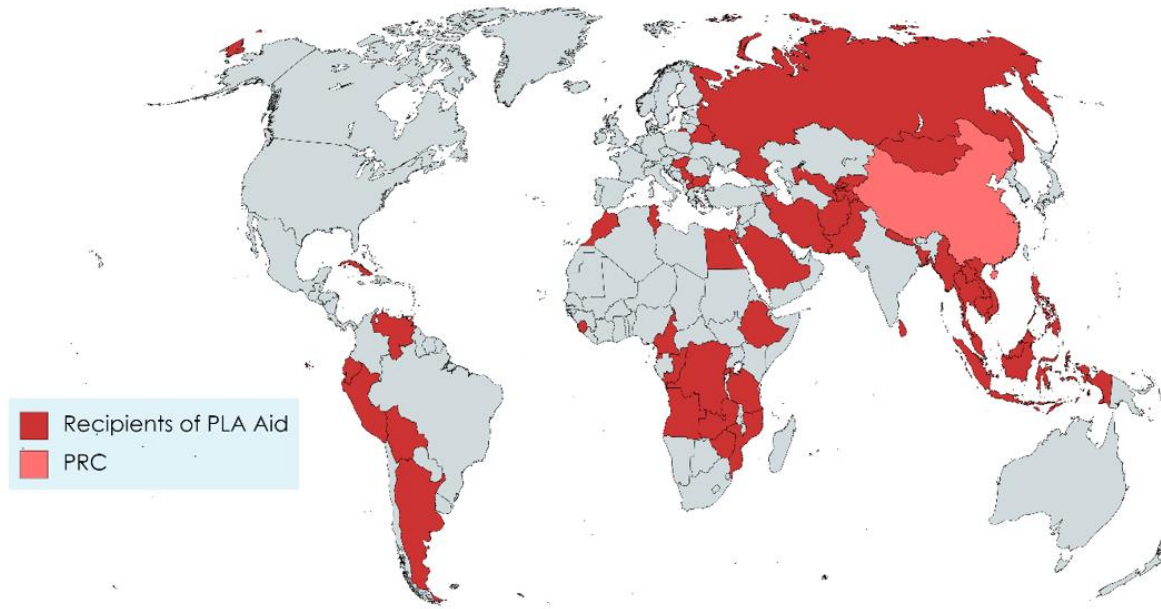
A member of a PLA medical team assists the Myanmar military in building a laboratory for testing COVID-19

Sources: "Chinese and Kuwaiti Military Medical Experts Hold COVID-19 Response Video Conference," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the State of Kuwait, June 21, 2020, <http://kw.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1790808.htm>; "Chinese Military Medics Assist Myanmar Military in Building COVID-19 Testing Laboratory," Xinhua, May 1, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c_139022026.htm.

PLA aid efforts have delivered supplies to countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. As of November, the PLA has delivered medical supplies to 50 countries around the

world, as illustrated in Figure 39 below. See Appendix A of this report for a full list of these countries.

Figure 39. Countries that have received COVID-19 medical aid and materials from the PLA



Source: CNA; mapchart.net

Unfavorably comparing the US military to the PLA. In addition to holding up the PLA as an embodiment of China’s strong and compassionate response to the outbreak, the PRC media also pointed to Chinese military activities during the pandemic to disparage the US military. For example, English-language PRC media reports highlighted the April voyage of the PLA(N)’s *Liaoning* aircraft carrier task group in the Pacific and noted it was being conducted at the same time that four US aircraft carriers were reported to have COVID-19 cases.³²⁸ Chinese military analysts hailed this as a reflection of China’s comparable success in controlling the virus, and asserted that the PLA(N)’s activities would “greatly increase the national morale.”³²⁹

6.3.6 Restarting economic activity

Beijing has made considerable efforts to revive China’s economic growth after COVID-19 caused the first contraction of the country’s economy in nearly 30 years.³³⁰ After implementing a series of fiscal measures aimed at preventing a lengthy recession, the PRC announced in July that its GDP had grown by 3.2 percent in the second quarter of 2020, following a 6.8 percent

decline in Q1.³³¹ Official PRC data released since then suggest that China's economy has continued to rebound from the initial damage caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak.³³²

Beijing has tried to maximize the propaganda value of this economic restart in order to build an image of itself as having defeated the virus—an image that it has used to restore consumer and investor confidence and contribute to the rebuilding of its economy.³³³ This approach has seen the PRC propaganda apparatus push positive stories, attempt to censor negative economic news, and contrast China's role in the global economy with US trade policies.

Highlighting growth and projecting optimism. PRC media has pushed a steady stream of economic optimism since overcoming the worst of the outbreak.³³⁴ Even reports acknowledging that the country's economy has suffered considerably from the pandemic are infused with reassurances that the government will soon get things back on track.³³⁵ Furthermore, Beijing has portrayed China's economic recovery as good news for the world. For example:

- State media hailed China's second quarter rebound as a "robust recovery" from the damage caused by the pandemic, and asserted that the Chinese economy's growth would "inject positive energy into the global recovery."³³⁶
- When the PRC National Bureau of Statistics announced that the Chinese economy had experienced a net growth over the first three quarters of the year, PRC officials portrayed it as "undoubtedly good news for the global economy," and asserted that China would "play a positive role in driving global economic recovery."³³⁷
- Foreign-directed media outlets, such as China's official English-language newspaper *China Daily*, have published political cartoons portraying the Chinese economy as saving the rest of the world from the pandemic.

Figure 40. *China Daily* cartoons portraying China as leading the global economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: Cai Meng, "Leading the Way," *China Daily*, Oct. 22, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202010/22/WS5f90c913a31024ad0ba80252.html>; Cai Meng, "Uptrend," *China Daily*, Nov. 12, 2020, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202011/12/WS5fac78f3a31024ad0ba93869.html>.

Manipulating social media discussion of economic recovery. As Beijing pushes the narrative that it can guide China's economy back to health, it has also striven to silence news that offers a more pessimistic picture. According to a commercial data aggregator, the PRC attempted to censor social media discussion on a number of economic topics during the pandemic, including:

- Criticisms that Xi Jinping's "domestic circulation" plan unrolled at an economic conference in July was too vague and reflected a lack of a strong economic plan.³³⁸
- News of deteriorating food stockpiles over the summer that sparked netizen anxieties about a possible famine.³³⁹
- A netizen article that circulated in the lead-up to the meeting between the top US and Chinese diplomats in June suggesting that China was losing the trade war.³⁴⁰
- An announcement of an 85 percent increase in pork prices in August.³⁴¹

Criticizing US "trade war" as harmful to the global economy. Since it began in 2018, Beijing has condemned the Trump Administration's "trade war" against China—referring to US economic policies intended to pressure the PRC into abandoning what the White House describes as "unfair trade practices."³⁴² Beijing has used the pandemic's impact on the global economy to argue that the US trade war with China will slow the world's economic recovery. For example:

- In his speech at the Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit in March, Xi Jinping called on all G20 member states to cut tariffs and other trade barriers in order to help the global economy recover from the pandemic.³⁴³
- China's white paper on its response to the novel coronavirus outbreak stresses the need to "cut tariffs, remove barriers, [and] facilitate the flow of trade" during the pandemic.³⁴⁴
- Authoritative PRC media outlets such as *People's Daily*, *Xinhua*, and *China Daily* published multiple commentary pieces criticizing the US trade war as irresponsible during a global pandemic.³⁴⁵ For example, a 16 April *China Daily* editorial contended that "any attempt to erect more trade barriers" during the pandemic would cause "irreversible damage to future recovery and growth."³⁴⁶

7. Concluding Thoughts

Ever since China's leaders acknowledged to their people and the world the severity of the crisis in late January, they have strived to turn what had every possibility of being a heavy blow to the CCP's legitimacy and the PRC's standing on the world stage into a net gain in both aspects. Through stringent measures to extinguish the initial outbreak in Wuhan and Hubei Province, Beijing has at least temporarily stopped the virus' spread within the country's borders, and has leveraged this success to position itself as a leading voice within the global fight against the pandemic.

7.1 Issues to watch

7.1.1 The race to develop a vaccine

It is unlikely that the COVID-19 pandemic will end until a safe vaccine for the virus is developed and made widely available. As of 2 December, researchers from around the world are running clinical trials of 58 vaccines on humans, plus nearly 100 more on animals; however, none of the current candidates have been approved for full use.³⁴⁷

As mentioned in Section 6.3.2, the first country to develop a successful vaccine has the potential to reap considerable diplomatic rewards as the rest of the world tries to ensure they receive it as soon as possible.³⁴⁸ China and the US are two of the frontrunners in this race, and the leaders of both countries have urged their respective scientific bodies to push for a vaccine as soon as possible.³⁴⁹ However, Beijing has shown itself willing to circumvent best practices to achieve this. In July, the Chinese government launched an emergency program that allowed pharmaceutical companies such as Sinopharm and Sinovac to bypass clinical trials and begin inoculating human populations with experimental vaccines.³⁵⁰ Doing so disregards precautions that the US and other countries are following out of recognition of the dangerous possible consequences of rolling out a vaccine before it has been determined to be safe.³⁵¹

In addition, Beijing has also reportedly deployed hackers to try to steal relevant data from US and European research organizations.³⁵² When confronted with news reports that Chinese hackers had stolen vaccine information from a Spanish lab, MFA spokesperson Wang Wenbin denied that the PRC was engaging in such activity, and declared that as "a world leader in vaccine research and development," China would not need to rely on stealing data.³⁵³

Should China succeed in producing a safe vaccine, it may use it as leverage to compel other countries to accede to PRC diplomatic preferences, in addition to using it to add a triumphant coda to its official history of the pandemic. Beijing has repeatedly sworn to make any vaccine

that it develops “a global public good,” and in October, it joined the WHO-backed COVAX initiative, which aims to enable distribution of viable vaccines around the world.³⁵⁴ Should China help ensure that a vaccine is made globally available, that could positively shape other countries’ views of the PRC. Alternatively, should the Chinese government try to exploit countries in exchange for access to a vaccine, it could exacerbate negative opinions of Beijing around the world.

7.1.2 The recovery of the global economy

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has called the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic “the worst recession since the Great Depression.”³⁵⁵ As nearly every country in the world struggles with increased unemployment and slowed economic growth rates, Beijing has been keen to convince domestic and foreign audiences that its economy has bounced back and is ready to be “a crucial stabilizer for the global economy,” as discussed in Section 6.3.6.

The stakes for Beijing are high. Consider the following:

- If the world embraces China’s propaganda as truth, then Beijing could benefit in the form of more investment opportunities and willing customers, no small prize as Chinese companies like Huawei battle for access in nations that are increasingly suspicious of its brand.
- If, however, Beijing is unable to maintain its economic recovery, there could be serious consequences for China’s leaders. A failure to sustain the country’s economic growth could threaten the CCP’s legitimacy at home, and continued economic turmoil could further incite international calls for reparations.

Chinese officials have also stated that the PRC will help poorer nations navigate the pandemic through debt relief programs such as the G20’s Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI).³⁵⁶ However, US officials have expressed concerns about Beijing’s commitment to transparently honoring its international debt relief obligations.³⁵⁷ It remains to be seen whether China will abide by the G20’s latest framework for restructuring government debt, which was agreed upon on 13 November.³⁵⁸

7.2 Further implications

Looking beyond how people and countries will remember China’s role in the pandemic, COVID-19 also has implications for broader issues of influence within the Indo-Pacific and beyond. As the findings of this report demonstrate, Beijing has attempted to use the crisis to degrade international trust in Washington, frequently by portraying the US and China as diametrically

opposed. For example, on 13 October, MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian responded to critical remarks the US secretary of state made about China by declaring:

Who is sowing division all over the world and who is the real threat to the world? I believe that the international community will reach a fair conclusion... In the face of the pandemic situation, China has provided assistance to more than 150 countries and regions, joined COVAX, and actively supported WHO's crucial role in fighting the pandemic. The United States withdrew from WHO and voted against the COVID-19 resolution in the UN General Assembly. It chose to stand on the opposite side of 169 countries by openly flouting international cooperation against the pandemic.³⁵⁹

Questions that US allies and partners may be considering in the pandemic's wake include:

- Do China's successes in containing its outbreak mean that its authoritarian style of government is better equipped to handle large crises than a US-style democracy?
- Will Washington's break with the WHO lead to a larger US withdrawal from the international community?
- Is the PRC a more dependable source of international aid and expertise than the US?

How people around the world answer these questions has major implications for the future of Sino-US competition for global influence.

It remains to be seen what the pandemic's net impact on China's international image will be. A Pew Research Study published in early October on international perceptions of China concluded that negative views of the PRC were at their highest points in over a decade.³⁶⁰ When presented with these findings, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying dismissed them as representing only the 14 sampled "Western" countries and not the "general view of the international community."³⁶¹ However, occasional hints of internal discontent at Beijing's hardline policies suggest that some of China's leaders may be concerned that such findings cannot be dismissed so easily.³⁶²

There is also the question of how Beijing's handling of the outbreak will shape the Chinese public's view of the CCP. Has it solidified the Party's legitimacy in the eyes of the people or degraded the public's trust in their government? Beijing's official line on the pandemic is that because of it, "the Chinese people have keenly realized that the CCP leadership is the most reliable shelter against storms. Their trust in and support for the Party have increased, along with their confidence in China's political system."³⁶³ However, the numerous social media tributes to the late whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang since his death in February suggest that the Chinese people have not forgotten how their government first responded to the crisis.³⁶⁴

Appendix A: Recipients of PLA COVID-19 Aid

Note: “Type of Aid” only refers to the material content of the PLA’s first delivery to the country, and does not include aid sent in any subsequent deliveries, nor does it include PLA medical experts who may have assisted the recipient country’s efforts to fight COVID-19.

Country	Type of Aid	Month of first PLA delivery
Cambodia ³⁶⁵	Unspecified medical supplies	March
Iran ³⁶⁶	Test kits, protective clothing, surgical masks	March
Laos ³⁶⁷	Protective clothing, surgical masks, test kits	April
Lebanon ³⁶⁸	Protective clothing, surgical masks	April
Myanmar ³⁶⁹	Protective clothing, surgical masks, test kits	April
Pakistan ³⁷⁰	Protective clothing, surgical masks	April
Afghanistan ³⁷¹	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Brunei ³⁷²	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
East Timor ³⁷³	Face masks, other PPE	May
Indonesia ³⁷⁴	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Kyrgyzstan ³⁷⁵	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Malaysia ³⁷⁶	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Mongolia ³⁷⁷	Face masks, other PPE	May
Nepal ³⁷⁸	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Philippines ³⁷⁹	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Russia ³⁸⁰	Face masks, other PPE	May
Sri Lanka ³⁸¹	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Tajikistan ³⁸²	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Thailand ³⁸³	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Uzbekistan ³⁸⁴	Protective clothing, surgical masks, thermometers	May
Vietnam ³⁸⁵	Unspecified medical supplies	May
Angola ³⁸⁶	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Argentina ³⁸⁷	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Bangladesh ³⁸⁸	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Belarus ³⁸⁹	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Bolivia ³⁹⁰	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Bulgaria ³⁹¹	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June

Country	Type of Aid	Month of first PLA delivery
Cameroon ³⁹²	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Congo (DRC) ³⁹³	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Cuba ³⁹⁴	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Ecuador ³⁹⁵	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Egypt ³⁹⁶	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Equatorial Guinea ³⁹⁷	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Ethiopia ³⁹⁸	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Hungary ³⁹⁹	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Morocco ⁴⁰⁰	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Mozambique ⁴⁰¹	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
North Macedonia ⁴⁰²	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Peru ⁴⁰³	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Republic of the Congo ⁴⁰⁴	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Rwanda ⁴⁰⁵	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Saudi Arabia ⁴⁰⁶	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Serbia ⁴⁰⁷	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Sierra Leone ⁴⁰⁸	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Tanzania ⁴⁰⁹	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Trinidad and Tobago ⁴¹⁰	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Tunisia ⁴¹¹	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Venezuela ⁴¹²	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Zambia ⁴¹³	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June
Zimbabwe ⁴¹⁴	Protective clothing, surgical masks	June

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Endnotes

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⁸¹ Xu Hailin, "Trump's Promise Not to Use 'Chinese Virus' Unlikely to Stop US' Ethnic Slander," *Global Times*, Mar. 25, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1183750.shtml>.

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⁸³ "Rumormongering by Fox News Reveals Desperate Situation of US: China Daily Editorial," *China Daily*, Apr. 23, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/23/WS5ea06e46a3105d50a3d181f9.html>. Another editorial published three days later similarly boasted: "Despite the US administration's continuous and organized attacks on it, China has never ceased providing assistance to the country. As of last week, China had provided the US with about 2.5 billion face masks, and 5,000 ventilators, making it the largest material supporter of the US in its fight against the virus." "GOP's Shameful Blame-Game Playbook Cannot Help White House to Defeat Virus: China Daily Editorial," *China Daily*, Apr. 26, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/26/WS5ea5728fa310a8b241151bfc.html>. Similarly, the 18 March editorial cited earlier in this section concluded by noting that even though "China is angry that it is being smeared" by the US as responsible for the virus, it "remains open to cooperating with the US to coordinate their actions to counter the pandemic and its effects on the global economy." "Futile Attempt to Deflect Domestic Pressure: China Daily Editorial."

⁸⁴ For example, the US secretary of state has repeatedly connected China's failure to contain the virus to its system of government, asserting that if the virus had emerged in a democratic country, it would have been contained. See, for example: "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Martha Raddatz of ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos," US State Department, May 3, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-with-martha-raddatz-of-abcs-this-week-with-george-stephanopoulos/>; "Europe and the China Challenge," US State Department, June 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-virtual-copenhagen-democracy-summit/>. For instances of Western media asserting that the closing of Wuhan was a human rights abuse, see: Frances Eve, "China's Reaction to the Coronavirus Outbreak Violates Human Rights," *The Guardian*, Feb. 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/02/chinas-reaction-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak-violates-human-rights>; James Hamblin, "A Historic Quarantine," *The Atlantic*, Jan. 24, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/01/china-quarantine-coronavirus/605455/>; Amy Gunia, "China's Draconian Lockdown Is Getting Credit for Slowing Coronavirus. Would It Work Anywhere Else?" *Time*, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5796425/china-coronavirus-lockdown/>.

⁸⁵ *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

⁸⁷ See, for example: Wang Mengjie, "China's Governance Model in Response to the Coronavirus Outbreak," CGTN, Feb. 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-20/China-s-governance-model-in-response-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak-OcLTh8x9u0/index.html>; Martin Jacques, "Capacity of State in China to Deal with Epidemic Far More Developed than Western Govt," *Global Times*, Mar. 1, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1181178.shtml>; Zhong Sheng, "China's Well-Coordinated Prevention, Control and Treatment in COVID-19 Response Indicate the Country's 'Life First' Philosophy," *People's Daily*, June 11, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0611/c90000-9699570.html>. Xinhua published a lengthy rebuttal to a number of "preposterous allegations and lies" pushed by Washington

“in order to shift the blame to China” —one of these was the “allegation” that China’s political system was a cause for the pandemic’s emergence. See: “Reality Check of US Allegations Against China on COVID-19,” Xinhua, May 10, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/10/c_139044103.htm.

⁸⁸ For example, an op-ed in the *Global Times* argued that America’s federal system prevented it from taking the kind of “decisive measures” that China had shown to be effective in combating the virus. See: Cheng Qingqing and Liu Caiyu, “Time for US to Learn from China to Deal with the COVID-19 Outbreak,” *Global Times*, Mar. 17, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182820.shtml>.

⁸⁹ The author is deputy director of the Center for American Studies, Fudan University. Song Guoyou, Song Guoyou, “US Soft Power Declining Because of Its COVID-19 Pandemic Bungling,” *Global Times*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1189596.shtml>. Another *Global Times* article featured commentary asserting that “federal governments are unable to force local officials to cooperate with central guidance,” and this was why the virus hit the US so badly.” Song Luzheng, “Many Western Governments Ill-Equipped to Handle Coronavirus,” *Global Times*, Mar. 15, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182661.shtml>.

⁹⁰ She Jingwei, “US Federal Government Missed Opportunity to Fight COVID-19: US Journal,” CGTN, Apr. 4, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-04/U-S-federal-government-missed-opportunity-to-fight-COVID-19-NEJM-PqaTygbDlC/index.html>. There were exceptions to this argument. For example, a Chinese law professor argued in CGTN that while “the tensions between the federal government and the states have massively restricted the power of the federal government,” Germany has shown that federalism can work if the state governments “strictly carry out policies made by the federal government.” He concluded that more than America’s system, its politicians are to blame for catering only to political allies and “shirking the duties of taking care of the people.” Zhu Zheng, “Federalism Can’t Explain America’s Failure in Its Response to COVID-19,” CGTN, May 4, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-04/Federalism-can-t-explain-America-s-COVID-19-failures-Qd7F3x3mLK/index.html>.

⁹¹ Sun Chenghao, “Political Polarization Will Hamper US Capability to Combat COVID-19,” CGTN, Apr. 13, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-13/Political-polarization-will-hamper-U-S-capability-to-combat-COVID-19-PDvCN7A1kQ/index.html>.

⁹² Tom Fowdy, “How America’s System Is Ill-Suited to Combat the COVID-19 Outbreak,” CGTN, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-13/How-America-s-system-is-ill-suited-to-combat-the-COVID-19-outbreak-OOPXCDri6I/index.html>.

⁹³ Mark Beeson, “Western Political System Gets a Radical Health Check,” *Global Times*, Mar. 22, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1183364.shtml>.

⁹⁴ Professor Li Haidong further argued that the US failed to take COVID-19 seriously as a threat, but instead saw it as “an opportunity to attack China.” Xu Hailin, “US Political System Stymies Effective Virus Response,” *Global Times*, Feb. 26, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1180822.shtml>.

⁹⁵ “Washington’s Irresponsible Blame Game Only Adds to American People’s Sufferings: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, May 8, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/07/WS5eb404a1a310a8b24115409d.html>.

⁹⁶ For example, see: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on April 2, 2020”; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on May 13, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 13, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1778769.shtml; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on June 29, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, June 29, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1793120.shtml.

⁹⁷ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 13, 2020.”

⁹⁸ For example, see: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 20, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 20, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1780978.shtml; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 2, 2020”; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on April 30, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Apr. 30, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1775332.shtml.

⁹⁹ Hu Bo, “US Military Threatened by COVID-19 Still Insists on Showing Off Might,” *Global Times*, Apr. 13, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185475.shtml>. The PLA's English-language online media outlet *China Military Online* published an op-ed in August that pushed a similar idea. The author, whose affiliation is unknown, asserted that in facing “the dual tests of the decline in combat readiness and the spread of the pandemic,” the US military decided that “to showcase the muscle [sic] while it is sick is far more important than to cure the disease.” “Plague-Ridden US Military Obsessed with Stirring Up Troubles.”

¹⁰⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the PRC media response to USS *John S. McCain*'s August 2017 collision with a merchant ship, see: CNA, “PRC Media Brief: PRC Media Coverage of McCain Collision Portrays USN as Destabilizing Force,” Aug. 30, 2017, OSE Product ID: CHL2017083081822718.

¹⁰¹ Liu Jixi and Li Jian, “Burning USS Bonhomme Richard Mirrors Overstrain of US Navy,” *China Military Online*, July 20, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-07/20/content_9857152.htm.

¹⁰² “NPC Session Will Adapt Country's Strategy to Post-Pandemic Situation: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, May 22, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/21/WS5ec67f0ca310a8b241157677.html>.

¹⁰³ *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*.

¹⁰⁴ National Health and Family Planning Commission of the PRC, “Major Health Exchange and Cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative,” *China Daily*, Dec. 18, 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/chinahealth/2015-12/18/content_22774412.htm.

¹⁰⁵ An Baijie, “WHO, China Sign Pact Establishing 'Health Silk Road',” *China Daily*, Jan. 19, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm; Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “Towards a Health Silk Road,” World Health Organization, Aug. 18, 2017, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2017/health-silk-road/en/>.

¹⁰⁶ He Yin, “Health Silk Road Protect Lives of All Mankind,” *People's Daily*, Mar. 25, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0325/c90000-9672120.html>.

¹⁰⁷ For example, see: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on March 18, 2020.” Belt and Road News Network, “Together We Fight the War of Pandemic, Together We Build the Silk Road of Health,” *Global Times*, Mar. 26, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1183832.shtml>; Jiang Yan, “Building a Healthy Silk Road Together,” *China Daily*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/28/WS5ecef27a310a8b241158f71.html>.

¹⁰⁸ For example, in response to accusations from White House officials that China was guilty of coercing other countries into following it, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying said on 9 October that the difference between China and the US “is not a fight for power, status or social system, but a choice of upholding justice or spreading evil, championing multilateralism or unilateralism, advocating win-win cooperation or zero-sum game.” “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on October 9, 2020.”

¹⁰⁹ “21 Countries Donate Medical Supplies to China: Spokesperson,” Xinhua, Feb. 6, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/06/c_138758854.htm.

¹¹⁰ For a resource on US aid efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, see: “Foreign Assistance for Coronavirus (COVID-19),” US Department of State, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-assistance-for-coronavirus-covid-19/>.

¹¹¹ “The US Role in International Organizations’ Response to COVID-19,” US Department of State, Mar. 31, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-u-s-role-in-international-organizations-response-to-covid-19/>.

¹¹² Hua further asserted that as the world’s largest developed country, the US has a “responsibility and obligation” to provide a significant amount of aid to developing countries around the world. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on April 1, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Apr. 1, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1764777.shtml.

¹¹³ February 25 appears to have been the first instance of the PRC publicly offering aid to other countries impacted by the novel coronavirus. Three days later, Chinese aid arrived in Iran. “Timeline of China Releasing Information on COVID-19 and Advancing International Cooperation on Epidemic Response,” Xinhua, Apr. 6, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/06/c_138951662.htm. On 3 March, the MFA then announced PRC aid efforts to Pakistan, Japan, the African Union, and Iran. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on March 3, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mar. 3, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1751740.shtml. Just over a week after the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, the PRC MFA announced that it would be providing medical equipment to 82 countries, the WHO, and the African Union, as well as sending medical experts to afflicted countries. The MFA spokesperson noted that Chinese local governments, companies, and non-government organizations were also donating supplies to countries in need. “MFA: China Has Announced Assistance to 82 Countries, WHO and African Union to Fight COVID-19,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mar. 20, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/t1759145.shtml.

¹¹⁴ Xi Jinping, “Keynote Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China, At the Opening Ceremony of the Third China International Import Expo,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Nov. 4, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1829373.shtml. Additionally, Xi Jinping announced in September that China had sent 34 medical expert teams to 32 countries in the period between 15 March and 6 September. See: “Xi Focus: China Does Its Best to Aid Global Fight Against Pandemic, Xi Says,” Xinhua, Sept. 8, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/08/c_139352358.htm.

¹¹⁵ For more information on China’s dominance in the global production of medical equipment, see: Sun Yu, Xinning Liu, and Tom Mitchell, “Chinese Companies Rush to Exploit Global Medical Equipment Shortages,” *Financial Times*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/875d9cf3-b5db-43da-8045-fa28c84cf972>; Keith Bradsher, “China Dominates Medical Supplies, in This Outbreak and the Next,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/business/china-medical-supplies.html>.

¹¹⁶ “Chinese Respond to Call of Duty as World Wages War Against Virus: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, Mar. 31, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/30/WS5e81e472a3101282172831a8.html>.

¹¹⁷ The author, a Pakistani journalist, went on to imply (intentionally or not) that the aid campaign helped distract from US efforts to draw global attention to China as the origin of the virus. He writes: “It is well-known that an illogical and baseless campaign was launched by Trump to smear China regarding

the birth of COVID-19, but when the world saw the humanitarian assistance of China, the fraudulent campaign failed to gain support from the global community.” Muhammad Zamir Assadi, “China’s Help Wins Hearts and Minds,” *China Daily*, Sept. 16, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202009/16/WS5f61a137a31024ad0ba79ea3.html>.

¹¹⁸ See, for example: “President Xi Jinping Talked with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte over the Phone,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mar. 16, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1756887.shtml; “President Xi Jinping Speaks with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa on the Phone,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Apr. 8, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1767990.shtml; “President Xi Jinping Speaks with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on the Phone,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mar. 24, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1760438.shtml.

¹¹⁹ During their meeting, Xi Jinping and Pakistani President Alvi further stressed the “ironclad” nature of the bilateral relationship. President Alvi also met with PRC Premier Li Keqiang and Chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee Li Zhanshu during his visit to Beijing. “Xi Holds Talks with Pakistani President to Deepen Ties amid Fight Against COVID-19,” Xinhua, Mar. 17, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/17/c_138888328.htm; “Full Text of China-Pakistan Joint Statement,” Xinhua, Mar. 18, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/18/c_138888840.htm.

¹²⁰ “Spotlight: Italy, China Stand Together in Joint Fight Against COVID-19,” Xinhua, May 27, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/27/c_139092278.htm.

¹²¹ “China Sends More Medical Aid After Czech President Appeals for Help in Its Fight Against COVID-19,” CGTN, Mar. 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-20/Czech-president-thanks-China-for-support-in-fighting-COVID-19-pandemic-P0qSr9QOL6/index.html>.

¹²² “New York ‘Finally’ Gets ‘Good News’ as China Donates 1,000 Ventilators,” CGTN, Apr. 5, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-05/New-York-finally-gets-good-news-as-China-donates-1-000-ventilators-PqUf2HCWJO/index.html>.

¹²³ Commercial data aggregator, “China Using Aid to Build ‘Mask alliance’ and Deflect Blame for Mishandling the Outbreak,” 1 May, 2020.

¹²⁴ In addition to donating supplies to Serbia, China also funded the construction of two COVID-19 testing labs in the country. “Spotlight: China-Europe Anti-Pandemic Ties Set Stage for Economic Recovery,” Xinhua, Sept. 8, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2020-09/08/c_139351185.htm.

¹²⁵ “Serbia Is Proud to Be Part of the Initiative ‘One Belt, One Road’,” *Belt and Road News Network*, Apr. 27, 2019, <https://www.beltandroad.news/2019/04/27/serbia-is-proud-to-be-part-of-the-initiative-one-belt-one-road/>.

¹²⁶ Bai Yunyi, “US Treats Us as Pests, China Helps Us, Say Spanish Netizens,” *Global Times*, Mar. 14, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182565.shtml>.

¹²⁷ “Commentary: China-Africa Solidarity Against COVID-19 to Strengthen Ties,” Xinhua, Aug. 18, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/18/c_139300365.htm?fbclid=IwAR2R4PIW6akw5ewG7H7tR7cgnfA-uUmBi4fftOoQQTCe5xaN7VFdJhGadmk.

¹²⁸ People’s Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), “People’s Daily Commentator: Handing over ‘China’s Answer Sheet’ in the Fight Against the Pandemic,” (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: Yiqing Zujizhan Jiaochu ‘Zhongguo Dajuan’*; 人民日报本报评论员: 疫情阻击战交出‘中国答卷’), *People’s Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 8, 2020,

<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0508/c1003-31700285.html>; People's Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), "People's Daily Commentator: China's Epidemic Fight Can Be Called 'A Live Broadcast'," (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: Zhongguo Kangyi Kancheng 'Xianchang Zhibo'*; 人民日报评论员: 中国抗疫堪称'现场直播'), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 9, 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0509/c1003-31701887.html>; People's Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), "People's Daily Commentator: 'Life Above All Else' Manifests Humanity's Glory," (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: 'Shengming Zhishang' Zhangxian Renxing Guanghui*; 人民日报评论员: "生命至上"彰显人性光辉), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 10, 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0510/c1003-31703142.html>; People's Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), "People's Daily Commentator: United People Win the 'People's War'," (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: Wanzhongyixin Daying 'Renmin Zhanzheng'*; 人民日报评论员: 万众一心打赢'人民战争'), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 11, 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0511/c1003-31703476.html>; People's Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), "People's Daily Commentator: China's Support Is Evidence that 'The World Shares the Wind and Moon'," (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: Zhongguo Zhiyuan Jianzheng 'Fengyu tongtian'*; 人民日报评论员: 中国支援见证'风月同天'), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 12, 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0512/c1003-31704901.html>; People's Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), "People's Daily Commentator: Researching Hand-in-Hand to Put Shared Destiny into Practice," (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: Keyan Xieshou Jianxing Mingyunyugong*; 人民日报评论员: 科研携手践行命运与共), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 13, 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0513/c1003-31706514.html>; People's Daily Commentator (*Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan*; 本报评论员), "People's Daily Commentator: Chinese Products Help the Globe Fight the Pandemic," (*Renmin Ribao Benbao Pinglunyuanyuan: Zhongguo Chanpin Zhuli Quanqiu Kangyi*; 人民日报评论员: 中国产品助力全球抗疫), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), May 14, 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0514/c1003-31709364.html>.

¹²⁹ "Coronavirus: Countries Reject Chinese-Made Equipment," BBC, Mar. 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52092395>.

¹³⁰ Andrea Dudik and Radoslav Tomek, "Europe Turned to China for Coronavirus Testing Help. Why Some Are Now Regretting It," *Fortune*, Apr. 1, 2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/04/01/europe-china-coronavirus-testing-help-regret/>.

¹³¹ "China Using Aid to Build 'Mask Alliance' and Deflect Blame for Mishandling the Outbreak," May 1, 2020.

¹³² "Politicizing China's Foreign Assistance Does No Good for Global Efforts Against COVID-19," *People's Daily*, Apr. 1, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0401/c90000-9675037.html>. Similarly, a *China Daily* editorial denounced "diehard China-bashers" like the US secretary of state for "trying to politicize the small number of defective masks and test kits" that China has delivered to other countries. "Some Trying to Exploit Pandemic in Attempt to Revive Cold War," *China Daily*, Apr. 2, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/01/WS5e8484b2a310128217283b6e.html>.

¹³³ "Coronavirus: 3 Million Mouth Masks Don't Meet Quality Standards," *The Brussels Times*, Apr. 9, 2020, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/105704/coronavirus-3-million-mouth-masks-dont-meet-quality-standards/>.

¹³⁴ "Remark by Spokesperson of the Embassy of China in Belgium," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Belgium, Apr. 12, 2020, <http://be.china-embassy.org/eng/sghd/t1768637.htm>.

¹³⁵ "MFA: Hype-Up of the So-Called Quality Issue of Chinese Products is Counterproductive to International Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Apr. 3, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/t1765850.shtml.

¹³⁶ Andy Blatchford, "Canada: 1 Million Respirators Acquired from China Unfit for Coronavirus Fight," *Politico*, Apr. 23, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/23/canada-china-respirators-coronavirus-205461>.

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²¹⁷ Li Yang, "How Long Will the Evil of Fort Detrick Sustain?!" Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Rio de Janeiro, June 5, 2020, <http://riodejaneiro.china-consulate.org/pot/gdxw/t1786000.htm>.

²¹⁸ Ambassade de Chine en France @AmbassadeChine, "Il n'y a aucune preuve pour étayer l'affirmation selon laquelle le nouveau coronavirus proviendrait d'un laboratoire. C'est un fait très clair. 2/4," Twitter, Aug. 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadeChine/status/1293177605328449537>. Earlier in March, the same account reposted a commentary article posted by the French-language version of CGTN that insinuated a connection between Fort Detrick and the outbreak. See: "Commentary: Three Questions the US Must Answer Related to the COVID-19 Outbreak" (Commentaire: Les Etats-Unis Doivent Répondre à Trois Questions Liées à l'Epidémie de COVID-19), CGTN Français, Mar. 22, 2020, <https://francais.cgtn.com/n/BfJAA-cA-FcA/BcdBcA/index.html>.

²¹⁹ For example, during a state visit to Norway, PRC FM Wang Yi asserted that although China was the first country to report detect the new virus, that "does not mean that the novel coronavirus epidemic originated in China." "No Factual Basis to Blame China for One's Own Ineffective Response to COVID-19: Chinese FM," Xinhua, Aug. 29, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/29/c_139325684.htm. During a UN Security Council debate in late September, ambassador Zhang Jun, China's permanent representative to the UN, denounced the US President's assertion that China should be held responsible for the pandemic as "baseless accusations" and "disinformation." "Ambassador Zhang Jun Solemnly Refutes the Vicious Attacks by the US at the UN Security Council."

²²⁰ Bill Gertz, "Coronavirus May Have Originated in Lab Linked to China's Biowarfare Program," *The Washington Times*, Jan. 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/26/coronavirus-link-to-china-biowarfare-program-poss/>. Of note, an editor's note was added to the article two months after it was published with the following disclaimer: "Since this story ran, scientists outside of China have had a chance to study the SARS-CoV-2 virus. They concluded it does not show signs of having been manufactured or purposefully manipulated in a lab, though the exact origin remains murky and experts debate whether it may have leaked from a Chinese lab that was studying it."

²²¹ For example, an unnamed US official is quoted as having told *The Washington Times* in late January that "false rumors circulating on the Chinese internet claim the virus is part of a US conspiracy to spread germ weapon." The official went on to suggest that these rumors "could indicate China is preparing propaganda outlets to counter any charges that the new coronavirus escaped from one of Wuhan's civilian or defense research laboratories." Ibid.

²²² The report noted on 22 February that "various conspiracy theories" about the virus were spreading in Chinese cyberspace, including the idea that US participants of the October 2019 Military World Games held in Wuhan could have carried it into China. The report further quoted a Chinese international relations professor as dismissing such rumors and "urging the public to rely more on facts." Hu Yuwei and Zhang Han, "US CDC Refutes TV Asahi Story, Claiming No Evidence Shows Flu Deaths in US Were Caused by Coronavirus," *Global Times*, Feb. 22, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1180415.shtml>. Reposted by *People's Daily* at: "Japanese TV Report Sparks Speculations in China that COVID-19 May Have Originated in US," *People's Daily*, Feb. 23, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0223/c90000-9661026.html>.

²²³ See, for example: "China Focus: Pangolins a Potential Intermediate Host of Novel Coronavirus: Study," Xinhua, Feb. 7, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/07/c_138764153.htm; Wang Xiaodong, "Virus Likely Originated from Wild Animals, Experts Say," *China Daily*, Jan. 21, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/21/WS5e266cb4a310128217272837.html>; Zhang Hao, "Tracing the Virus," CGTN, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-10/Tracing-the-virus-NYB93tDLLG/index.html>.

²²⁴ “COVID-19 First Discovered in China, Does Not Mean It Originated Here: Respiratory Specialist,” Xinhua, Feb. 27, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/27/c_138824360.htm.

²²⁵ Wang Qi and Xu Keyue, “COVID-19 ‘May Not Originate in China,’” *Global Times*, Feb. 28, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1181005.shtml>.

²²⁶ Commercial data aggregator, “Amplify, Blame, Censor, Repeat: Seizing Control of COVID-19 Narratives,” July 9, 2020.

²²⁷ PRC officials had used this term before in the context of the pandemic, just not directly about assertions that the virus originated in China. See, for example: “Chinese Ambassador to US Warns Against ‘Political Virus,’” CGTN, Feb. 2, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-02/Chinese-ambassador-to-U-S-warns-against-political-virus--NLltgqOgc8/index.html>.

²²⁸ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on March 4, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mar. 4, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1752172.shtml. A day earlier, Xinhua published a commentary article in English slamming the “rumors and lies” that the virus came from a Chinese lab as a “political virus.” See: “Commentary: Fighting the Virus, Let Science Silence Lies,” Xinhua, Mar. 3, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/03/c_138840084.htm.

²²⁹ CNA, “PRC Media Brief: PRC Diplomat Promotes COVID-19 Conspiracy as Part of Larger Info Campaign,” Mar. 17, 2020, OSE Product ID: CHW2020031811393283.

²³⁰ “Someone Posted a Petition to White House Website: Make Public the ‘Real Reason’ the US’ Largest Bioweapons Base Was Closed, Explain Clearly Whether or Not There Was a Virus Leak,” (*You Ren Zai Baigong Wangzhan Faqi Qingyuan: Gongbu Mei Zui Da Huawu Jidi Biguan ‘Zhenzhen Yuanyin,’ Chengqing Shifou Cunzai Bingdu Xielou*; 有人在白宫网站发起请愿: 公布美最大化武基地关闭‘真正原因’, 澄清是否存在病毒泄漏), *Global Times*, (*Huanqiu Shibao*; 环球时报), Mar. 11, 2020, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/3xNQH4KWfKa>; BZ, “We the People - Petition for Information of Fort Detrick,” The White House, Mar. 10, 2020, <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petition-information-fort-detrack-1>.

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²³² See, for example: Steven Lee Myers, “China Spins Tale That the US Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/asia/coronavirus-china-conspiracy-theory.html>; Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, “Chinese Diplomat Promotes Conspiracy Theory that US Military Brought Coronavirus to Wuhan,” CNN, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>; Branford Betz, “Chinese Foreign Ministry Suggests US Army to Blame for Coronavirus Pandemic,” Fox News, Mar. 12, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/chinese-foreign-ministry-us-army-blame-coronavirus>.

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²³⁴ “Coronavirus Crisis Alerts: Beijing Champions Its Relief Efforts as Anti-US Rumors Continue to Spread,” Mar. 16, 2020.

²³⁵ “US Urged to Release Health Info of Military Athletes Who Came to Wuhan in October 2019.” The rumor appears to have been started by a US conspiracy theorist who also drew attention to Fort Detrick as a possible source of COVID-19.

²³⁶ Zachary Basu, “Pompeo Says There's 'Enormous Evidence' Coronavirus Originated in Wuhan Lab,” *Axios*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/pompeo-coronavirus-wuhan-lab-5f305526-9ceb-49af-943a-fd8291a6d5d9.html>; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 6, 2020.”

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²⁵² “Someone Posted a Petition to White House Website: Make Public the 'Real Reason' the US' Largest Bioweapons Base Was Closed, Explain Clearly Whether or Not There Was a Virus Leak.”

²⁵³ “Concern Regarding US Fort Detrick Laboratory as COVID-19 Wreaks Havoc,” (Preocupación con respecto al laboratorio Fort Detrick de EE. UU. mientras COVID-19 causa estragos), CGTN en Español, CGTN en Español, May 19, 2020, <https://espanol.cgtn.com/n/2020-05-19/DJBEIA/preocupacion-con-respecto-al-laboratorio-fort-detrick-de-eeuu-mientras-covid-19-causa-estragos/index.html>; China Face, “Did COVID-19 Really Come from a Lab?” (Wīṛāś kho wid-19 ħlud mā cāk ħxng pṭibātikār cring ħrūx; ไวรัสโควิด-19 หลุดมาจากห้องปฏิบัติการจริงหรือ), Facebook, July 7, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinafacecriThai/videos/326694272062902/>.

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²⁵⁵ Zha Zha Dao (渣渣刀) and Qiao Qiao Dao (锹锹刀), “Bu Yi Dao: Is There a Connection Between the US Military's Fort Detrick and Unit 731?” (*Buyidao: Meijun Detelike Bao, He 731 Budui You Guanxi?* 补壹刀: 美军德特里克堡, 和 731 部队有关系?), *China Daily*, (*Zhongguo Ribao*; 中国日报), May 21, 2020, <http://world.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/21/WS5ec5f1fca310eec9c72ba6e3.html>. In his essay calling for the US to allow an international investigation into Fort Detrick, the PRC consul general in Rio de Janeiro also discussed Fort Detrick's historical connection with Imperial Japan's notorious Unit 731 bioweapons program, arguing that the US fort “inherited the ‘devil's legacy’” of the Japanese army's human experiments. Li Yang, “How Long Will the Evil of Fort Detrick Sustain?!”

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²⁵⁹ Xi Jinping, “Fighting COVID-19 Through Solidarity and Cooperation, Building a Global Community of Health for All,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 18 May, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1780221.shtml.

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²⁶⁵ See, for example "Lessons from China's COVID-19 Response," *Daily News Egypt*, May 30, 2020, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2020/05/30/lessons-from-chinas-covid-19-response/>; Xinhua, "High-Level China-Africa Meeting Calls for Deepening Cooperation Against COVID-19 Pandemic," *Daily News Egypt*, Aug. 11, 2020, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2020/08/11/high-level-china-africa-meeting-calls-for-deepening-cooperation-against-covid-19-pandemic/>. Note that some of these are straight reposts of Xinhua reports, others are articles authored by Chinese SMEs, and others do not source Xinhua but parrot PRC talking points.

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COVID-19 vaccines into a global public good. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic still poses a severe threat to the safety and health of people in all countries. China continues to focus on ensuring that developing countries have equal access to appropriate, safe and effective vaccines. To that end, we have solemnly pledged to make vaccines developed and deployed by China a global public good, which will be provided to developing countries as a priority. Therefore, China has maintained close communication with COVAX with a positive attitude towards joining it. Even when China is leading the world with several vaccines in advanced stages of R&D and with ample production capacity, it still decided to join COVAX. We are taking this concrete step to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines, especially to developing countries, and hope more capable countries will also join and support COVAX. China will also strengthen vaccine cooperation with relevant countries through the COVAX network. You asked whether China will provide vaccines for COVAX. As President Xi Jinping explicitly stated, COVID-19 vaccine development and deployment in China, when available, will be made a global public good. This will be China's contribution to ensuring vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries. To implement these measures, the Chinese government supports Chinese vaccine R&D companies in participating in COVAX and providing vaccines for developing countries through this channel, and we have been assisting their effort. As far as I know, multiple Chinese vaccine enterprises have expressed to COVAX their willingness to participate. Experts of the two sides are in close communication regarding the vaccine R&D, certification, regulation and other technical standards. We will continue to work together with COVAX partners and contribute our share to the global fight against the pandemic to safeguard all human beings' safety and health." "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on October 9, 2020."

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in traditional allies of the US like the UK, France, Germany, Japan and the ROK, approval ratings for the US all reduced to historical lows.” Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on October 9, 2020.”

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