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*Global Health Security*

## **China's Medical Diplomacy: How to Turn a Black Swan White**

*By Frederick Kliem*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The global spread of COVID-19 exposes the strong nationalistic tendency in the European Union and the United States and – ironically – provides China with a unique opportunity to shine.*

### **COMMENTARY**

ON 17 MARCH 2020, Serbian leader Aleksandar Vucic [said](#) that his people lost belief in the existence of European solidarity, which he called “a fairy tale on paper”. Only his “friend Xi Jinping” and China could and would help to manage the COVID-19 crisis.

As ironic as this is – it was ostensibly China where the now global health crisis started – Beijing is supporting in particular Europe and Africa to manage the pandemic. As a result, the COVID-19 crisis may turn out to be one of those black swan moments that change international relations.

### **A Friend in Need**

After the first wave of COVID-19 infections subsided in Asia, attention turned to Europe where the outbreak is currently hitting EU members harder than it has ever hit most Asian countries. Italy and Spain are suffering in particular and became the world's second and third most affected countries after China.

While Italy went into lock-down, spontaneous public outbreaks of community solidarity was something to hold on to. Intra-societal solidarity, however, was not at all matched

by European solidarity. To the contrary, as soon as the crisis hit, EU members switched into unilateral nationalist gear.

On EU-level, the otherwise non-negotiable “four freedoms” (of goods, capital, services and people) were jettisoned immediately, as the border-less Schengen area was de facto abandoned. And when Rome asked its European “friends” for help with medical equipment, other capitals went fully protectionist and decreed export bans on such goods, forsaking the EU single-market.

It is remarkable how quickly lofty EU ideals and institutions unravel as soon as a crisis strikes the continent. It seems that Beijing has identified the global COVID-19 emergency as a unique opportunity to rectify its poor reputation in the world.

Now that the situation appears to be under control domestically, Beijing is selling and donating medical supplies around the globe, in Europe, the US and Africa, and millions of facemasks and test-kits went to Italy alongside medical experts to support the devastated Italy.

It helps a great deal that Chinese experts have SARS-CoV2 experience and much of the global medical supplies now most desperately needed around the world are produced in China. Beijing can simply order its manufactures to ramp-up production far beyond domestic needs and pandemic relief efforts become fairly low-cost.

### **Soft-Power and Global Leadership**

In contrast to hard-power, [soft-power](#) is the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than to coerce them to do what they may not do otherwise.

While a risen China already has the largest economy in PPP terms and a growing military power, Beijing has lacked soft-power, especially in the West. The prominent professor Don Emmerson once said that we must invent an antonym to soft-power to describe China’s global influence beyond economics and military power; repulsion rather than attraction is what he meant.

The Chinese COVID-19 aid offensive is a chance for Beijing to reposition itself. And it can become a game-changer in the way China is perceived in this context: from the authoritarian regime that incubated a global epidemic to a responsible international stakeholder and provider of global goods at a moment of crisis.

Meanwhile, China’s peer-competitor in Washington is turning inward. Like many, President Trump has been caught off-guard and in the early stages of election-mode. Instead of assuming global leadership at a moment of crisis, Trump engaged in scapegoating, calling SARS-CoV2 the “China virus”, and tried to acquire a German company working on a vaccine, to ensure exclusive US rights to the product.

While President Trump is retreating into “America First”, China is attempting to fill this crisis-leadership vacuum. Only a few months ago, amidst public discontent and outrage over the authoritarian disadvantage in handling such crises, COVID-19 seemed to become Xi Jinping’s Watergate-moment.

Now, the utter failure in Europe and the US to prevent community spread provides the Chinese leadership with an opportunity to change the narrative for good, to consolidate at home and rise to leadership status abroad.

## **Swing of the Pendulum**

The large export-based EU economies had long prioritised trade with China over anything else. Lately, however, it seemed that the EU was heeding calls by its transatlantic partner to challenge China more on trade and good governance issues. The EU Commission for the first time [called China a “systemic rival”](#) and vowed to take a more robust stance towards Beijing.

Beijing responded by seeking closer relations with EU members by, inter alia, including as many European countries as possible into Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi is also touting China’s governance and trade model in contrast to the protectionist nationalist in the White House.

Of course, a great majority of European leaders still prioritise their transatlantic over Eurasian relations. But China’s skilful exploitation of the COVID-19 black-swan will certainly impact the mood among many Europeans, perhaps even swing it in some communities.

While COVID-19 will not swing the political pendulum fully in China’s favour, increases in relative soft-power vis-à-vis Washington and Brussels go a long way. Especially in the G-7 country Italy, the mood will certainly turn more favourable towards China at the expense of continental and transatlantic relations.

Italy was the first major Western nation to sign up to the BRI and Beijing’s help in this crisis will strengthen those voices that advocate closer China relations despite American pressure.

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*Dr. Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)