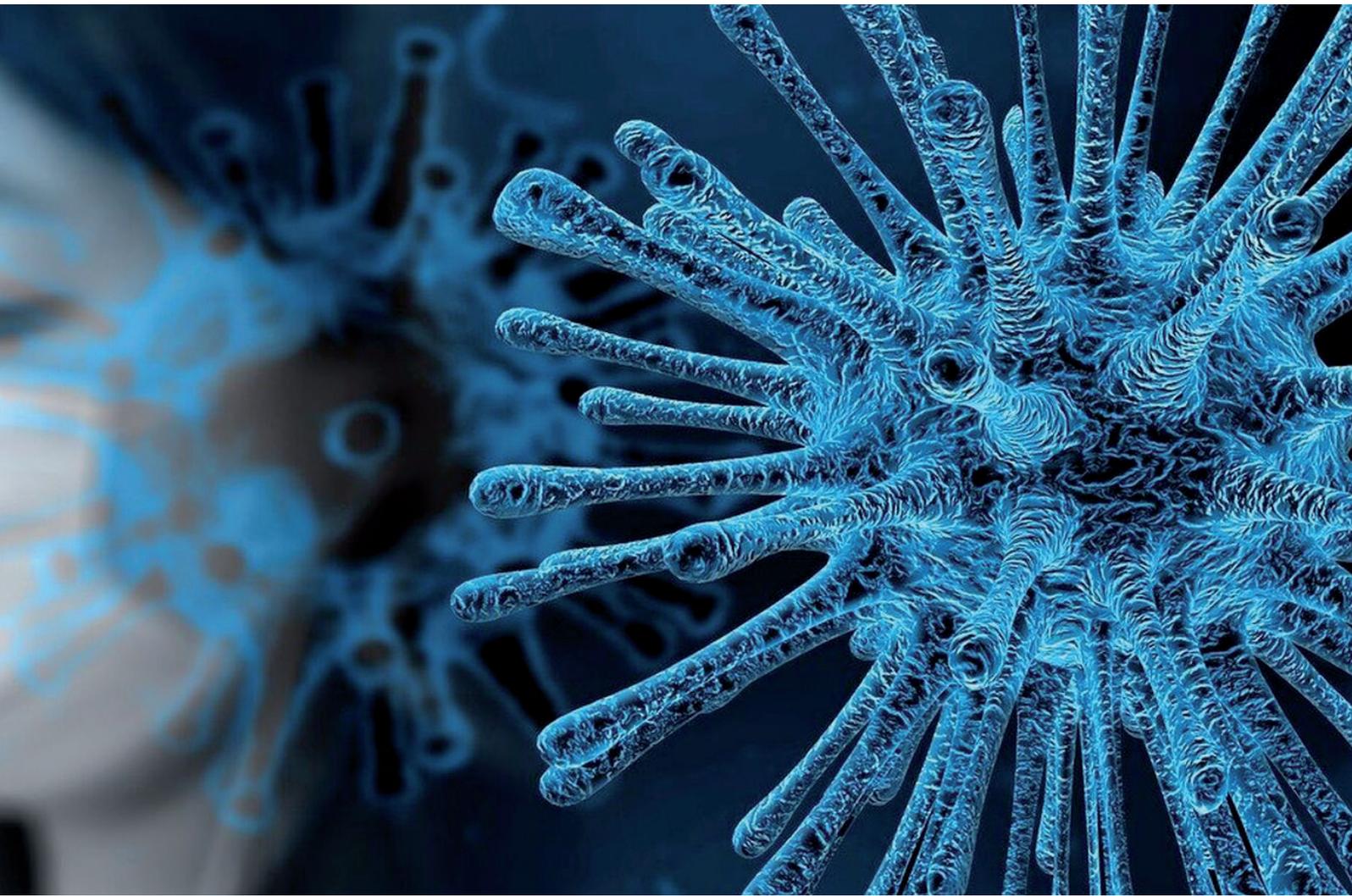


Covid-19 and Europe-China Relations

A country-level analysis



European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC)
Special Report - 29 April 2020



INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PRAGUE



Forum Aussenpolitik
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Covid-19 and Europe-China Relations

A country-level analysis

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European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC)

Special Report

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Introduction:

China as partner, competitor and rival amid Covid-19

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As Europe struggles with an existential crisis brought on by Covid-19, the complexities of its relations with China are on full display. While the crisis itself is unprecedented in many ways, it is also the first time that China has figured so prominently on an issue of such immediately critical importance to European citizens, governments, and the European project more broadly. As such, China has become a conspicuous part of public and policy debates around Covid-19 across much of the continent. The way that relations with China evolve over the course of the current crisis, and the debate around these relations, will more than likely have a lasting effect on the Europe-China relationship, long after the crisis has subsided. To begin to understand the dynamics at play, the chapters in this report provide country-specific analysis on these shifting relations within the context of Covid-19. They also seek to provide some indication of the broader impact on bilateral relations and their trajectories.

Before the crisis hit, relations with China had already grown more complex. What were largely commercially-driven relations a decade ago have now become more diverse, more (geo)political and more contested, as China's interests in Europe have grown considerably and China itself has become more competitive and more globally ambitious.¹ Just over one year ago, in March 2019, the European Commission and the External Action Service characterized China as a [partner, a competitor and a systemic rival](#). The chapters that follow attest to the veracity of this multi-faceted formula when it comes to Europe's relations with

1. Over the last five years, the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), which has put together the current report, has been analysing these changes through country-specific lenses in its annual reports – [mapping Europe-China relations](#) (2015), and looking at specific issues such as the "[Belt and Road](#)" (2016), [Chinese investment](#) (2017), [political values](#) (2018), and the US-China rivalry (2019 – published in January 2020) and their broader implications for Europe and its relations with China.

China on and around Covid-19. This was already supposed to be a defining year for Europe-China relations. Critical decisions are slated to be made on questions such as 5G licensing rules in Europe and a bilateral investment agreement between China and the EU, while in September 27 European heads of state and government are meant to sit down, for the first time collectively, with their Chinese counterpart in Leipzig, Germany. Now, 2020 is shaping up to be decisive on an even broader range of issues.

What this report is, and what it isn't

This report seeks to identify and underline key developments in bilateral relations between China and a wide range of European countries, and to highlight debates that these relations inspire across Europe within the context of the evolving health crisis. It is a collection of independent analyses from 19 countries meant to compare notes on country-level experiences and build on the annual reports of the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC).

The goal here is not to be exhaustive or definitive – indeed, the crisis is still unfolding across much of Europe and the globe, and the potential for change is still great. Rather, this report offers a marker in time and a window into some of the issues that will become increasingly important in Europe-China relationships in light of Covid-19.

Moreover, views from certain key partners in Europe are notably missing (including, for instance, Ireland, Croatia, or even non-EU member states in the Balkans). In particular, this report could be supplemented by an all-important analysis of interactions between European Union institutions and China on Covid-19. This would be particularly significant given the debate around European unity and the visibility of European officials such as the Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, and the high representative, [Josep Borrell](#), on China-related issues during the crisis. Recent media reports² have moreover revealed the pressures that China has placed on EU officials during the crisis, which also serve to highlight frictions within the EU over how to approach China. Furthermore, while it strives for objectivity, the report also takes a decidedly European point of view. Comparing the analyses below with similar analyses from a Chinese perspective on Europe-China relations would also be instructive.

2. See for instance reports in the [New York Times](#), [Politico](#) and the [Financial Times](#) on 24 and 25 April.

Key observations, and questions to explore further

The Covid-19 crisis has hit at a time when debates over the need to adopt more coherent strategies towards China have been emerging across Europe. In many ways, the current crisis has become a catalyst for a number of trends that have been shaping Europe-China relations in recent years, while in other ways it has turned the tables. It has simultaneously brought Europe and China into closer cooperation, pushed them further apart, and seemingly underlined the fractures that exist within Europe on how to approach an increasingly influential China.

- ***Covid-19 crisis assistance has been mutual, and commercial exchanges in medical supplies from China to Europe have far exceeded aid volumes.***

Many European countries were quick to organize support for China as the coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, with EU officials [noting](#) aid deliveries of over 50 tonnes of medical supplies in January. Europe's messaging at the time was largely muted, [according to reports](#), out of respect for Chinese requests to maintain a low profile.

In turn, Chinese assistance has arrived from multiple sources, including various levels of the Chinese government, state-owned enterprises, private companies, foundations, as well as connections resulting from local Chinese communities in Europe. Sister-city arrangements and the various local government connections made as a result of decentralized diplomacy are another feature noted in a number of chapters below. In many instances, there is also a correlation between Chinese companies with commercial interests in the country and donations from these companies, as noted in the cases of Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Spain, for instance. There are also notable similarities across a number of countries, where aid provided from China has been accompanied by messages tailored to local audiences – be they celebrated Portuguese poets or the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.

China has organized a number of video conferences with governments and health experts across Europe to share information about its experiences in fighting Covid-19, particularly related to medical and scientific aspects of combating the virus. It is worth noting that the first video conference was set up with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries – including non-EU member states – that make up the so-called “17+1”, with the interesting addition of Malta, on 13 March. The conference preceded those with other European counterparts by one week. One hypothesis behind this scheduling (see the chapter on Latvia) is that Beijing sought to provide CEE countries with a tangible deliverable of the 17+1 format that, for many participating governments, is losing its appeal.

While aid and “mask diplomacy” has been a key feature of the discussion, it is important to note that commercial deliveries of medical supplies from China have far exceeded aid volumes. While instances of defective supplies from China have also entered the discussion, this does not seem to have fundamentally altered the debate (see for example the case of Spain). Privileged access to Chinese suppliers as a result of high-level political contacts or “strategic partnerships” has also become a talking point for many European national governments, from Germany to Poland to the Czech Republic.

- ***China’s public diplomacy has gone into overdrive. It appears well coordinated, with varying degrees of dogmatism, divisiveness and moderation.***

Chinese embassies and ambassadors across Europe have become highly visible, both on social media and in traditional media, as the Covid-19 crisis has expanded across the continent. Some Chinese official social media accounts were only created in the last year and have become active during the current crisis.

Drawing from the chapters below, key messages tend to fall into four categories: 1) highlighting solidarity and aid; 2) calling for international unity; 3) promoting China’s fight against Covid-19 as a success story, and in some cases (for instance in France) blaming Western democracies for their poor management or even responsibility in the spread of the pandemic; 4) countering narratives critical of China, including through sowing doubt about the origins of Covid-19.

While China’s increasingly proactive public diplomacy is widespread, and there appears to be a relative degree of consistency in messaging, there is a diversity in method that ranges from low key (see Latvia or Romania) to charm offensive (see Poland, Portugal, Italy or Spain) to provocative or aggressive (see Sweden, Germany or France). The degree of variation is worth considering further. Could this be due, for instance, to different [styles or ways of thinking](#) within the Chinese foreign ministry or Party-state apparatus more broadly, or does it reflect a consciously constructed approach formulated on a reading of target audiences and the state of bilateral relations with each country?

Some countries (for example France and Germany) have pushed back on the more provocative elements of China’s messaging by summoning the Chinese ambassador and/or making public statements that serve to challenge the Chinese narrative.

- ***Relations with China amid Covid-19 have fuelled internal political discord in some countries, while also highlighting divisions within Europe.***

The cases of Italy and the Czech Republic are illustrative of how, in some countries in Europe, relations with China have become an important, even divisive topic of political debate. Still, these cases do not appear to be the rule across Europe, or at least not yet. The political ramifications of the crisis brought on by Covid-19 are far from clear, but the populist politics that have swept Europe in recent years is not likely to disappear, and may rather be strengthened, particularly if the severe economic crisis proves protracted.

Already, China's assistance in fighting Covid-19, particularly in early to mid-March, as the virus was breaking out on the continent, was seen by some to provide a stark contrast to the inaction and lack of unity within Europe at the time. It is not the first time that China has been used as a domestic political lever against the European project and it is likely that it will not be the last. As noted in the chapter on Portugal, for instance, Covid-19 has served to highlight Europe's North-South divide in the minds of many, giving a sense of "déjà-vu" from the saga that resulted from the 2008 financial crisis. At the same time, Covid-19 has also sparked xenophobia and anti-Chinese sentiment in Europe as well (the point is illustrated in the case of Italy, for instance) that could further drive right-wing populist narratives (see for instance the case of Vox in Spain).

In effect, China's actions towards Europe in this time of crisis and disagreements within Europe over how to manage relations with Beijing, could further amplify the fractures across the continent. At the same time, it cannot be excluded that, as time wears on, China will prove a catalyst for the emergence of a more "geopolitical Europe". As China has recently been a spark for common European initiatives on issues such as investment screening, 5G and industrial policy, it could also prove to be an external factor in fuelling collective European action in a post-Covid-19 world.

- ***Is a rebalancing of Europe's relations with China in the making?***

As many of the chapters in this report have shown, necessity has proven to be a powerful driver in promoting cooperation with China in the fight against Covid-19. Even countries that have seen their relations with China sour in recent years have found a reason to strengthen those relations in a time of crisis. For many governments in Europe, the mid-term solution to the Covid-19 crisis (and the longer-term prevention of similar outbreaks) must pass through multilateral action, which highlights China's role as a partner and further necessitates a

degree of cooperation, despite the concerns that have been raised over China's growing influence in international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Whereas the age of "naiveté" towards China may be declared over, this does not mean that China won't be a partner in dealing with important global issues. At the same time, China's emphasis on a "Health silk road", which was originally proposed in 2015 but has taken on added visibility amid the current crisis, could complicate matters. Even among countries such as Italy, which signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China on its Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, issues such as data privacy regarding healthcare will prove to be important roadblocks.

Indeed, the chapters in this report also indicate that more contentious, structural issues, including some that have been exacerbated by Covid-19, loom around the corner. Already, some, for example Germany and Sweden, have moved to strengthen investment screening measures out of concerns that foreign, particularly Chinese firms may seek to take advantage of Europe's economic distress to acquire strategic assets. This demonstrates a persistent level of wariness and distrust of China in many corners of Europe.

Dependence on China for medical supplies, now clearly demonstrated as being a strategic sector, has also become a topic of debate in much of Europe. In the wake of this crisis, Europe will have to engage in further conceptual discussions on the nature and terms of dependence in strategic industries, and this will also necessitate a debate on the nature of Europe's relationship with China.

Finally, US-China frictions have not been absent from the Covid-19 crisis in Europe (as well as at the multilateral level, for instance within the G7). European countries have resisted the confrontational language and stance of the Trump administration, particularly on Covid-19, but this does not mean that US diplomatic pressure has not been prevalent in some countries, as shown in the case of Romania and the Netherlands. In Sweden as well, American and Chinese diplomats have been trading barbs over the responsibility for the crisis. As examined in ETNC's latest report on [Europe in the face of US-China rivalry](#), US-China frictions will be a structural factor weighing on Europe's relations with China as it seeks to forge a balance of interests in dealing with the post-Covid-19 challenges to come.

Austria: A non-confrontational road to European economic sovereignty?

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While the Covid-19 crisis has not induced a restructuring of Sino-Austrian relations, it might intensify Austria's European engagement regarding China. The rather non-confrontational position held by the Chinese embassy in Austria has been matched by Austria's perpetuation of its longstanding policy of neutrality. Yet, in parallel to its conciliatory stance toward China, the Austrian government has begun to take concrete measures to protect European interests.

China's official messaging: more classical, less confrontational than elsewhere in Europe

Over the course of the Covid-19 crisis, the Alpine Republic, and later China, have provided mutual assistance to one another by way of personal protection equipment (PPE) shipments. Donations have been made by the respective governments and by private actors, such as Austria's Chinese community, Chinese companies with business interests in Austria and vice versa.

China's PPE donations to Austria have further been accompanied by a comprehensive communication campaign. However, compared to other European countries, such as [France](#), the discourse of the Chinese embassy in Austria has so far been less confrontational. In Austria, activity on Twitter from official Chinese accounts has predominantly persisted in what Alžběta Bajerová defines as the [Chinese way](#): "[...] re-writing the reality with positive news". The reason for this may lie in the largely non-confrontational attitude of China's ambassador to Austria compared to some [Chinese ambassadors in other European countries](#).

Nevertheless, the Chinese embassy in Austria has sought to adapt China's official narrative to the Austrian context. In this regard, the Twitter accounts of the Chinese ambassador and of the Chinese embassy in Austria have been

increasingly used to relay China's perspective, as well as to respond to specific developments in Austria. In that regard, China's official communication in Austria aimed first at minimizing the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis for China and subsequently at portraying donations as a sign of solidarity and deepening cooperation between both countries. The Chinese ambassador, Li Xiaosi, notably promoted during 'donation ceremonies' the contributions made by the Chinese community as well as Chinese companies to Austria. While these contributions seem to have emerged organically, they have been incorporated into China's public diplomacy campaign.

Furthermore, analogous to [previous cases](#) of Chinese foreign aid, China's communication campaign has also focused on its domestic audience. In Austria, the Chinese embassy has distributed masks to Chinese students via the local Chinese Students and Scholars Associations. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [portrayed](#) this as an initiative by the CCP's Central Committee, which may be viewed as a bid to foster political support from Chinese students abroad. Furthermore, as for [other](#) European countries, expressions of gratitude by Austrian officials for Chinese PPE donations have been widely [propagated](#) in Chinese media.

Between Austria's noticeable silence on China and its push for greater European autonomy

Contrary to the increased engagement of Chinese diplomats, the Austrian government has distinguished itself through its noticeable silence toward China. It is noteworthy that the call between Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Premier Li Keqiang on 27 March was widely publicized by China through an [official statement](#) and several social-media posts, while the Austrian government did not mention it. Furthermore, the Austrian economy minister Margarete Schramböck [abstained from openly singling out China](#) when confronted with reports of deficiencies in the quality of mask imports from China. Austria's reticence symbolizes the continuation of a policy of neutrality regarding US-China rivalry.¹ This is further exemplified by the [announcement](#) that telecom providers in Austria will be able to choose whether to employ Huawei or not in the country's 5G roll-out. Furthermore, similar to how [economic dependence](#) has pressured European governments to adopt an accommodating stance towards China, Austria's

1. Adam Urosevic, "Austria and the growing US-Chinese rivalry: from cold-war neutrality to European Solidarity?", in Mario Esteban and Miguel Otero (eds.), "Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry", Report by European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), January 2020, p. 35-38.

dependence on Chinese PPE imports² is likely to have participated in shaping the Austrian government's conciliatory stance towards China during the Covid-19 crisis.

However, this diplomatic silence is contrasted by the Austrian government's [push](#) for greater autonomy in the procurement of pharmaceutical products. In this context, Austria, collectively with other European countries, [welcomed](#) the EU Commission's new industrial strategy, echoing its call to reduce the external dependence of European value chains to ensure common sovereignty. Furthermore, following the EU Commission's [guidelines on reinforcing FDI screening regulations](#), which were published on 25 March, during the Covid-19 crisis, the Austrian minister of the economy [announced](#) comprehensive investment control measures directed at protecting critical infrastructure. In conclusion, although the current crisis has not led to a major reversal of Austria's rather neutral stance toward China, it might reveal itself as a catalyst for an invigorated protection of European interests in the future.

2. According to an [article](#) by the research platform, Addendum, 18 of 19 cargo flights transporting medical supplies to Austria between the 27 March and 10 April came from China.

Bulgaria: Limited dependence on medical supplies from China, but proactive Chinese public diplomacy

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China has offered assistance to Bulgaria amid the Covid-19 pandemic and is retooling this aid to serve its public diplomacy. However, Chinese donations are considerably smaller than the volume and value of medical equipment commercially obtained from Chinese producers. Furthermore, Bulgaria is considering either diversifying its sources of medical supplies or boosting the local production of relevant items.

Cooperation between Bulgaria and China on the Covid-19 pandemic

At the initial stage of the outbreak in Hubei province, Bulgarian government officials expressed [sympathy](#) to China. However, two months later, closer cooperation was necessitated by the spread of the pandemic into Europe. On 18 March 2020, Bulgarian prime minister Boyko Borisov and Li Keqiang spoke by phone and the Chinese premier stated that [Beijing stood ready to help](#) by sharing its containment experience with Sofia, and facilitating the purchase of Chinese personal protective equipment (*PPE*) and medical supplies by Bulgaria.

It is in this context that 12,000 disposable masks and 2,000 special masks were donated to Bulgaria by the Government of Jiangxi Province and the China-Europe Association for Economic and Technical Cooperation. In addition, Chinese

1. The authors express their warm gratitude to Mariana Trifonova, Senior Analyst at the Economic Policy Institute in Sofia, for her suggestions and comments on the report.

assistance has included the donation of an undisclosed amount of masks, goggles and gloves, delivered on 16 April 2020. Huawei Technologies Bulgaria Ltd. has also donated [150,000 masks to the Bulgarian Red Cross](#). Notably, a small amount of masks, gloves and protective suits have been donated by the 'Chinese community in Bulgaria' to four hospitals.

With regard to purchases, Bulgaria's government has placed orders for approximately 1.2 million KN95 disposable masks worth EUR 1.4 million and 50 respirators at the cost of EUR 1.5 million, with relevant resources provided by the EU through the European Regional Development Fund. Another contract relates to the purchase of 1 million KN95 masks worth EUR 1.7 million. The government has decided to [shoulder the transportation cost](#) of commercially obtained supplies and donations from China. [Two draft contracts](#) with China's National Pharmaceutical Corporation for Foreign Trade have been approved for the delivery of: (i) more than 170,000 packs of Hydroxychloroquine Sulfate 100 mg tablets worth nearly USD 600,000, and (ii) 30,000 packs of Azithromycin 250 mg dispersible tablets worth some USD 46,000.

Experts from the Bulgarian Health Ministry took part in a 17+1 video conference on 13 March 2020 aimed at sharing China's containment experience, but the event was hardly covered by the local media. While China's expertise in combating the pandemic has definitely been seen as useful, the most commonly referenced models in Bulgaria are South Korea, Germany and Israel.

Bulgaria does not depend exclusively on China as a source of pandemic-related equipment. The government is in the process of ordering 30,000 real-time test kits from South Korea, while other supplies are expected from Turkey, Qatar, Vietnam and India. Bulgaria also aims at partially meeting the domestic demand for PPE for frontline medics by swiftly mobilising local apparel and textile companies. In addition, the shortage of medical supplies, e.g. protective masks and clothing, in Europe is seen as an opportunity for the Bulgarian industrial sector, with a number of European countries seeking diversification. This is why Bulgaria is planning to participate as a supplier in EU procurement deals, as well as to revive its pharmaceutical industry.

China's public diplomacy in Bulgaria

Beijing has engaged in proactive public diplomacy in Bulgaria, both at the intergovernmental level and within the country. Apparently, the Bulgarian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce is behind the donation by the 'Chinese community', and there are plans for the [provision of future supplies](#) through the PRC embassy in Sofia. The Chinese community's donation has been presented on national television. In a TV interview, the Chinese representative acknowledged

that some Bulgarians viewed the pandemic as a “Chinese virus”, but stated that it was not clear where Covid-19 had originated, reiterating a theory favoured by some in Beijing that [the virus had been fabricated in a laboratory](#) in the United States.

Another TV channel has aired messages of solidarity recorded by Chinese citizens. All the speakers are from Chinese educational and cultural institutions, including the Confucius Institute in Sofia, with the [messages](#) following a common template, e.g. “Hold on, Bulgaria” carved along the lines of the “Keep going, Wuhan” slogan.

While the European Commission has approved approximately BGN 4 billion (EUR 2 billion) for Bulgaria as contingency EU funding, this fact was not extensively covered by the national media, until Radio Free Europe (Svobodna Evropa) published a [detailed analysis of EU actions](#) in an effort to combat the lack of information and even deliberate disinformation.

Impact of the pandemic on Sino-Bulgarian relations

The level of awareness about China’s role in the world is relatively low in Bulgaria, as there are no historical links between the two nations. Shortly after the Covid-19 outbreak, elements of prejudice and some anti-Chinese sentiments emerged, mostly in the form of reluctance to engage with Chinese nationals or other Asians in public spaces. Chinese restaurants were closed even before the state of emergency was introduced due to a lack of customers, as people feared they might get infected.

Business and political elites in Bulgaria acknowledge China’s economic potential and international standing. At the same time, the volume of China’s investment in the country is extremely limited, compared to its investment in other EU member states or the 17+1 area. Moreover, the foreign policy and security priorities of the current Bulgarian government are determined predominantly by its European and transatlantic commitments. So far, the Covid-19 crisis has not led to a noticeable shift of Bulgaria’s stance in favour of China.

Czechia: Covid-19 puts China at centre of increasingly divisive national debate

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The Covid-19 crisis in the Czech Republic has not been nearly as serious as in many corners of Europe, in terms of both numbers of infections and deaths. With regards to China, the case of Czechia so far demonstrates the current difficulties that China faces in improving its soft power, and the uncertain effects of those attempts. The Covid-19 pandemic found Czechia unprepared, despite its abundant China-critical media that have regularly reported on the severity of the situation in China. When the first few cases of infection arrived in early March with Czech tourists returning from Italy, the public debate on China was preoccupied with the scandal of the Chinese embassy making [threats of economic retaliation](#) in reaction to the Czech Senate Speaker Jaroslav Kubera's scheduled trip to Taiwan. As a result, the Senate, the opposition parties, and even Premier Andrej Babiš himself, [called for the replacement](#) of Ambassador Zhang Jianmin.

Czech aid to China, despite concerns over domestic supply

The first Czech political debates on Covid-19 that appeared with the outbreak of the epidemic in China dealt with divergent opinions on the real spread and impact of the new disease, which was originally thought to have a similar level of mortality as the ordinary flu. The first urgent requests made by Czech state institutions and civic groups for medical supplies to be sent to China as it battled the epidemic were rejected by Premier Babiš due to limited domestic supply. The first humanitarian aid package, which the Czech Republic co-organised and co-financed together with Austria, Hungary and Slovenia, was shipped through Vienna airport directly to Wuhan at the end of January. The donation was co-organised and co-sponsored by the Office of the President, the Foreign Ministry, and corporate providers (Škoda Auto, PPF), and it was additionally supported by

an extra state financial aid (CZK 6 million) to the WHO. Donations from Czech regional and civic organisations were added to the shipment.

The Czech government's turn to China meets with local resistance

However, the outbreak of the infection in Czechia in March suddenly [changed the situation](#), as state institutions went on high alert in search of insufficient domestic resources for hospitals and healthcare staff. At the onset of the crisis it took several days to form the government crisis team of ministers and experts and solve the problem of institutional competency and the management of financial resources between several ministries. The shortage of respirators, face masks and other medical materials exposed the Ministry of Health to unprecedented pressure both within the government and from the opposition.

In light of the strenuous situation, the Babiš government [came together](#) with President Zeman and pro-Chinese political and lobby groups, who managed to arrange for one month's worth of Czech state-sponsored rescue supplies by using their [high-level contacts](#) in China, which helped to rapidly transport the supplies to Czechia. This political comeback of the previously denounced pro-Chinese lobby, which related to their dealings with the dubious CEFC group, quickly elevated the China links to the forefront. Yet, this change of status was met with fierce criticism claiming that the delivery was badly organised, that the China-made materials were unfairly expensive, that their quality and health and safety standards were questionable, and that Premier Babiš, Minister of Interior Jan Hamáček, and Minister of Finance Alena Schillerová were shamefully televised "[kowtowing](#)" to China on the arrival of the first airplane with the urgently needed supplies in Prague Airport.

The Czech government explained the massive supply of medical equipment from China but did not highlight China's crisis management as a suitable model for the Czech case. Instead, the tough measures taken in [Taiwan and South Korea](#) were presented as more relevant for the [restrictive Czech policy](#), which imposed restraints on free movement, business closures, and mandatory use of face masks. Critical narratives have focused on a number of dimensions of the government's handling of the crisis and relations with China, pointing to serious economic and social consequences of this policy, the risk of misuse of power by the state, the poor coordination of crisis management, the acceptance of easy Chinese propaganda by the Czech government, and the dependence on Chinese supply chains, underscored by a deep mistrust of China-released data on the epidemic.

President Zeman officially gave thanks to the PRC in his public speech to the Czech nation on the coronavirus crisis, and the Chinese media circulated this praise of foreign aid. Yet medical supplies did not come for free, and critics compared this case with [Jack Ma's humanitarian aid](#) in other European states. The Chinese attempts to spread propaganda in Czechia, which is available on a limited number of pro-Russian and anti-EU websites, were strongly countered by influential, China-critical opinion makers from the media and a part of Prague's Sinological circles. Media reports referring to sources in the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) pointed to [mass purchases](#) of face masks and respirators conducted by the Chinese embassy and Chinese community members in Czechia in the first months of the crisis in China. The think-tank Sinopsis highlighted the issue of the demand for Chinese commercial supplies as an easy spread of "[propaganda](#)" in which China is portrayed as a saviour. The same source focused on Minister Hamáček's personal political and economic involvement in China as the relevant point in his crisis management of health supplies. Following Minister Hamáček's [insulting reply](#), soon after Czech Television aired an [investigative report](#) echoing the argument of Sinopsis by posting the Chinese buying masks and respirators and alleging a securitisation of "Chinese overseas epidemic war operation".

Toward greater strategic autonomy and reducing dependence on China

The liberal media environment in Czechia, unrestricted by the state of emergency, has opened the way for critical voices from a wide range of political orientations. [Facing criticism](#) for its alleged discrimination against domestic producers and its dependence on China, the government pointed to the timeline of the first days and weeks of the crisis, and the limited provisions of health materials that were not available anywhere other than in China. Meanwhile, Czech domestic research centres and small and medium-sized production units were able to develop a certain amount of nano-masks, respirators and other urgently needed equipment. The existing bureaucracy, however, delayed bringing the various domestic small suppliers into the state-level system. The support for self-sufficiency and preference for EU suppliers to balance the dependence on China has gained ground, and the Czech Senate (Upper House) recently [passed legislation](#) in this direction.

Besides the occasionally enhanced profile of China, it is interesting to note that the "side-winner" of the public diplomacy competition has been Taiwan, which presented itself as the country that successfully coped with the epidemic, and a provider of health material and know-how. The Covid-19 crisis in Czechia could hardly avoid being politicised and it thus revealed the Czech domestic trend

of divergent interests and polarised views on relations with the rising Asian power. The pro-Chinese narratives pointed to the urgency of the first Chinese supplies in March, while critical voices argued by warning about Chinese propaganda, accepting humiliating conditions and pointing to insufficient and even discriminatory policies towards domestic producers, [as was argued](#) in one of the most hard-hitting Czech television reports. Over the past two decades, polarised views on China in Czechia have caused very few major disputes on really relevant issues, but the Covid-19 crisis has put China front and centre. The need for strategic autonomy is becoming the common impetus for shaping at least some domestic consensus.

France: Between healthcare cooperation and political tensions with China amid Covid-19

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As the Covid-19 crisis has evolved, China and France have demonstrated mutual assistance and expressed their solidarity with each other in the face of the pandemic. However, their bilateral relations have also been tested, particularly as the Chinese embassy in Paris has made waves through a number of controversial public comments. The Covid-19 crisis reveals the officially strong and friendly bilateral relationship while at the same time highlighting the ideological gap between the two countries.

France's reaction to the epidemic's breakout, and assistance to China

At the beginning of the epidemic in China (in January and February), the Elysée, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and many members of the government and French politicians [expressed](#) their solidarity to China, and to the people of Wuhan. There were also several local initiatives to gather funds and resources to help China face the crisis.

President Macron first reached out to his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, to discuss Covid-19 on 20 January, as China prepared for lockdown measures. One of the first concerns for the Crisis Center of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was to arrange and secure the repatriation of French citizens in Wuhan who wished to return home. Two repatriation flights were arranged on 31 January and 2 February, and also welcomed foreign nationals, especially Europeans. Among the 254 passengers aboard the [second flight](#) were 64 French and 135 citizens from various EU countries.

Following a second phone call between the two presidents on 18 February, France expedited the delivery of 17 tonnes of medical supplies from its strategic stock (including, protective suits, gloves, hydro-alcoholic gels and some [560,000 face masks](#)) to Wuhan. Flying back to France, the A380 again [repatriated](#) French and European citizens to Paris.

China's support as France was hit by the pandemic

The first cases of Covid-19 in France appeared on 25 January. Three people who had been to Wuhan were discovered to be infected; two in Paris and one in Bordeaux. The number of cases and deaths started to increase drastically from late February and a nation-wide lockdown was declared starting on 17 March.

On 18 and 19 March, France received a "[solidarity freight](#)" from China, including one million face masks, which France was sorely lacking, 1.5 million gloves and 10,000 protection suits. Chinese companies and organizations also sent additional supplies to France.

Starting from 30 March, an airlift was established to deliver face masks from Shanghai to Paris, with the help of Air France. France's face mask orders from Chinese producers were "close to 2 billion" [according to](#) the French Minister of Health in early April.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs repeatedly [stated](#) that "just as France showed its full solidarity to China at the beginning of this crisis, France today is benefiting from China's solidarity".

An unprecedented offensive from the PRC embassy in France

The PRC embassy in France has played an unprecedented role in the media, actively promoting Beijing's narrative on social networks, on its website, and in the French media.

First, the embassy has been very active on Twitter. It opened its Twitter account in August 2019, as the new Ambassador, Lu Shaye, took office. However, it only became active on 4 February 2020, retweeting the Director General of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. It has been tweeting multiple times a day ever since, mainly on issues related to Covid-19. The embassy's activity raised concerns in March when it [spread rumors](#) and conspiracy theories implying that Covid-19 originated in the United States and was introduced to China by the US military – a narrative that other diplomats supported, including Zhao Lijian, an official spokesperson of China's MFA.

Second, the embassy published several op-ed-like, anonymous articles on its website, entitled "Observations of a Chinese diplomat stationed in Paris". Five of them were published between 22 March and 26 April. All of them, quite aggressively, aimed at "restoring distorted facts" presented by Western "media, politicians and experts" who intended to slander China. These papers blend together real facts with false or unfounded assertions, denigrating Western democracies' management of the crisis and pushing forward the official PRC narrative of success. The most aggressive [piece](#), for instance, published on 12 April, promoted (again) the theory that the virus may come from the US, accused French parliamentarians of having supported racist comments by Taiwanese authorities towards Mr. Tedros, and blamed European retirement home personnel for "abandoning their positions overnight, deserting collectively, and leaving their residents to die of hunger and disease".

Third, the embassy often commented on specific reports in the French media that it said were untrue and detrimental to China's image. In addition, Lu Shaye made multiple appearances in the French media to defend China's narrative. Notably, he gave four interviews to the news channel BFMTV between late February and late April.

The behavior of the Chinese embassy in France reflects Beijing's new diplomatic approach to public relations, a more proactive and aggressive one, dubbed "[Wolf Warrior](#)" diplomacy after a recent patriotic blockbuster film. This new approach has been witnessed in many countries these past two years, especially in Europe.

The French reaction and prospects

Generally speaking, the press coverage and government reactions in France toward China were quite positive during the first two months of the crisis. This seemed to have changed from late March. Debate on China's influence over the WHO, new information questioning the number of casualties in China, suspicion of geopolitical motives behind what has been called China's "mask diplomacy", as well as the aggressive stance taken by the PRC embassy, all contributed to a cooler, and sometimes hostile attitude toward China in France.

French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian [summoned](#) Ambassador Lu Shaye on 14 April to "express clearly my disapproval" of certain statements made, which "do not conform to the quality of the bilateral relationship between our two countries". The next day, during an [hearing](#) with Mr. Le Drian, French senators shared their discontent and concerns regarding the embassy's comments. Finally, regarding China's overall management of the crisis, President Macron, while avoiding a direct challenge to China's political

system, [declared](#) in an interview with the Financial Times on 16 April: “obviously, things that we don’t know have happened [in China].”

China and France have been cooperating since the start of the epidemic in China, as well as when France was under great pressure, notably due to its severe face mask shortage. However, the aggressive attitude of the PRC embassy in France is a new phenomenon that risks undermining the views of China in France, including within the government, and that could affect bilateral relations. This could, for instance, push France toward banning Huawei from the French 5G market.

In a broader perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to push further President Macron’s commitment to multilateralism and strategic autonomy. He has already repeatedly emphasized the need for multilateral cooperation in order to deal with the crisis, especially within the EU framework. This will necessitate a certain level of cooperation with China. The “strategic autonomy” concept that he has been promoting since 2017, meanwhile, seems even more inescapable today, as the pandemic is calling globalization into question. This will likely materialize in an increased self-reliance in industrial sectors, like healthcare supplies. As a result, France would, to some extent, reduce its reliance on the Chinese market.

Germany: Covid-19 a catalyst for current trends in relations with China

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Germany-China relations were already complicated before the global Covid-19 crisis. Both sides were busy preparing for government consultations in 2020 and a major “Leaders’ Meeting” in Leipzig this fall under the auspices of the German EU Council presidency. The aim of these meetings was to promote the partnership dimension of Germany-China and EU-China relations. At the same time, political relations were deteriorating not least because of growing German scepticism about Chinese policies concerning the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and large-scale human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Traditionally well-oiled business relations have also suffered setbacks recently. There is a growing debate also among business leaders about the (political) risks of doing business with Chinese partners.

Modalities of German Covid-19 cooperation with China

Germany-China communication at the senior political level reflects three priorities in their cooperation against Covid-19: research cooperation, rhetorical support for international solutions, and securing the supply of medical and personal protective equipment (PPE).

At the end of March, Chinese president Xi Jinping and German chancellor Angela Merkel used a [phone conversation](#) to agree on close scientific cooperation, especially with a view to developing a vaccine against Covid-19. A representative from Germany’s disease prevention and control agency, the Robert Koch Institute, [joined](#) the WHO Joint Mission to China in mid-February to enhance German understanding of the disease. Private sector companies have also joined

forces. German company BioNtech has [linked up](#) with Chinese pharmaceutical company Fosun to develop an mRNA vaccine against the coronavirus.

Both sides have also [helped](#) each other with business and government donations of medical supplies. In [contrast](#) to some other EU members, there was no excitement in Germany when Chinese deliveries arrived. The German chancellor [described](#) the donations as an act of reciprocity, referring to German and European support for China earlier this year. At the start of April, Merkel used her good relationship with the Chinese president to [secure](#) Germany access to Chinese PPE producers – in part outcompeting other European member states.

Dissemination of China's public diplomacy in Germany through diverse channels

China's outspoken ambassador in Germany, Wu Ken, has used several German-media appearances to [praise](#) China's crisis management and [reject](#) criticism of it. Calling for closer Sino-German cooperation on Covid-19, he stressed the Chinese system's ability to deal with the crisis and the need for a strong government hand to ensure a decisive response.

A "joint appeal on COVID-19" [released](#) by the CCP's International Liaison Department claimed to have brought together over 230 political parties from around 100 countries to endorse a coordinated crisis response. Germany's ruling centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was one of the parties asked to sign up.

The German government appears to have become aware of an "intensified propaganda policy" on the part of Beijing after China attempted to influence the perceptions of German government officials about Chinese crisis management by contacting them directly. The newspaper "Die Welt" [published](#) an [unconfirmed](#) story about a confidential German foreign ministry document. It called for vigilance and countermeasures in light of Chinese attempts to encourage German government officials to positively address China's handling of the coronavirus crisis.

The case of Heinsberg in Germany highlights the disturbing effects of Chinese public diplomacy efforts on social media. In March, the head of the Heinsberg district authority asked China to provide help to what was then the most heavily-virus hit county in Germany. His plea was widely broadcast by German media and quickly [came to stand](#) for bad initial crisis management at the German and European level. Having failed to get a swift response to a request for help from the German army, the district official saw a Chinese post on social media that [prompted him](#) to address a letter to Chinese president Xi Jinping. He asked for

the shipment of much-needed PPE to Heinsberg and immediately received a response from the relevant consulate. Deliveries of medical supplies followed.

Treatment of discussion on China in Germany

German media and political debates generally distinguish clearly between the different roles China is playing in this crisis. China is seen as the source of the problem, as discussed below; as a country that tightly controls information and so responded slowly to the outbreak in December; as a source of crisis-response support; as a partner for developing joint solutions against the virus; and as a geopolitical actor trying to increase its influence within the EU.

Like in other European countries, some stakeholders and media outlets in Germany are outspoken about blaming China for the emergence of the virus. Recently, the editor-in-chief of the large German tabloid "Bild" openly attacked the Chinese president. After [publishing](#) a calculation of what China owes Germany as financial compensation, he harshly accused Xi in an [online video](#) of, among other things, having informed the international community too late about the danger. Statements such as those in this video are likely to shape mainstream opinion about China in Germany.

German politicians from across the party spectrum have been quite [outspoken](#), too, publicly criticizing China's handling of the crisis and its international propaganda efforts. This has included a plea from a lawmaker from FDP, a centrist liberal party, for Germany to ignore the CCP's 'One China' policy and deal directly with Taiwan. A representative from the centre-left SPD expressed concerns about the dependence of Germany's supply chain on China. A Green Party member criticized China for turning the crisis into a competition of systems. He accused China of starting this "open competition" as a consequence of the initial exposure of the weakness of its own political system, which he said did not allow for error correction.

The Covid-19 crisis catalyzes existing trends in Sino-German relations

The Covid-19 shock will most immediately impact Germany through the country's close business ties to China. There will be lasting effects on the production capacity and market outlook of German manufacturers, but the main shock is expected to come through a decline in trade.

The crisis will be a catalyst for the following four trends in Sino-German relations:

First, this crisis will give new momentum to the debate about Germany's dependence on China, about what degree is appropriate and when supply-chains should be diversified.

Second, widespread fears about asset-hunting by Chinese companies during the crisis has led Germany to once again increase its efforts to sharpen investment screening.

Third, the crisis has underscored the simultaneous roles of partner, competitor and rival in which many European policymakers cast China – and the challenges this entails for the political management of Germany-China relations. Beijing's crisis management and ensuing international posturing has probably fueled more doubt than confidence in Beijing and its global leadership capacity.

Lastly, the crisis is likely to lead more German decision-makers to acknowledge new geopolitical realities, and in turn to reaffirm that EU unity is of utmost importance in the face of China's rise. Covid-19 has demonstrated China's growing influence across Europe, and how it was able and willing to seize the opportunity to present itself as a global leader following initial shortcomings in crisis management in Germany and elsewhere in the EU.

Greece: Close – and primarily commercial – cooperation between Greece and China

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In the midst of the pandemic, Greece is importing large quantities of medical supplies from China. However, while Chinese donations have elicited very positive statements from the government and have enjoyed considerable media coverage, they are a small fraction of the overall volume of medical equipment purchased from China by Greek donors and then delivered to the national health system. Debate about China's role in the global spread of the coronavirus has revealed a gap between a rather negative perception in Greek society and a more tolerant stance from the business and political elite in the country.

Cooperation with China on the Covid-19 pandemic

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in China last January, [Chinese citizens in Greece purchased large quantities of masks](#) and shipped them home. The first Covid-19 case in Greece was registered a month later and brought about a reversal in the flows of medical supplies. Since then, [China has donated 1 million protective masks to Greece](#), half of them provided by the State Grid Corporation, holder of a 24% stake in the Greek high-voltage grid operator ADMIE. In addition, the municipal government of Shanghai has donated [20,000 masks to Piraeus](#), with the two cities' twinning relationship as a vehicle. The Bank of China, which has recently opened an office in Greece, has donated [22,000 masks](#) to the city of Athens.

In parallel to these donations by the Chinese side, much larger quantities of medical supplies have been purchased from China and then donated by Greek actors. The Onassis Foundation, the Laskaridis Foundation and the Union of Greek Shipowners have purchased from the China National Building Material company [13.5 million masks worth EUR 7.8 million](#), reportedly at a discount of EUR 600,000. The Public Power Corporation (DEH) has donated [China-sourced](#)

medical equipment worth more than EUR 5 million – 1.5 million FFP2Q and FFP3Q masks, 75,000 protective suits and 50,000 Q goggles. The state-owned corporation has covered the [transportation cost](#) as well.

In addition, a [Greek ship owner](#) has paid EUR 1.2 million to Chinese suppliers for his donation, which includes 160,000 protective suits and 2.5 million gloves. The Stoihiman gambling agency has purchased [250,000 surgical masks from China](#) and has donated them to the Ministry of Health. [Private businesses in Crete](#) have paid for 70,000 FFP2 masks and 3,600 protective suits delivered from China. There is a very long list of [donations made by Greek businesses and foundations](#) to the Greek state, though it is not clear what share of the medical equipment has been purchased from China nor is the cost always indicated.

With regard to technical assistance and the presentation of China's experience in combating the pandemic, there was a [teleconference in the framework of the 17+1 format](#) on 13 March 2020 and the Ministry of Health was represented by one expert. The event was not heavily covered by the Greek media and there was only a [fleeting reference to the China-CEEC grouping](#), which is not well-known in the country.

China's public diplomacy in Greece and implications for Sino-Greek relations

The PRC embassy in Greece has launched an ambitious public diplomacy campaign in relation to the pandemic. The [arrival of the State Grid-donated supplies](#) on 21 March at Athens airport, in the presence of four Greek cabinet ministers and the PRC ambassador, was covered by many media outlets, including TV channels. The slogan of the event was an admittedly smart catchphrase attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle: 'A friend is a single soul dwelling in two bodies'. It is noted that ten days later the [Greek prime minister](#) chose to attend another ceremony on the delivery of a much larger quantity purchased in China and donated to the state by the Onassis Foundation.

The PRC embassy has been actively involved in the provision of Chinese medical equipment to Greece. A highly political move was its [donation of 10,000 masks to the staff of the Greek parliament](#). [The PRC ambassador has appeared on Greek TV](#) to present China's successful response to the outbreak, promoting inter alia traditional Chinese medicine. Interestingly, a representative of the Laskaridis Foundation, set up by a Greek ship owner, has been appointed by the PRC embassy as a [coordinator of the campaign](#) for the provision of Chinese medical supplies to Greece. Another interesting development is the [offer of flats to hospital personnel](#) by the Sino-Greek Investor Confederation, which includes,

among businessmen from both countries, Chinese buyers of real estate in Greece and Golden Visa holders.

The general mood in society is not as positive. Greek citizens tend to refer critically to China's role in the origin of the coronavirus and the global spread of the pandemic. In many Greek media outlets and public debates, China is seen as bearing a major responsibility for the coronavirus calamity. Therefore, while the government expresses gratitude for the Chinese donations, they are largely perceived as a [damage-control campaign](#). It is also noted that Chinese donations are relatively small, compared to much larger orders placed by national donors with Chinese producers.

China views Greece as a strategic partner, the seaport of Piraeus hosting a large-scale Belt and Road Initiative project. The COSCO conglomerate managing the port is keen on receiving an approval by Greek authorities for the construction of a new pier, which would considerably boost the throughput of the facility. In addition, ADMIE is involved in the construction of two underwater electricity cable links between continental Greece and the island of Crete, and other investment schemes in the energy sector were discussed during [president Xi's visit](#) to the country last November. Greek ship owners have developed a close working relationship with China, which is an important customer for their commercial fleet. Therefore, despite suspicion at the societal level, Beijing's 'charm offensive' amid the pandemic allows it to score points which boost its economic presence in Greece.

Hungary: Business as usual with China amid Covid-19

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The global pandemic has not changed the amicable relationship between the Hungarian government and China. Official comments have not blamed Beijing for the outbreak of Covid-19, instead they have emphasised the massive amounts of medical equipment sent from China to Hungary. Meanwhile, the government has used the crisis as a pretext to strengthen its control over domestic political and business affairs.

Cooperation between Hungary and China on Covid-19: mostly business, not donations

Hungary was one of the first countries to send aid to China, according to the Chinese ambassador to Budapest, although he did not mention the specifics of the support in his [article](#). Local governments have also sent medical equipment to China, for example the city of Győr [donated](#) around EUR 10,000, while the county government of Csongrád together with the Hungary-Shaanxi Commerce Society [offered](#) 17,000 masks to Shaanxi Province.

When the virus started to spread in Europe, it was China's turn to deliver medical supplies. Hungary has been importing medical equipment from China since 23 March, when the first airplane [landed](#) in Budapest. Dozens of planes commissioned by the Hungarian government have been commuting between Budapest and various Chinese cities in the recent weeks to deliver millions of mask, PPEs, ventilators and other equipment. The overwhelming majority of the cargo was purchased by the Hungarian government, while there have been some smaller donations by different Chinese actors as well.¹ On the communication

1. Among those who have donated various types of medical equipment are: Fudan University, Huawei, China Railways (delivered directly to Hungarian Railways), China Construction Bank (which is about to open an office in Budapest later this year), Shaanxi Province, the Shaanxi Chamber of Commerce, and the Xi'an Medical University (based on sister-city and sister-province/county relations), the local

side, Hungary participated in the [videoconference](#) on the prevention and control of infection between China and its 17 Central and Eastern European partners on 13 March.

In sum, according to the [statement of Foreign Minister Szijjártó](#), Hungary has ordered 148.7 million masks, 3.3 million test kits and 47.8 million PPEs altogether. As of 15 April, Chinese counterparts had delivered 46.9 million mask, 352 thousand test kits and 20.3 million PPEs. Besides these, 101 ventilators have been sent to Hungary from China. It is conspicuous that the text of official communiques of the Hungarian government, and thus most of the media coverage never used the verbs 'to buy' or 'to purchase' when it comes to medical equipment coming from China, and prices are never mentioned either. Instead, the government employs phrases like 'arrival', 'delivery' or 'in transit' to describe how the medical cargo gets to Hungary. It is unclear why the communication about the actual price tag and the nature of purchases is so ambiguous.

Furthermore, the government [announced](#) on 4 April that Hungary was among the four countries to receive 400,000 pieces of a special Chinese anti-viral medicine which it is reported may cure 10,000 patients.

In comparison with some other European countries, notably the Czech Republic, Hungary did not ask for the help of Taipei and Taipei has not considered sending medical supply to Hungary either, according to diplomatic sources, as the relationship between the two sides has been deteriorating in the past ten years due to the close relations between Hungary and Beijing.

Public diplomacy in China-Hungary relations

In line with our previous findings in the 2018 ETNC Report, the Chinese side has not engaged in a major public diplomacy campaign in Hungary, and given the cooperative approach to China, the Chinese government has not sought to directly influence or actively intervene in the domestic debate in order to change public perceptions.² The Chinese ambassador has published an op-ed and given some interviews, in which he thanked Hungary for its help and called for solidarity in fighting the pandemic and generally repeated official Chinese talking points.

Meanwhile the Hungarian government has grabbed the opportunity presented by the distraction from the pandemic, and enacted a law to [classify](#)

government of Huaxiang, as well as some donations by local Chinese residents of towns in Hungary and Chinese SMEs and NGOs based in Hungary.

2. Tamas Matura, "Absent political values in a pragmatic Hungarian China policy", in Tim Rühlig, et al., [Political Values in Europe-China Relations](#), European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) Report, December 2018, p. 49.

[the details](#) of the China-financed reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line for ten years. This has prompted a [wave of criticism](#) from some members of the opposition. However, given the supermajority of the governing party in the national assembly, it is highly unlikely that political dissent will derail the railway project. As the virus dominates the news, public attention is distracted by the pandemic, and thus the issue of the railway has not sparked any public outrage.

No change in Hungary's position on China

Budapest has been following a pro-China policy over the past decade, and according to international criticism it has [disrupted European unity](#) vis-à-vis China in many cases. The Covid-19 crisis has not led to a change in Hungary's position on China, as the Hungarian government has expressed its gratitude for the Chinese help and support on various occasions. The crisis has also offered the opportunity to the government in general and to the Foreign Minister in particular to present the Eastern Opening Policy as a success story, as Central Asian countries (Hungary became an observing member of the Turk Council in 2018) have also donated some medical equipment.

In contrast to the official narrative, non-governmental media sources are more critical about China and the role it played in the current pandemic, and the general public as well has been expressing very negative opinions on social media. However, criticism is aimed at the Chinese government and the way it handled the Covid-19 crisis in China and not at the Hungarian government or its China policy. In sum, the pro-China attitude of Budapest is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

Italy: Cooperation, competition and local politics amid Covid-19

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Italy holds the sad record of having registered the first major outbreak of the coronavirus outside of China. The country was also the first to receive conspicuous exports and donations of medical equipment from Beijing. Because of the controversial nature of various means of support from China, the relationship between Italy and China is now back in the spotlight, one year after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Belt and Road Initiative.

Aid, trade and erratic responses

During the two months that separated the first cases in China from the outbreak in Italy, the response of Italian authorities was erratic. In mid-January, when Covid-19 was apparently confined to China, fear of a possible spread of the virus arose among the Italian public. The growing anxiety led to an alarming number of [xenophobic incidents](#) against individuals considered to be Chinese and even sporadic boycotts of Chinese businesses. In several cities of northern Italy, local politicians as well as private citizens launched [solidarity campaigns](#) to counter this phenomenon.

On 30 January, two Chinese tourists in Rome became the first two registered coronavirus cases in Italy. The Italian government placed a [ban on travel](#) to and from China, a [decision which was harshly criticized by Beijing](#). However, the halting of flights also from Taiwan, which had few cases, was perceived negatively as a symbolic gesture to please [Beijing](#). In the following days, to ease the diplomatic tiff with Beijing, Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio announced the dispatch of medical supplies to China through the government aircraft sent to Wuhan to repatriate nationals. The Vatican also [sent](#) around 600,000 – 700,000 medical masks to Hubei, Zhejiang and Fujian.

As the crisis unfolded, Italy sent an international call for help and China seized the moment, stepping in with a coordinated effort among governmental and private entities. On 12 March, a Chinese cargo plane loaded with donations from [the Chinese Red Cross](#) arrived in Italy, receiving widespread media coverage. The event was also live streamed by Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, who [presented](#) it as the result of the special solidarity between the two countries. Concurrently, Italy [ordered a total of EUR 209.5 million worth of medical supplies from China](#).

In the weeks that followed, more flights carrying both donations from the central and local governments¹ in China, as well as purchased supplies, arrived in Italy. On three occasions these were accompanied by teams of Chinese medical staff. However, due to lack of official records, the proportion of donated and purchased medical supplies that came from China to Italy remains unclear.

Chinese foundations and private companies have also been donating medical supplies to Italy, including the [Jack Ma Foundation](#), the [Alibaba Foundation](#), [Xiaomi](#), [Huawei](#) and the pharmaceutical enterprise [Lihe](#). It is worth noting that state-owned enterprises [China Merchants Port Holdings](#), [China Communication Construction Company](#) (CCCC) and the [Cosco Shipping Corporation](#) have been making targeted donations to Trieste and Genova, both cities of interests for the BRI, as they are home to very large port facilities. Interestingly, regular aid has also been coming from the Chinese diaspora in Italy, who have been donating to hospitals and the Italian Civil Protection and have organised the free distribution of masks in several cities.

The Chinese embassy's media campaign

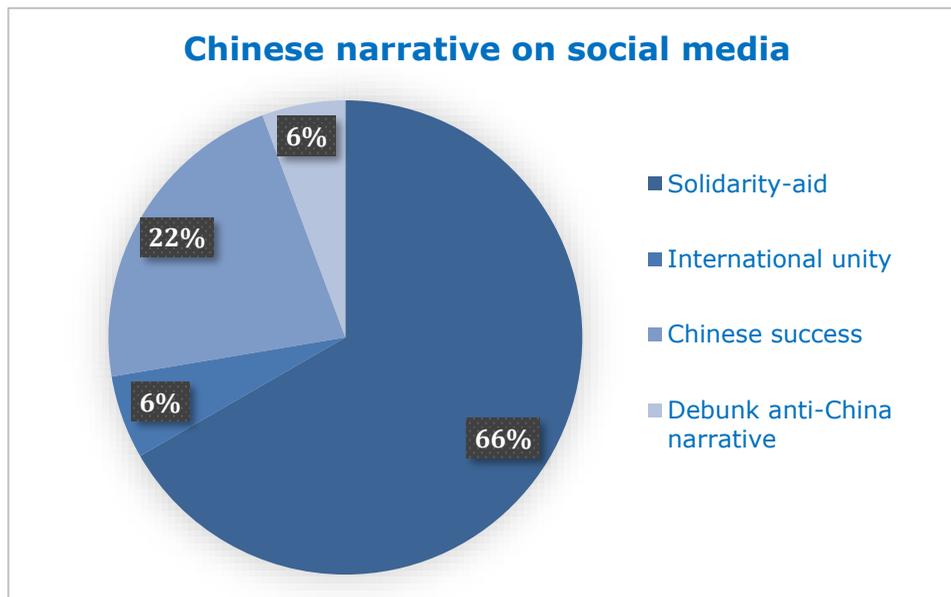
Since the first days of the epidemic in Italy, the Embassy of the People Republic of China to Italy has conducted an intense media campaign. The embassy's Twitter account has gone from an average of 2.35 posts per day before the crisis to 3.74 during the epidemic.² Most of the content focuses on promoting solidarity between the two countries, which has resulted in a notable increase in the number of users interacting with the account.³

1. [Fujian](#) donated 8 tonnes of medical equipment, including 30 ventilators; [Guangdong](#) sent 200,000 masks to Emilia-Romagna; [Xiangcheng](#) donated 60,000 masks to the city of Recanati, and [Suzhou](#) 20.000 masks to Venice.

2. Data collected by the authors comparing the posts of the embassy's official Twitter account in December 2019 and March 2020.

3. The number of likes of the posts covering the arrival of Chinese aid to Italy, as well as those containing messages of solidarity are remarkably higher than likes in previous posts. The nature of the accounts that have reacted to these posts has not been analysed for this report.

The embassy's Facebook account has also been very active, and an [official Instagram account was opened during the crisis](#). These accounts do not necessarily share the same content - instead, content appears tailored to the audience of the different platforms in order to maximise engagement. This suggests the existence of a well thought out social media strategy. Furthermore, [available data reveal that bots have been used conspicuously](#) to inflate popularity of the official accounts.



Data collected from the 1st of March 2020 to the 14th of April 2020 from the official Twitter account of the Chinese embassy of in Italy.

Four major strands of messaging can be identified in the Chinese narrative on social media. The first message promotes China as acting in solidarity, helping others by providing aid. The second strand encourages international unity in the fight against the pandemic. Both components are directly linked to Beijing's core concept of a "[community of shared future for mankind](#)", in which China undertakes an active role as responsible global actor. The third strand emphasizes China's success in dealing with the epidemic thanks to its technological prowess, in line with Xi Jinping's ambition to see China at the forefront of innovation. The fourth trajectory aims at undermining criticism of the government's management of the outbreak, including Beijing's systematic efforts to debunk the idea that the virus originated in a lab in Wuhan, an idea which has found fertile ground in Italy.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this campaign remains questionable. [Recent polls show](#) an increase in favourable views of China among Italians in comparison to 2019. However, it is too soon to say whether this is a durable change. It is also difficult to ascertain the degree to which the media campaign

conducted by China has played a role in such a change, or whether this trend is the indirect result of the growing dissatisfaction with traditional partners, most notably the EU, which was apparent before the pandemic. Moreover, it must be considered that Italians are not the sole target of such campaigns; [some contents](#) are also thought to be targeted at the domestic audience in China as well as the Chinese diaspora.

Italy's political reaction

While preferences at the societal level are hard to define, the views of Italian political parties appear unchanged. The Five Star Movement, the party most positive about China, has retained its position. Luigi Di Maio, former leader of the Movement and staunch supporter of the BRI MoU, has actively promoted engagement with China for the acceptance of aid. He tried to capitalise on the moment and attempted to give a new shine to the MoU.⁴ Moreover, recent [declarations](#) from other prominent party members seems to suggest that the Five star Movement is increasingly consolidating its utilitarian position in favour of China, to be used also as leverage against the EU.

The right and the centre-right have remained China-sceptic and have at times used the Five Star Movement's proximity to China to pressure the government. Matteo Salvini (Lega) shared a 2015 video by Italy's state television RAI, which documented China's work at the Wuhan lab, claiming that this was somehow evidence of the artificial origin of the coronavirus. He stated that: "[if China knew of the virus, it should then be prosecuted for crimes against humanity](#)". Antonio Tajani, vice-president of the European Parliament and a leading figure within Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, has declared that [solidarity cannot be used to promote the BRI](#) and sneak in deals concerning Italy's strategic infrastructure.

The centre-left Democratic Party (PD) has welcomed Chinese support but has made a strong point of Italy's allegiance to the EU and NATO. The PD has been the only major party in Italy that has tried to [counter the narrative](#) that other countries, China included, are providing Italy with more help than its EU partners.

The issue of the potential strategic goals of Chinese aid has been widely discussed in Italian media, and generally there is agreement on the necessity to mitigate propaganda efforts. To date, the government has actively responded to some of the most pressing concerns by strengthening mechanisms to defend

4. Di Maio [declared](#) that "those who laughed at us on the Belt and Road Initiative, now must admit that investing in this friendship has allowed us to save lives in Italy".

Italian enterprises and assets. Another topic of concern is Italy's potential participation in the [Health Silk Road](#). Although it remains unclear what this project will look like, the possible sharing of health data with Chinese companies has already sparked an intense debate focusing on security concerns.⁵

Last year, one thing that clearly emerged from the discussions regarding the signing of the MoU was Italy's lack of a China strategy. The current situation demonstrates that this is still a major strategic weakness that remains to be addressed. Overall, the domestic debate on the Italy-China relationship still suffers from internal political dynamics that prevent the development of a coherent strategic vision. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a strategy could have better safeguarded the country from the risks of China's charm offensive, while enabling it still to grasp opportunities such as the reception of medical supplies.

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5. Paolo Formentini (Lega) and Alessandro Alfieri (PD) have brought up issues that might emerge from the participation of Huawei and ZTE in the use of cloud technologies in the health sector. At the European Parliament, Cinzia Bonfrisco (Lega) has posed a series of Parliamentary Questions over the nature of the Health Silk Road to evaluate its strategic nature and the management of European citizens' data.

Latvia: Mask Diplomacy in Minor Key

UNA ALEKSANDRA BĒRZIŅA-ČERENKOVA

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At this point in the Covid-19 crisis, relations between Latvia and China have remained limited, constructive, and market-based. The exchanges have not been visible in the public and media space.

Latvian assistance to China

As the Covid-19 outbreak first developed in China and the city at its epicentre, Wuhan, was locked down, it was thought that Latvia would not be affected much. From January 2020 reports mainly relied on information from international news agencies, with no relation to or risk assessment for Latvia. The reporting on China was mostly neutral, with no emphasis on the virus being “Chinese”, but rather “from China”.

Some activities to help the victims in China took place, such as an online charity auction organized by the PRC embassy in cooperation with a small scale, Latvian-run association, Baltic China Agency for Cooperation of Commerce, Culture and Education. The auction took place from 5 to 15 March, but the donation of EUR 5190 was later given to Latvia, as the wave of the Covid-19 outbreak had already begun to subside in China, which reportedly had enough supplies.

Chinese assistance to Latvia

According to [reports](#) from China, a total of 54,000 medical masks were donated to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries on 26 March, including Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, but this gesture did not gain traction in the local media. Another donation of 5,000 masks to the Saeima Group for Interparliamentary Relations with China – one of the 40 groups established in the national parliament for cooperation with various countries – was [publicized](#) by the PRC embassy on 8 April, and the donation was later distributed among

regional hospitals. The Chinese Ambassador to Latvia, Liang Jianquan, explained the gesture as reciprocating an earlier Latvian donation: "at the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic, Latvia provided assistance to China and donated medical protective equipment." Ambassador Liang was likely referring to the donation [mentioned](#) on the website of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 11 February, whereby "the Latvian government has donated epidemic prevention and control materials, including protective clothing, masks, respirators and others, to help China contain the coronavirus outbreak." Again, this event was not reported on in the Latvian media.

Another story, however, did make it to all major news outlets in Latvia. A flight in late March by the national airline AirBaltic to Urumqi and back carried 900,000 face masks and 80,000 respirators from China. While this equipment was supplied as part of a commercial transaction, the details and sums have not been revealed. The Latvian reports are worded as a praise of AirBaltic and do not focus on the context of the exchange and China's role. A second delivery on April 10 brought another one million face masks for the National Health Service, and an additional, [privately organized donation](#) of 10 000 masks from Beijing Shengshi Huayi Industries Co., Ltd., was given to the Children's Hospital. The flight was [reported](#) to be a cooperation between the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and two China-based companies – "AirLink Aviation Services" and a logistics operator "Wish Global".

Latvian officials [commented](#) that the purchase was made from PRC-based companies due to the fact that large producers of medical protective gear, such as Turkey, had imposed export bans.

An interesting case of information manipulation surrounds a [joint order](#) by Latvia and Estonia to purchase "1.5 million masks, 30,000 FFP2 respirators, 20,000 gowns, 5,000 pairs of protective goggles and 500,000 pairs of nitrile gloves" from China, which took place in early April. According to Estonian media, the delivery was conducted by a Russian logistics company, Volga-Dnepr Airlines, which offered the best price, but a picture of the Russian plane was later used in [Russian media](#), blurring the message to appear that the equipment was Russian humanitarian aid. China has not commented on the situation.

On 13 March, China [organized](#) a video conference with Chinese health officials and experts and their counterparts from CEE countries, and, interestingly, Malta, which was attended by high-ranking medical officials from the Baltic states. According to the participants, the call was mostly dedicated to concrete epidemiological steps, rather than politics, although it did contain official Chinese messages. Similar video calls were organized with other European countries one week later, signalling a certain symbolic, preferential treatment of

the CEE region, possibly with the aim to demonstrate it as one of the deliverables of the "17+1" format.

Conclusion: Limited, constructive, market-based cooperation so far

To conclude, certain exchanges have taken place between Latvia and China during Covid-19, including charity events, donations, experience exchanges, and equipment purchases, but the activities that could serve China's image have gone largely unnoticed in the local media and public discussion. Latvian officials have participated in the exchanges, but have not actively publicized them, whereas local Chinese diplomats have only been using the official social networks to share information about the exchanges, without attacking the local government or media. The Latvian government did not use Chinese aid or cooperation in procurement to lash out at the EU, nor to underscore any special relationship with China. Those involved referred to the cooperation as limited, constructive, and market-based. Whether China will push for a better image in the following months and capitalize on the examples of cooperation remains to be seen.

Netherlands: Tough questions, stronger answers in the face of Covid-19 and a more audacious China

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Although developments concerning Covid-19 are at peak flux, it is already clear that the crisis is reshaping Sino-Dutch relations.

China in Dutch discourse on Covid-19

How has "China" – as a subject in popular, political and diplomatic discourse – featured in the unfolding of the Dutch Covid-19 crisis? At least three themes can be discerned.

Facemask diplomacy gone awry?

On the same day in early February that the WHO warned against a "global shortage" of protective gear, the Dutch government granted special landing rights for a Chinese cargo flight to pick up a large quantity of medical supplies bought in the Netherlands. At that time, "we deemed ourselves invulnerable", a Dutch civil servant was [quoted](#) as saying. In March, three Chinese state-owned airline companies donated facemasks to KLM, part of Air France-KLM, in response to the Dutch airline's donation of medical supplies to China before the crisis hit Europe. Private Chinese companies such as Huawei and Alibaba also donated facemasks.

However, shortly thereafter these gestures were overshadowed [in the Dutch media](#) by the Dutch Ministry of Health's recall, due to quality concerns, of 600,000 facemasks it had purchased from Chinese commercial producers. The news came at a moment when the Dutch public was realizing the extent to which the country depends on foreign suppliers of medical equipment. This resonates beyond the

merely medical: Dutch strategic reliance on China for many supply chains had already become a hot topic, especially since the publication of the Dutch government's [China strategy](#) in May 2019.

Does China show the way?

As the crisis in the Netherlands escalated, China's approach to tackling Covid-19 – strong state, heavy lockdown, high-tech surveillance – garnered interest from Dutch media. It raised questions over the extent to which the Netherlands could and should adopt similar measures. In line with the "China-shows-the-way"-narrative, China has offered [technological help](#) in tackling the virus. At the centre of the public debate are "Corona apps", including contact tracing-technologies. A great [worry](#) for some is the loss of privacy, especially but not only if the technology used is Chinese. In these [discussions](#), "China" appears as both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: as an innovator and example as well as a bogeyman.

Is China to blame?

The argument that China is to "blame" for the global Covid-19 crisis, and should be held accountable, has also come to the fore, although certainly not as prominently as in the US. The issue has appeared in [op-ed pages of newspapers](#), where the term "Dood door schuld" (which roughly translates as "negligent homicide") appeared occasionally. This theme has not played a significant role in [parliamentary debates](#).

Chinese (and US) attempts to influence Dutch and European discourse

China's official response to Dutch public discourse has proven to be more outspoken than it was before – perhaps typical of Chinese diplomacy in the Xi Jinping era.

Facemask-quagmire

In response to the recall of a batch of facemasks mentioned above, Chinese representatives tried to downplay the issue itself. PRC Ambassador to the Netherlands Xu Hong [tweeted](#):

[Minister of Health van Rijn] said some masks purchased from China aren't appropriate for medical staff of ICU, but the Ministry is still looking into it. He expressed gratitude to China for its support again, & wish to continue our cooperation.

Anti-Chinese racism, cartoons and concern for Chinese citizens

A new level to Chinese engagement with Dutch public discourse was provoked during Carnival festivities in February. A song that included anti-Chinese racist slurs was met with condemnation by 57 Sino-Dutch organizations as being “discriminatory and hateful”. The national discrimination hotline received over 3,000 notifications of [anti-Chinese racism](#), breaking records. Chinese Ambassador Xu [tweeted](#) in response to the incident by saying:

Such discrimination is totally unacceptable in any civilized country and is a suspected violation of law. Looking forward to the result of investigation.

In a similar fashion, Xu offered a crisp piece of [advice](#) to the Dutch government, in reference to Danish and German cartoons that, in his eyes, pushed the message that the Covid-19-crisis was “made in China”:

To use this virus to attack one country, one people, is a violation of human rights. ... The Dutch government has a duty to prevent and punish similar publications. A government that argues that publications like that fall under the freedom of expression, cannot be taken seriously as a guardian of human rights.

In a phone call with Dutch Prime Minister Rutte, Premier Li Keqiang [pledged](#) that “China stands ready to facilitate the Netherlands’ purchase and transportation of medical supplies of urgent need from China.” In return, he added, Li “hopes ... the Dutch side safeguard the safety and the convenience for the living of Chinese citizens, especially Chinese students, in the Netherlands with concrete measures.”

US-China rivalry

In a newspaper interview, US Ambassador Pete Hoekstra pushed the point that China is to blame for the pandemic, and that it is not doing enough to solve the crisis. His Chinese counterpart responded by issuing a long letter, published on the PRC embassy’s website and various social media outlets, titled “[A Kind Reminder to Ambassador Hoekstra: Mind Your Proper Duties](#)”, in which he writes:

Ambassador Hoekstra seems to enjoy slandering China and undermining Sino-Dutch relations. This is a fact-based conclusion. We browsed all tweets he posted since January, among which more than a dozen are vilifying or negatively suggestive to China.

Concluding observations

Before the Covid-19 crisis, public debate on China was increasingly contentious. Special attention went out to the protests in Hong Kong, human rights violations in Xinjiang and the 5G question. These issues have all but vanished from public discourse due to Covid-19. The way that China engages debates concerning anti-Chinese racism is not wholly novel but has reached a new level of intensity during the Covid-19 crisis. Premier Li's focus on the safety of Chinese citizens in the Netherlands may reveal an increasing willingness by China to exert influence beyond its own borders in order to protect its citizens. To be sure, the Netherlands has now become an arena for Sino-US bickering.

The Covid-19 crisis shows an increasingly audacious China: eager to show leadership and no longer apprehensive to throw mud when provoked. Sino-Dutch relations has become a topic that raises fundamental questions about privacy, loyalties and strategic autonomy that are far from being answered.

Remarkably, neither the Netherlands nor any other member state of the European Union has brought these issues to the Brussels agenda yet, even though the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs [stated](#) in 2019, when the Dutch China Strategy was published: 'Without the European Union we cannot handle China'. One factor explaining this is that the Dutch Ministry of Health is in the lead when it comes to dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, and this is the least Europeanized ministry of all.

It is clear though that the extreme dependence of the Netherlands and other European countries on protective material (e.g. face masks) will trigger a debate on the coordination of investments in production of these materials in Europe, European strategic autonomy in this regard and European industrial policy. The [Conclusions](#) of the President of the European Council following the video conference of the European leaders on 23 April kicked-off this very important strategic debate by stating: "It is of utmost importance to increase the strategic autonomy of the Union and produce essential goods in Europe".

Norway: Crisis highlights normality in bilateral relations with China

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Compared to a few years back, when Norway-China relations were still officially frozen in relation to the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to Liu Xiaobo, the Covid-19 crisis points to a different situation. Norway now appears to be among China's more steady and ordinary relationships in Europe.

Appreciating Chinese assistance

Back in early February 2020, when the new coronavirus was still largely contained to China, Norway was [reportedly still considering](#) what material to give the Chinese to help with their domestic epidemic. In many ways, this would be very natural, considering that Norway still maintains a regular development aid portfolio for China and that health has long been considered an area ripe for [more bilateral cooperation](#). However, a few weeks later, Norway has itself entered crisis mode in mid-March, battling an uncontrolled spread of the virus, and facing shortages in medical supplies. Badly prepared for a pandemic, Norwegian authorities started scrambling for equipment, pursuing new imports, and responding positively to China's offers of help.

Although sometimes raised, China-related issues have not dominated discussions concerning the pandemic in Norway. The primary catalyst of early virus spread in Norway was neither Chinese nor people flying in from China, but Norwegian ski tourists returning from their winter holidays in Italy and Austria. Chinese assistance to Norway has been substantial and has been publicly noted. Chinese diplomatic efforts have stirred some, but comparatively speaking relatively little, attention or controversy. The following are the main developments and observations so far.

Norwegian national and local health authorities have pursued many international avenues for securing protective gear and other medical equipment. From the outset of the crisis and the strict measures introduced in Norway in the middle of March, Norwegian politicians and officials have pointed to [China as a place where production of relevant equipment](#) has been restarted, thus representing a valuable source of new supplies. The Chinese embassy in Norway indicated [in the media](#) in late March that Norway, due to its relatively high infection rate, would be among the countries being prioritized for allocation of equipment. The Norwegian Health Minister and other government representatives have expressed gratitude on several occasions. Many have, however, also noted that the reliance on suppliers and value chains highly concentrated in one country is [something to reconsider](#) in coming years.

Norway has received [several shipments of Chinese products](#) relevant for managing the Covid-19 crisis. Some deliveries have built on already established channels for trade, some new arrangements have been initiated or facilitated by [private entrepreneurs](#), and several new contracts for equipment from China to Norwegian health institutions have been reported. Deliveries also include donations. [Oslo received a donation](#) of protective masks and suits from its sister city Shanghai, and the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation have also provided shipment of protective masks. Norwegian authorities have [expressed gratitude, also promising](#) that some of the donations will be accounted and compensated for in Norway's own outgoing international aid, meaning some of this may also benefit other countries.

Diversified debate

Public debate around China's role has been diverse. Some health professionals, other observers and researchers and have emphasized the effectiveness of Chinese control measures and its [contributions to international health](#), some also arguing Norway should [learn from China](#). Others have remained more critical. Norwegian media commentators have repeatedly questioned the reliability of China's official information and [problematized its responses](#), also [discussing Chinese diplomacy](#) and the [public relations and social media activity](#) that have been reported internationally. At one occasion, the Chinese embassy stepped in with a [written public response](#), defending Chinese positions. It accused a Norwegian newspaper editor of appearing racist when, [in an article](#) on the news site Nettavisen, he stated that China has to carry the blame for not preventing the early spread of the virus. The embassy's letter pointed to uncertainties concerning the actual origin of the new coronavirus, repeating claims similar to those made by Chinese representatives in other international contexts. On another occasion, the Chinese embassy [posted comments on Facebook](#),

responding to and naming one of two journalists behind an [article in the newspaper Aftenposten](#), which had reported on quality issues with some Chinese equipment shipped to crisis struck countries. The embassy's post included information pertaining to specific issues in several countries.

Norwegian journalists and commentators have also raised questions about the [role of the World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and its relations to China. Norwegian ministers and national health officials have largely responded by [expressing confidence in the WHO](#), also announcing [new support](#) to further strengthen its work. Without referencing any other country, the Norwegian Prime Minister reiterated support for the WHO and the UN system in [an appearance](#) during the 18 March "One World: Together at Home" digital concert. Moreover, the Health Minister and other officials have in televised press briefings denied having any information showing China is deliberately misreporting on Covid-19 to the WHO. Nevertheless, Trine Skei Grande, the leader of the Liberal Party, which is represented in the coalition government, expressed strong disbelief in both China's official reporting and in its authoritarian politics and crisis measures in a [newspaper op-ed](#) in early April. As she recently resigned from her ministerial position and returned to her seat in Parliament, also announcing her intent to step down as party leader, it is not immediately clear how much her statement is to be regarded just a matter of personal opinion or also representative of her party, which holds four ministerial positions in the government.

No conclusive corona-effect on relations

In conclusion, China-related issues are certainly part of the discussion around the Covid-19 crisis in Norway. Still, these issues appear less hotly debated than seems to be the case in some other European countries. Chinese delivery of supplies has been debated in a largely positive context and Chinese diplomacy has not appeared extraordinarily active, with the exceptions noted above. So far, the coronavirus crisis does not seem to push bilateral relations in any distinct direction. There has certainly been discussion around China and the situation in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, the conflictual Swedish-Chinese relations, Chinese investments and reported intelligence activity in Norway in recent months, some of it related to Norwegian security authorities issuing their annual reports earlier this year. But it is so far difficult to see the Covid-19 crisis influencing these debates in significant or substantive ways. That may of course change, depending on how the crisis unfolds in other areas of the world and how China and other countries respond. For now, the extraordinary Covid-19 crisis highlights the normal and steady nature of Norway-China relations, at a time when tensions seem to be rising between China and several European states.

Poland: Mutual “charm offensive” with China amid Covid-19

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Poland has used its political contacts with China and some goodwill gestures to ensure the purchase of medical equipment needed to combat the coronavirus. Warsaw is communicating that the pandemic necessitates broad international cooperation - with allies, within the EU and with other countries, such as the PRC. As a result, Polish authorities are restrained in criticism of China’s initial reaction to the first cases of the new coronavirus.

Poland’s goodwill gestures to China

When Covid-19 was spreading in China, Poland’s reaction was twofold – political and practical assistance. On 3 February, [Polish President Andrzej Duda sent a sympathy letter to Xi Jinping](#). He praised Chinese efforts in fighting the virus and protecting people. Duda highlighted Beijing’s quick and decisive reaction, as well as the efficient organization of relevant medical services, which helped check the spread of the disease and thus saved many lives, both in China and other countries. There was also a concert held in Warsaw titled “[Solidarity with Wuhan](#)” organized by a private economic organization with the support of the Polish Olympic Committee to express sympathy with people and medical staff in Wuhan and Hubei province.

Apart from political appreciation, Poland also offered practical assistance at that time. A few Polish private companies sold medical equipment, such as surgical masks, goggles, and protective suits to China. The [Marshall of the Polish Sejm](#), the lower house of parliament, also met with the Chinese ambassador on 19 February, and informed him of the donation of a consignment of thousands of surgical face masks to China.

China's "green light" for Poland

The first case of coronavirus in Poland was confirmed on 4 March. As of late-April, there have been more than 11,000 cases and more than 500 fatalities. Due to the lack of equipment – mostly protective items for medical staff – Polish authorities started to look for those products overseas. On 24 March, [President Duda spoke with his counterpart, Xi Jinping on the phone](#). Xi assured him of a green light for Poland to purchase medical goods from China. There were also conversations between the Polish and Chinese prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs and the Chinese ambassador to Poland about the supply of equipment and sharing experience in combating the virus.

As a result, China's support to Poland has included both non-commercial and commercial supplies. [Donations include](#): 10,000 tests kits, 20,000 N-95 masks, 5,000 protective suits, 5,000 medical goggles, 10,000 disposable medical gloves and 10,000 shoe covers. While Poland has purchased masks, goggles, protective suits, etc. from China. At the government's request the products have been bought by state-owned companies, such as the oil and gas companies Orlen and Lotos, and handed over to the Material Reserves Agency - a state institution responsible for creating and maintaining strategic reserves in case of emergency. The first cargo aircraft from China landed in Warsaw on 26 March. It is hard to assess the exact amount, but the Ministry of State Assets - responsible for these supplies - has announced that as of 14 April, [29 airplanes with 580 tonnes of Chinese medical equipment](#) had arrived in Poland. Also, private companies and foundations have purchased those products in China and then donated them to hospitals.

Further, several [Polish local governments](#) have cooperated with Chinese regions and cities and asked them to provide medical supplies and to share their experience in the form of [video conferences](#), which have taken place (and were different from the 17+1 videoconference initiated by China about pandemic in which Polish side participated as well). So far, there has been no information about problems with the quality of China's medical products in Poland. However, recently one of the [Polish daily newspapers](#) suggested that masks from China do have fake certificates.

China's coronavirus "charm offensive"

Chinese authorities have been very active in coronavirus public diplomacy in Poland. The main actors are the Chinese embassy in Warsaw and the Chinese ambassador himself. There are at least two channels for this campaign: the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the embassy and the ambassador, and the latter's public appearances. The ambassador has given [interviews](#) in the Polish

press, [expressed his views in the media](#), and held one [press conference](#) in the Chinese embassy in February.

With regard to China's messages and tone, one may highlight the following themes: China's prompt reaction to a new disease, thus suggesting no missteps and cover-up of the first infections; Xi Jinping as the mastermind behind Beijing's success; Xi's efforts are praised domestically (i.e. Chinese citizens trust their authorities) and abroad (by the WHO and foreign scientists); China is helping the world and this assistance is being pursued in the spirit of a "community of shared future for mankind". Although there is no explicit reference to the superiority of China's model, the [ambassador argued in February that](#) "relying on the merits of the Chinese system (...) the Chinese government will certainly (...) overcome the epidemic soon".

A significant part of Beijing's public diplomacy efforts has been harsh criticism of those who blame China for withholding information about the virus. The Chinese ambassador accused those people of using cold war thinking and [presented infographics](#) underscoring China's prompt reactions to the initial coronavirus cases.

A rather positive perception in Poland of China's endeavors

It seems that there is a rather positive perception of Chinese efforts in Poland. The best example is the aforementioned tone of Polish officials' statements and remarks. Similar views have been presented by Polish medical specialists, mainly epidemiologists and virologists. Medical experts who appear in Polish media to comment on the pandemic often use Chinese examples such as the Hubei lockdown or experimental methods of curing the infected people as an appropriate response to the spread of the virus. What is more, there is a lot of information in traditional and social media about China's donation of medical supplies. In that sense, Polish public opinion (or probably also bots responsible for disinformation) has adopted the Chinese narrative about the prevalence of humanitarian aid, which somehow distorts the reality.

A different perception is presented by media, commentators and experts on China, as well as other people active in social media. They focus mostly on a delayed Chinese reaction to the initial outbreak, China's ongoing disinformation campaign about Covid-19, and the prompt assistance for Poland provided by other Asian partners, such as South Korea and Taiwan. There are also signals from the Polish authorities that the lack of medical equipment and upcoming economic crisis may lead Poland to pay more attention to domestic production of related items to avoid overdependence on other countries, such as China.

Context and consequences

Despite Poland's tougher approach towards China, noticeable since 2017, the growing cases of infections and shortage of medical equipment led Polish authorities to cooperate more closely with Beijing. Bearing in mind that, in case of China, political decisions are crucial for having access to the products manufactured in the PRC, Poland had used not only its support for China in February but also political contacts based on the strategic partnership between two countries.

Despite Poland's close ties with the US, whose president pursues a confrontational policy towards China, and the fact that Polish authorities are cautious with the PRC, Poland has still kept channels open to cooperation with Beijing. Poland is signaling that in times of pandemic there is a need for broad international cooperation, with allies, within the EU and with other countries like China.

Portugal: “Everything is worthwhile, if the soul is not small” – relations with China amid Covid-19

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Chinese donations of medical and personal protection equipment have earned particular public attention in Portugal. China’s assistance, despite the ‘China virus’ labelling and criticism over how the initial outbreak was concealed, is being judged against a perceived lack of solidarity from the EU.

Chinese medical assistance to Portugal

The Portuguese media has reported daily on the arrival to the country of tonnes of medical and personal protection equipment shipped from China. Although far from the EUR 75 million of medical goods and equipment the Portuguese national and local governments have purchased from Chinese suppliers,¹ donations made by individuals and companies (which amount to millions of masks, thousands of testing kits, surgical gloves, protective medical ware, safety eyewear, and hundreds of ventilators) raised particular attention in the media and public opinion.

Underlying the impressive record are a plethora of agents, modalities, and motivations. Among the most remarkable are:

- Chinese companies with interests in Portugal, for instance the state-owned China Three Gorges (the main shareholder of EDP, the major Portuguese energy supplier) and the private, global, China-based conglomerate Fosun (owner of major private healthcare services and insurance companies in Portugal and the main shareholder of the Portuguese bank Millenium BCP). According to a Fosun’s [press release](#),

1. From March 1 to April 6.

with this donation, the company “*reasserts its strategic commitment to Portugal*”. The Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation have also [donated](#) masks, screening and diagnostic tests, and protective clothing, with high-profile involvement of Portuguese diplomatic bodies;

- The governments of cities such as Shanghai and Shenyang, donating equipment to twinned Portuguese cities, respectively Oporto and Braga, in a somehow unprecedented expression of the twinning agreements;
- ISCTE/IUL, a Lisbon-based public university, served as an intermediary to deliver medical equipment to the Portuguese NHS, which had been [donated by](#) Lin Weifang, both a PhD student at the university and head of the Chinese SOE Meheco Guangdong Pharma Ltd.;
- Further donations have come from the [Chinese community in Portugal](#) (which had mobilized supplies for Hubei), the [Portuguese community in Macau](#), and [real-estate mogul](#) Ming Xu (who also used her clout to secure donations from Tencent Holdings).

Framing cooperation amid Covid-19

Chinese official discourse has emphasised the longstanding friendship uniting the two countries as the main factor underpinning the great assistance China is providing to Portugal. During a personal call to his Portuguese counterpart, António Santos Silva, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi cited the strategic partnership as an additional reason. The Chinese ambassador in Lisbon, Cai Run, in turn confirmed the “*genuine friendship between the two peoples*”. The diplomat, referring to the ‘[moral](#)’ support offered by Portugal, [avowed that](#) China “*will never forget the positive evaluation, persistent understanding and firm support Portugal gave to the Chinese efforts to fight the COVID 19 epidemic outbreak*”. In this context, Beijing has provided assistance to the Portuguese government by facilitating its business interaction with the Chinese market for medical and personal protective equipment, as well as alleviating the bureaucratic burden inherent to these market operations.

Meanwhile, as expected, the role China is playing in supplying Portugal with important resources to fight Covid-19 has been widely disseminated by the Portuguese media. The “quantitative” dimension is the dominant perspective in the news, that is, the impressive imagery of planes landing on Portuguese runways to unload tonnes of crucial equipment arriving from China. Any attempt at setting a more holistic debate on the subject becomes overshadowed by the crude fact that China, whatever its motivation, is underpinning the most visible dynamics of international solidarity with Portugal.

In this context, the idea that China is replacing the EU as a source of solidarity, namely with southern EU countries, has clearly gained ground in Portuguese public opinion. This, despite the stigmatisation brought by the ‘*China*

virus' label, as well as the backlash from the way China initially dealt with the *virus*' outbreak. China's ability to effectively convey solidarity is also **being voiced** by influential political analysts in the national media. The indecisive stance and scant action by the EU have left many in Portugal with a sense of *déjà vu* following the austerity saga of the financial crisis of 2008, namely regarding the bloc's North-South divide. This has left a void for China to fill. Nevertheless, it is hard to identify any sign of instrumentalization of the 'China factor' in domestic politics. The 'silence' across the political spectrum was only disturbed by the criticisms of the left-wing parties, namely the Communist Party and the Left Bloc, towards EU inertia, as compared to China's action.

Decreasing the dependence on imports from a single country...

Strong bilateral relations between China and Portugal are unlikely to change due to the eventual impact of the pandemic surge. Nonetheless, the Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa has pointed out that the Covid-19 crisis made clear the need to reinvent the country's productive structure in order to ensure a shorter, closer and safer supply chain and diminish the dependence on imports from a single country, i.e., China. Mr. Costa's **brief words** are brand new in Portuguese political discourse concerning Portugal's trade relations with China. At the same time, he **explained the need** to avoid the EU "*to be contaminated by the division virus*".

The perceived failure of a solidarity in Europe, once again, is undermining the possibility of looking at the EU as a whole, acting together in order to overcome a new crisis. The EU, so far, has been unable to compete in Portugal with the '*courtesy*' (using the terming of Chinese donors) expressed through the words written by Fernando Pessoa, a celebrated Portuguese poet, that could be read in Portuguese (*Tudo vale a pena, se a alma não é pequena*) and Chinese (海国一尺绮, 愿赠万里春), on the boxes lying on Lisbon's airport tarmac, after being unloaded from the Airbus that flew from Shanghai to the Portuguese capital carrying tonnes of donated personal protection and medical devices. "*Everything is worthwhile, if the soul is not small.*"

Romania: China's actions amid Covid-19 generate contradictory opinions

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The novel coronavirus pandemic has once again put Sino-Romanian relations to the test. The Romanian Ministry of Health considers the Chinese approach to Covid-19 as the “gold standard” and Romanian authorities have emphasised cooperation, while responding to overdependence. By contrast, China is far from being a model to follow for other voices in the country, including the US ambassador and some Romanian language international online media. The roles played by the US and NATO in general are highly appreciated in Romania, therefore their criticism of China continues to directly influence China's image.

Sino-Romanian cooperation against the Covid-19 pandemic

The EU and China have been working together since the beginning of the outbreak. Romania was not among the countries to contribute to the supply of medical and personal protective equipment to China in February or to benefit from subsequent donations from China by means of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. However, there are several significant active cooperation channels between Romania and China.

China's embassy in Romania has been a dynamic actor. For instance, it [organized](#) the participation of the Romanian authorities at the 17+1 video conference on 13 March, in order to share information on preventing and controlling the pandemic. The Chinese ambassador, Jiang Yu, along with representatives of the Chinese enterprises in Romania and the local Chinese community, [donated](#) medical materials to the Bucharest City Hall on 21 March. The ambassador [offered](#) epidemic prevention materials on behalf of the local authorities of China's Gansu province to its twin county Alba on 3 April. On that occasion it was announced that more than 10 provinces and cities in China were

actively preparing medical supplies to [donate](#) to their twin cities in Romania, which underlines that cooperation is also strong at local levels.

Moreover, Romania has access to medical and personal protective equipment purchased from China. However, it is worth noting that intermediaries and not the Romanian authorities have direct contact with Chinese providers. Procurement is made by the pharmaceutical distributor Unifarm SA, a state-owned company subordinated to the Ministry of Health. In the [communications](#) by the Ministry of Internal Affairs via its Strategic Communication Group, no details about the purchase prices of equipment are included, nor about the intermediary suppliers from China, Turkey, South Korea etc.

For the month of April, [13 flights](#) from China were planned, operated by different airlines. The first one, operated by the state-owned company TAROM, took place on 3 April. That was described by the Romanian embassy in Beijing on [its Facebook page](#) as a sort of resumption of direct flights, even if it was a full cargo transport, taking into account that TAROM interrupted its passenger flights to China 17 years ago due to another epidemic. The general focus of the news was not on the source of medical supplies, but on the Romanian airlines operating the flights. The second TAROM transport was financed through the Romanian “Donate for the first line” campaign.

However, such actions have been less intensely [publicized](#) by the Romanian mass media, as compared to the transport operations from South Korea by NATO, for instance: “NATO again helps Romania to bring from South Korea the medical equipment needed to combat the Covid-19 epidemic... Transportation costs are borne by the United States”.

Perceptions of Chinese “mask diplomacy” in Romania

In general, Romanian mass media offers balanced and well-argued news related to China’s role in combating the Covid-19 pandemic. Others, such as the US government-funded Radio Free Europe Romania, are extremely active in highlighting Chinese propaganda behind its “[mask diplomacy](#)”. Romanian authorities tend to underline the [need to cooperate](#) with China but at the same time to [respond to overdependency on China](#). Romanian companies’ reprofiling in order to support the health system is intensely encouraged.

The 17+1 video conference

A [video conference](#) attended by China and 17 CEE nations of the 17+1 cooperation platform took place on 13 March. The main message of the Chinese experts was the following: [if requested, China is ready to assist the CEE countries](#). In the Romanian mass media, only very few articles were published [about that event](#) but a [controversy](#) broke out. Victor Ponta, a former Romanian premier, a vocal supporter of strong Sino-Romanian ties and currently the leader of the new Romanian political party (in opposition) *Pro Romania*, [argued](#) that the Romanian government was not interested in the experience gained by China in the fight against the new coronavirus and in material support, but instead the crisis stimulated “smart guys” to get rich (companies profiting from the ongoing crisis by buying low and selling extremely high). In reply, the Ministry of Health formulated a [clarification](#), emphasizing that Romania appreciated the openness of the Chinese side, considered the Chinese approach to Covid-19 as the “gold standard” and reiterated that there was permanent collaboration between the two countries.

Romania, the arena of US-China diplomatic conflict

Several countries, including the US, [blame China for the global contagion](#), and this narrative has been used by Adrian Zuckerman, the US ambassador in Romania. *Free Europe* published his [editorial](#), in which he accused China of “misinformation” and “lack of transparency”. In a letter published in response, China’s embassy in Romania immediately rejected the criticism by [arguing](#) that China had actively contributed to the fight against the global epidemic and was willing to continue working with the international community, including the US, to maintain global public health security.

Finally, it should be reiterated that China has offered its assistance to all countries worldwide, including CEE. Romania has not directly requested China’s help, such as direct purchases of medical and personal protective equipment at reasonable prices. In contrast to a number of other European countries, there has been no phone conversation between the presidents or premiers of the two countries. In general, US representatives and some Romanian-language international online media have criticized China, but Romanian authorities have emphasized the need for cooperation with China even while rejecting any overdependency.

Slovakia: Changing views of China during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Slovakia has so far been one of the more successful EU states in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, perhaps due to strict measures implemented early on. The delicate situation has brought China to the forefront of public discourse as probably never before. To some extent, we can observe accelerated polarization of views among politicians and the general public, oscillating between seeing China as a source of the problem and the main provider of help.

Slovakia has so far avoided the worst

Compared to most European countries, Slovakia has (as of mid-April) coped comparatively well with Covid-19, keeping the numbers of infected cases and resulting deaths low. This can likely be attributed to the swift response by the authorities, who were among the first in Europe to issue lockdown orders. Slovakia (together with the Czech Republic) was also one of the first countries in Europe to adopt the general and compulsory wearing of face masks (including signature home-made ones). It is also noteworthy that the virus started spreading at the time when Slovakia was just changing government. While the initial response (including the lockdown) was conducted by an outgoing leadership, the new government was sworn in on 21 March 2020, amid the crisis.

Public opinion amid China's medical supplies

One of the most interesting news items related to China was a [public opinion survey](#) conducted by Focus on 25 and 26 March, which found that China was seen as providing the most help in fighting the virus – altogether more than 67% of respondents saw China as helping “a lot” or “somewhat”, while less than 9% held this view about Germany, and only 22% about the EU. The second most help,

according to about 45% of the respondents, was provided by the Czech Republic, followed in third by Russia with about 25% (ironically, no help from Russia was actually noted by the MFA).

These numbers might have been the result of the public welcoming of Chinese supplies of medical equipment when (outgoing) Prime Minister Pellegrini, together with the Minister of Interior, personally inspected the supplies at the airport and [posed for a photo](#) inside the aircraft full of boxes purchased from China. There were no more welcoming parties arranged by the new government or other high-level figures, although the Chinese embassy organized at least [one more event](#) at the airport when further donations of supplies arrived (the highest-ranked Slovak official present was the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the third highest-ranked official at the ministry).

It is difficult to estimate the exact ratio between sales and donations of medical equipment from China, but it can be estimated that the vast majority of the Chinese supplies were sold on a commercial basis, while there were confirmed cases of aid as well, for instance from the city of Cangzhou (Hebei) and the Sino-Czech-Slovak Friendship Farm (also located in Cangzhou). The gift was presented as a reciprocal gesture after supplies were [provided by a Slovak businessman](#) with commercial interests in Cangzhou, back in February. Interestingly, while the supply to Cangzhou was a commercial sale, the supply from Cangzhou to Slovakia was presented as a donation. Another [notable donation](#) to Slovakia was made by Shanghai within the framework of its partnership with Bratislava. Several other Slovak cities and regions have partnerships with Chinese counterparts which, however, have lain dormant through the crisis.

Battle of narratives

The Chinese embassy's social media accounts were used to spread disinformation about the origin of the virus, [pushing](#) a narrative that purported the origin of the virus was in the United States and subsequently introduced to China by the US military. Despite the low following of these accounts, local politicians such as [former PM Robert Fico](#) and [MP Ľuboš Blaha](#) (both from the previously governing SMER-SD party) picked up these narratives. According to Fico and Blaha, Slovakia should not have been criticizing China, but rather expressing gratitude for China's willingness to sell medical supplies to Slovakia.

The Chinese embassy also decried an article that [appeared](#) in a Slovak newspaper *Hospodárske noviny*, which noted China's lack of transparency and the untrustworthy nature of the Chinese data on infection cases and mortality. It also objected to the newspaper using an image of the Chinese flag in connection with the report on Covid-19. The embassy's [letter](#) was published only in the

Chinese language, which suggests that its main purpose was to serve in China's domestic propaganda and propaganda aimed at the local Chinese diaspora.

The Slovak [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) publicly decried disinformation spread from China and Russia and called for a more effective combating of the "infodemic" which spread along with the Covid-19 pandemic. As a response to China's activities, pro-Western figures in Slovakia started emphasizing the role of the EU and highlighting the fact that the virus originated in China and spread due to the Communist Party's mismanagement, cover-up, and, according to some, due to "generally bad hygiene standards in China". Some even went as far as referring to the virus as the "Chinese virus" (or even "[Chinese plague](#)"), including the new [Deputy Minister](#) of Environment and several public intellectuals.

The public discussion in liberal circles also responded negatively to the fact that the boxes of Chinese supplies had 'poetic' messages about the Slovak-China friendship in the "rainy days"¹, which have been [perceived](#) as Chinese propaganda. It has also been [reported](#) that in January and February, the Chinese community in Slovakia engaged in collecting and shipping medical equipment to China. The article framed these activities as being organized by the Communist Party of China, but overall this was not presented explicitly as a problem. In both instances, one can notice much less charged public discussion than in the neighbouring Czech Republic, where this kind of news has attracted major headlines and is extensively discussed by media and politicians.

Overall, one can notice that the representatives of the new government sworn in during the pandemic have followed a more critical approach toward China than the figures of the previous government. At the same time, the first public opinion survey shows relatively positive public response toward Chinese help. Thus, the Covid-19 crisis might contribute to a polarization of Slovak attitudes toward China.

1. "In good and in bad, in wind or in rain, China and Slovakia will always be helping each other."

Spain: A necessary partnership with China in battling Covid-19

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The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of China-Spain cooperation. When the crisis started in China, the Spanish Prime Minister and the Head of State delivered messages of solidarity to China and were quite sympathetic towards the concerns of the Chinese government, proactively rejecting any [stigmatization of Chinese communities in Spain](#) and explicitly supporting [China's 'effective' management of the epidemic](#). Spain also sent material support with [two shipments of medical supplies at the end of February and early March](#).

When the centre of the pandemic moved to Europe, China reciprocated by [supporting Spain at different levels](#). China's central and local governments such as [Fujian](#), [Gansu](#), and [Nanning](#) made several medical equipment donations. The most significant Chinese public donation [came from the central government](#) and was comprised of 834 diagnostic kits, 50,000 masks, and 40,000 other individual protection items. Donations from Chinese companies were even higher: [Alibaba](#) and [Huawei](#) – both with a significant presence in Spain – donated 500,000 and one million masks respectively and received public praise from Spanish national leaders. Chinese communities in China and in Spain also donated medical equipment to Spanish citizens and institutions. At the same time, China has established itself as Spain's essential supplier of medical equipment. So far, bilateral commercial contracts have reached more than EUR 726 million, including [EUR 628 million](#) in purchases by the Spanish central government, and [EUR 35](#) and [EUR 23 million](#) by the regional governments of Catalonia and Madrid.

Chinese public diplomacy in action

Chinese diplomacy in Spain has been very proactive in framing a counter-narrative and promoting a positive image of the regime with an emphasis on a "transparent", quick, and effective crisis management by the Chinese government as acknowledged by international organizations such as the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) or the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#).

A review of posts on Twitter by the Chinese embassy in Spain and the Chinese consulate in Barcelona from February to mid-April 2020, suggests that Chinese public diplomacy in Spain has experienced two stages. This was also evidenced by two interviews – 24 February and 17 March – of Yao Fei, Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese embassy in Madrid,¹ in one of Spain's most listened-to radio morning shows.

Until mid-March, when the epidemic was spreading in China, Chinese public diplomacy endorsed a *'defensive'* stance, which turned more *assertive* once the epidemic was brought under control in China and continued spreading in Europe. During the first phase, the Chinese embassy in Spain sought to prevent the stigmatization of the Chinese diaspora,² deflect criticism against the management of the crisis by the Chinese government, and the approval of measures that restricted communications with China. The Chinese narrative also tried to dismiss the Chinese origin of Covid-19, its link with the consumption of wild animals in poorly unregulated wet markets,³ and the lack of transparency in the early days and weeks of the epidemic.⁴

In the second phase, Chinese public diplomacy promoted its views on the effectiveness of the PRC government's crisis management and its contribution to curbing the pandemic both through domestic measures and foreign assistance. China projected itself as a top scientific and medical power capable of developing and producing state-of-the-art vaccines, medicines, health protocols and medical equipment.⁵ Its greater confidence also translated into a more substantial [media coverage of high-level exchanges with Spanish authorities](#) namely the Minister of Foreign Affairs Arancha González Laya, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, and Spain's Head of State, King Felipe VI. This went in hand with the promotion of

1. At that time Yao Fei was the highest-ranking Chinese diplomat in Spain as ambassador Wu Haitao had not yet arrived in Madrid.

2. Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 29 January 2020; "Debemos trabajar juntos para combatir la epidemia", [People's Daily](#), 6 February 2020; Gu Xin, "Vlogger español defiende a China contra maliciosos cibernautas", [People's Daily](#), 6 February 2020; Khadija Bousmaha, "La Embajada de China critica la discriminación a su población en España: 'A nuestros hijos les llaman coronavirus'", [20 Minutos](#), 4 February 2020.

3. Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 28 February 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 28 February 2020.

4. Between [11 February 2020](#) and [23 February 2020](#) the Chinese embassy in Spain published 40 reports on the epidemic of COVID-19 in China on its twitter account.

5. Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 5 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 2 April 2020; Embassy of the in Spain, [Twitter](#), 31 April 2020.

core concepts of Chinese diplomacy such as 'mutual benefit' or the 'Community of shared future for mankind'.⁶

Regarding the concerns expressed by the European External Action Service (EEAS) about [Chinese disinformation on COVID-19](#), on March 20 the official Twitter account of the Chinese embassy in Spain forwarded a [message from Hua Chunying](#), spokeswoman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which generated confusion about the origin and spread of Covid-19 from the United States. However, Chinese diplomacy in Spain has not explicitly advocated the advantages of a Chinese model over those of other countries, or explicitly discredited the European Union nor Spain's traditional allies. Rather, it has informed about various joint initiatives conducted between China and these actors, including the United States, to combat the coronavirus.⁷

China's role in the coronavirus crisis: Views from Spain

Chinese assistance, cooperation, and experience have been positively regarded by Spain's [Head of Government](#) and [Head of State](#) but never rated above those of other countries. Nor have they been used to criticize third-countries management of the crisis, be it at home or abroad.

As for the controversies over the quality of some medical supplies purchased in China, mainly [rapid diagnostic tests](#), and the motivations of Chinese assistance to Spain, the [Spanish government](#) has adopted a conciliatory attitude. In an interview for the CGTN program *The Point*, for instance, Spain's foreign minister, Arancha González Laya, explained that China and Spain are countries that help each other in times of need and that "[in exercising generosity \[China\] projects soft power \[like any other country\]](#)". She also acknowledged that the malfunctioning coronavirus testing kits were bought through a Spanish contractor, not through direct agreements with Chinese authorities and that the issue had been solved with a new shipment of kits.

6. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#), "Xi Jinping Envía Mensaje de Condolencias al Rey de España, Felipe VI por el Brote de la Epidemia de COVID-19 en España", 21 March 2020; [Embassy of the PRC in Spain](#), "Ganar Resueltamente la Batalla contra la Epidemia y Promover la Construcción de la Comunidad de Futuro Compartido de la Humanidad", 4 April 2020

7. Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 13 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 6 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 5 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 27 March 2020.

Likewise, although Prime Minister [Pedro Sánchez](#) himself stated that “it is as important and as necessary to buy abroad as to be self-sufficient and buy domestically”, and whereas the difficulties in purchasing healthcare equipment and materials in China’s overcrowded market have been acknowledged, there have been no publicized concerns by Spanish authorities about overdependence on China. But there are internal discussions on this issue within the public administration and many Spanish companies and it remains to be seen how it will be addressed in the medium term.

In Spain, the strongest criticism of the Chinese government’s management of the coronavirus crisis arises from two sectors. On the one hand, non-governmental organizations that consider Covid-19 within the context of their causes, be they [press freedom](#), [wildlife preservation](#), or [human rights](#) protection. On the other hand, conservative and liberal politicians and media groups critical of the Spanish government have not only condemned domestic measures in China, but also China’s cooperation with Spain.⁸ Among the most critical political leaders, several high-level members of Vox⁹ and, to a lesser extent, of the Popular Party,¹⁰ have referred to the Covid-19 as the “damned [Chinese virus](#)”, the “[21st century plague](#)”, the “[Chinese plague](#)”, and have described the Chinese market as a total “[bazaar](#)” while spreading [conspiracy theories](#) about the origin of Covid-19.

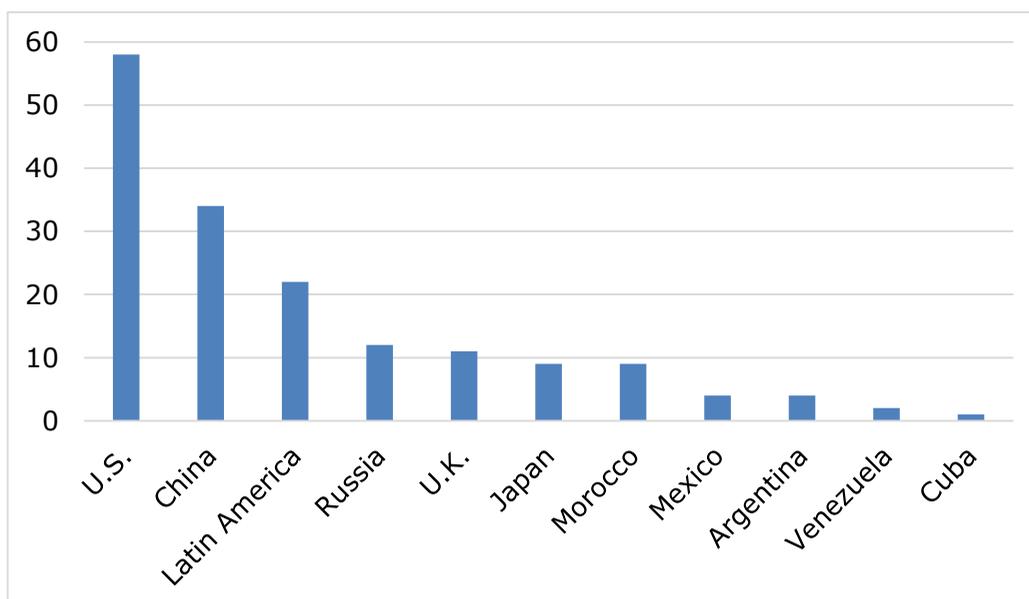
Implications for bilateral relations

Faced with the threat of the coronavirus, Spanish authorities have followed a diversified foreign policy and defended multilateralism as the most effective way to deal with this crisis. This suggests they will continue to bet on maintaining close relations with China. Moreover, China has stood out in this context as the most significant provider of medical equipment and supplies for Spain. In addition, Spanish authorities consider that this crisis should [strengthen multilateralism](#) which will require the active participation of China. This is in line with Spanish public opinion which identifies China as Spain’s second preferred ally outside the EU (Figure 1).

8. Alberto Rojas, “Un Chernobyl en Wuhan”, *El Mundo*, 9 April 2020; David Alandete, “Estados Unidos pone a Sánchez como ejemplo de lo que no hay que hacer”, *ABC*, 9 April 2020; Mar Llera, “Pekín ofrece ayuda sanitaria a España contra el coronavirus virus pero, ¿a qué precio?”, *El Confidencial*, 23 March 2020; Mario Noya, “China es culpable”, *Libertad Digital*, 22 March 2020

9. Vox is a far right-wing populist party with connection with the American “alt-right” that holds the third biggest number of seats in the Spanish parliament.

10. The popular party is a mainstream right-wing party that has alternate in office with the Spanish Socialist Worker’s Party since 1982.

Figure 1: Spanish Public views of preferred allies outside the EU

* *Weighted index = (%First x 1) + (%Second x 0,66) + (%Third x 0,33).*

Source: Barómetro del Real Instituto Elcano (BRIE) nº41 (2020): 17.

Nevertheless, it is far from clear at this point whether this crisis will strengthen bilateral relations in the way the Chinese government wishes. The press release by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on [the talks between Pedro Sánchez and Xi Jinping](#) on 17 March stated that: 'it is believed that, following the epidemic, relations between the two countries will develop even further'. This will probably depend on three issues. First is how Spanish authorities will assess the impact that a further rapprochement with China might have on Spain's relations with its traditional allies. Even if the reaction of some of them has been quite slow and disappointing, there is no appetite inside the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party to lean further toward China at the expense of the EU or NATO. The second issue relates to how Spanish authorities and companies decide to balance concerns about overreliance on Chinese suppliers, particularly in sensitive sectors like medical equipment or 5G infrastructure. Third is the evolution of Spanish domestic politics. Multiple statements by leaders of Vox, for instance, suggest that privileged relations with China would no longer be a state policy if this party were to be part of the Spanish central government.

Sweden: Not quite friends in need with China amid the Covid-19 crisis

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When the Covid-19 epidemic struck Wuhan in early 2020, it came after four years of a steadily worsening diplomatic relationship between Sweden and China. So far, the coronavirus emergency seems to have created no impetus for mending ties. China's initial cover-up and international publicity efforts have further strengthened already widespread suspicions of the country in Sweden. The Chinese embassy in Stockholm has continued its sustained campaign against public voices that do not follow the official PRC view on issues it regards as sensitive. Moreover, Chinese Communist Party media has criticized Sweden's distinctively liberal approach to the pandemic – an article which the Swedish side described as part of a “global disinformation pandemic”.

Material support and cooperation

Due to a lack of surplus medical protective equipment, Sweden was [not able to](#) contribute to a joint EU delivery to China in February. China's embassy [has stated](#) its willingness to facilitate Swedish purchases of medical supplies from China. Reports suggest [that several Swedish actors](#) have bought much needed medical equipment from China during the pandemic. However, the author has not been able to find information on its size relative to purchases from other countries. Moreover, there are no reports on donations of supplies from the Chinese government to Sweden.

¹ The author thanks Oscar Shao for his research assistance

Chinese criticism of Sweden's response to the pandemic

Sweden has adopted a distinctive approach to fight the pandemic, where physical distancing is to be achieved primarily by recommendations from civil servants at the Public Health Agency, rather than laws and regulations issued by the cabinet and legislature. Critics, including major international media and the US president Donald Trump, have described this as a dangerously laissez-faire strategy.

On 13 March, the Global Times – a nationalist daily ultimately owned by the Chinese Communist Party – [published an editorial](#) highly critical of Sweden's approach, demanding that "The international community, especially the European Union, should severely condemn Sweden's surrender to the virus". Foreign minister Ann Linde [responded](#) that, "International cooperation is needed to solve the situation the world is now facing. ... polemics don't help". When asked by Swedish media, a spokesperson at China's foreign ministry [declined to comment](#) on Sweden's approach to the coronavirus outbreak and emphasized the need for global cooperation. In an op-ed on March 24, Sweden's Minister for Defense, Peter Hultqvist, [described](#) the Global Times article as part of a an "international information war". Prior to the pandemic Hultqvist had also [criticized](#) China in straightforward terms.

Swedish views on China's response to the pandemic

Starting in early 2018, China's embassy in Sweden [repeatedly targeted](#) individuals and organizations for views that contradict official Chinese positions on contentious issues. The campaign has since [extended to opinions](#) on China's management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a phone call with Linde on March 20, China's ambassador Gui Congyou [criticized](#) local media's coverage of the outbreak in China, and asked the Swedish government to "explicitly oppose any actions that politicize the epidemic, label the virus and stigmatize China." Linde's press secretary [told media](#) that, "The Foreign Minister has been clear about not engaging in polemics in these times, but has emphasized that the freedom of expression is constitutionally protected in Sweden".

Partly due to Sweden's administrative tradition of independent government agencies, the Public Health Agency has taken on key responsibilities in responding to the pandemic. On 13 February, Sweden's State Epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, [sought](#) to tone down suspicions that China was concealing the real number of infected persons, saying "I think we should calm down and wait for the WHO's assessment, they are the ones who have direct contact with

China". In mid-February, the agency's Director General, Johan Carlson, [questioned](#) the restrictions against travelers from China implemented by the US and Russia. On March 3, [Tegnell said](#) that, "It's possible that China, through its drastic measures, has saved the world from a serious problem." On April 8, however, he [lamented](#) that the failure of the WHO – and thus indirectly, China – to provide anti-body tests from Wuhan complicated Sweden's efforts to get a good understanding of the virus.

The Chinese government's response to the crisis has received little praise from media and politicians in Sweden. Repeated themes in the public discussion instead include the [initial cover-up](#) of the spread in Wuhan, [Chinese disinformation](#) about the pandemic, [Taiwan's exclusion](#) from the WHO, and worries that China and other non-democracies are [taking advantage](#) of the crisis to push their agendas. Moreover, there have been [demands](#) to speed up planned national legislation for investment screening, in order to [prevent](#) Chinese actors from [buying up](#) Swedish companies in [critical sectors](#) during the looming economic crisis. In late April 2020, [the Swedish parliament agreed to](#) introduce a temporary legislation to stop foreign investments that harm the country's security interests.

The US-China narrative battle coming to Sweden

On 2 April, the US ambassador to Sweden, Kenneth A Howery, [published](#) an op-ed that criticized China's initial "cover-up" and attempts to "put the blame on others". In a statement on the Chinese embassy's webpage, Ambassador Gui [responded](#), "My colleagues and I never criticized or smeared the United States in Swedish media. The fact that Ambassador of the US Mr. Kenneth Howery accused and smeared China ... started a very bad precedent." Since he presented his credentials in November 2019, Howery has [on several instances](#) criticized various Chinese policies in public.

Switzerland: Covid-19 has not altered limited China policy debate

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Switzerland was hit early by Covid-19

The novel coronavirus is having a significant impact on Switzerland both in terms of health and economic challenges. Bordering with Italy, Switzerland was among the earliest countries in Europe to be confronted with the virus. By 26 April, Switzerland counted 29,061 confirmed Covid-19 infections and over 1,337 fatalities. In terms of economic challenges, 1.7 million employees have been registered with the national unemployment insurance offering compensation for 80% of lost income. Unemployment is expected to rise significantly and economic output to contract sharply. A V-shape like scenario of economic activity is still possible, yet unlikely. Worst case scenarios now include an unemployment rate of 7% and drop in GDP by 10% in 2020 vis-à-vis 2019. The Federal Council, Switzerland's executive arm, announced a financial injection of CHF 42 billion for short-time work compensation and immediate economic aid. Furthermore, companies running into liquidity problems as a result of Covid-19 will be supported with CHF 40 billion worth of bridging loans.

Covid-19 related Sino-Swiss transactions are commercial

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is the only Swiss government actor that supported the combat of the novel coronavirus within China, as well as in neighbouring countries in Asia – mainly through the WHO's China office and its regional office for the Western Pacific. In a [press release](#), the SDC explicitly associated its existing efforts in strengthening local capacity for management of major epidemics in the region to the Belt and Road Initiative.

When the crisis reached Switzerland in late February, the Swiss Army Pharmacy¹, through the Federal Office for Defence Procurement (armasuisse), reached out to suppliers in China to procure protection kits and drugs on commercial terms. The same was true in the [Canton of Zurich](#), one of several subnational procurement initiatives, some of them brokered by private matchmakers. Furthermore, in a successful competitive bid, the Swiss government sourced two Chinese mask (FFP2) production lines, which were delivered as an intra-company shipping of the Chinese mask machine manufacturer to its Swiss subsidiary. As a latest development following these transactions, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pleaded to the Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis on 7 April to “significantly step up supplies” for ventilator components, as Chinese producers face an “impossible” task of expanding supply to meet global demand”. Switzerland indeed boasts several leading component manufacturers, but also Hamilton Medical, one of Europe’s top three OEMs for ventilators that is also in need of these scarce components. It thus remains to be seen how the Swiss government – that so far bravely refrained from imposing export restrictions of any type – will respond to the request from China’s top diplomat.

Critical depiction of China’s efforts to change the narrative around its role in the pandemic

The portrayal of the Chinese government in Swiss media in the context of Covid-19 evolved from its initial cover-up, to the draconian lock-down of Wuhan and Hubei, its technology-enabled governance and control capacity to its widely broadcast public diplomacy efforts as benefactor to desperate European countries such as Italy, Spain or Serbia. Official Chinese representatives in Switzerland continually highlighted the substantial efforts China undertook to “buy time” for the world and vocally condemned the US travel restrictions for Chinese nationals. The [PRC embassy in Switzerland used its website to counter articles connecting the Chinese government’s actions with the spread of this pandemic](#). The same Swiss media, however, did not miss any occasion to lament, almost deride, the EU’s dividedness and inability to display solidarity and to deliver during a crisis. Overall, Covid-19 has further cemented the image of an authoritarian China able to quickly mobilize resources and impose invasive governance on routines of people and businesses.

1. Among other agencies tasked with national supply security in accordance with the [National Economic Supply Act](#), and the [Ordinance on National Economic Supply](#).

Covid-19 not pushing Swiss political debates to reflect on the changing “world order”

Besides deploring the total disappearance of Chinese tourists from Swiss tourist hotspots, which is likely to continue in the medium term at least, there is little self-reflection on implications from a world with an emboldened China and a collapsing multilateralism. Debates about security of supply and overreliance on Chinese manufacturing, especially for medical protection equipment, drugs and vaccines, happen on the margin only, as most political debates are absorbed with domestic questions. The fact that [the international press was commending the Swiss government’s rapid and unbureaucratic economic policy measures](#) has not encouraged those self-reflections either. Further, in contrast to Germany, no scepticism has been voiced regarding the potential risk from Chinese take-overs of under-valued but economically important Swiss assets during and after this crisis. This, as a matter of fact, fits well into the immutable stance of Switzerland’s liberal and business elites, who tend to be unwilling to recognize the state-driven nature of China’s “socialist market economy” – best manifested in Switzerland’s arguably early and non-substantiated granting of the market economy status (MES) to China under the WTO in 2007.

UK: Sharpening the China Debate amid Covid-19

TIM SUMMERS

CHATHAM HOUSE

The impact of Covid-19 on UK-China relations has so far developed in two phases, with the dynamics shifting as the centre of attention moved from Hubei to Europe and the UK.

The impact on bilateral interactions first began to be felt in late January. Just over a week after the lock down of Wuhan on 23 January, the British government organised two evacuation flights for British citizens in Hubei province (on 31 January and 9 February), and on 4 February [advised](#) against all travel to Hubei. The British consulates in Wuhan and Chongqing were closed. The UK [sent](#) two shipments of medical supplies to Wuhan.

In a [phone call](#) with President Xi Jinping on 18 February (several weeks after Xi's calls with French and German leaders), Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed support and – according to the [Xinhua readout](#) – admiration for the Chinese response to the virus, and the two leaders emphasised cooperation in dealing with the crisis. Meanwhile, the Department for International Trade began work on [support](#) for British businesses affected by the impact on their operations in China.

After the WHO declared a global pandemic on 12 March, the British government began to [announce](#) drastic measures, having [resisted](#) these beforehand. London has continued to stress the importance of working with China “to help the world improve its capacity to tackle the virus”. With the focus of the epidemic moving to Europe, the [British Embassy in China](#) has been working to source equipment to be sent to the UK, and London has [reportedly](#) been looking at the Chinese experience of emerging from lockdown. The UK is host to more Chinese students than any other European country, and many of these have been returning home, making the UK a major source of imported cases into [mainland China](#) (310 out of 1607 from 48 countries as of 22 April) and [Hong Kong](#) (70 percent of 360 imported cases by early April). In early April the Chinese Embassy

arranged a charter flight for around 200 Chinese students under 18 to return to China from the UK.

The Chinese government's profile in the UK has been led – including on social media – by its very active Ambassador in London, Liu Xiaoming, and has had two broad components. One has been to encourage cooperation and to characterise the coronavirus as a common challenge. This has presented an opportunity to promote one of the main concepts in China's global vision, the idea of a "shared future for humankind", which Liu made the theme of a [speech](#) at Chatham House on 2 March. The Chinese Embassy has also publicised material support for the UK, around 17.5 tonnes of medical supplies. The second component of Chinese messaging has been more defensive, [responding](#) in firm language through the media to criticism that Beijing should be blamed for causing the pandemic. Liu has also publicly [paid tribute](#) to Li Wenliang, the doctor whose case attracted plenty of coverage in the UK.

The debate turns hostile

Indeed, there was plenty of British reporting of the outbreak in Hubei from late January onwards. In late March, however, a new and more hostile element emerged as some media ran [stories](#) calling for a "reckoning" with Beijing, with [comment pieces](#) by a number of senior Conservative Party politicians on the same theme. The Henry Jackson Society, an advocacy group, [published](#) a report on 5 April calling for legal action to demand China pay USD 4 trillion in "compensation" to the G7 for its "failure to adequately report information to the WHO", suggesting "battle" with China over the issue "would be nothing, if not historic". On 6 April, parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee [published](#) a short report which accused China of "propagating disinformation" and of not keeping the WHO informed about the spread of the virus. These views come from voices which have consistently been critical of China and of British government engagement with Beijing, and will [sharpen](#) the UK's policy debate. The Foreign Secretary [commented](#) on 16 April that "we can't have business as usual after this crisis", suggesting that there will be a deeper review of London's China policy in due course.

For the moment, the net impact of the Covid-19 crisis on China's image in the UK looks to be negative, and views will become more entrenched. Sino-British relations are likely to become increasingly contested as responses to the virus in the UK exacerbate an existing trend of [growing divergence](#) between those who argue that China provides opportunities for engagement and those who see China primarily as a threat to national security. Those who believe that engagement is needed in order to deal with this crisis and any future ones, or that non-state

threats are the main ones the UK faces, will find their views challenged by growing advocacy of disengagement and even hostility as prominent elements of post-Covid-19 British policy debate about China.

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About the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC)

The European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) is a gathering of China analysts and experts from a selection of European research institutes. It is devoted to the policy-oriented study of Chinese foreign policy and relations between China and European countries as well as China and the EU. It facilitates regular exchanges among participating researchers with a view to deepening the understanding within the European policy and research community and the broader public of how Europe, as a complex set of actors, relates with China and how China's development and evolving global role is likely to impact the future of Europe. The network's discussions and analyses take a decidedly 'bottom-up' approach, accounting for the various aspects of bilateral relations between European countries and China, and the points of convergence and divergence among EU member states in order to examine EU-China relations in a realistic and comprehensive way.

The network was first launched on the initiative of the Elcano Royal Institute and the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) in Brussels on 6 November 2014. This meeting brought together experts from eleven EU member states, as well as observers from EU institutions. The ETNC members decided to meet in a different capital every six months and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) joined Elcano and Ifri in their efforts to move the project forward. The network now counts members from 21 research institutes in as many countries, and each participates on the basis of equality.

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