



Coronavirus diplomacy: Chinese medical assistance and its diplomatic implications

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Abstract

The pandemic of COVID-19 struck the world in early 2020. China, which is regarded as the source of the new disease was also the first one to overcome it. After controlling the outbreak domestically, China started conducting public diplomacy offensive, which we will call ‘coronavirus diplomacy.’ Its main focus is put on assisting other countries that are still struggling with high numbers of infections and many difficulties, such as shortages in medical equipment or medical staff. This article aims to review public diplomacy activities undertaken by China in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. The goal is to determine what messages the Chinese government has been sending through those activities. The investigation was qualitative and the main research method employed is content analysis. The authors analyzed statements of China’s representatives in search of the messages that were supposed to be communicated.

Keywords Coronavirus diplomacy · Health diplomacy · Public diplomacy · COVID-19 · China

Introduction

In early 2020, the world has experienced unprecedented occurrences. The pandemic of the new disease COVID-19 reshaped the way it functioned. To combat the deadly disease, governments of most countries have introduced measures that a few months earlier could only be perceived as a political fiction of the globalized, interconnected world, including suspensions of air connections, restrictions in crossing interstate borders, bans on leaving home except justified cases, just to mention few of them. After several weeks of severe restrictions, many governments eased at least some of them in

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Summer, but the rapid growth of new infections in Autumn 2020 led to imposing them again. At the time of writing this article (March–April 2020), few people attempted to forecast when the whole crisis would have ended, while at the time of revising it (October 2020), the world is still far from returning to pre-COVID normality. What we knew is that the whole world has changed completely, with many not necessary events including the Olympic Games being canceled or postponed. The ultimate priorities for roughly all the governments in the world were to combat the new disease and potentially to limit the economic effects of the pandemic, which are expected to be massive.

The COVID-19 was first noted in the Chinese Province Hubei, and its capital city Wuhan is regarded as the source of the new disease, which probably has transmitted to humans from bats. The outbreak of the new virus was observed in December 2019 (Guo et al. 2020). China was the first country hit by the new virus, shortly before other countries of the region such as Japan or the Republic of Korea. However, soon the virus spread to the rest of the world and received a global status, with the WHO characterizing it as a pandemic in March 2020. The outbreak proved many countries, or most of them, unprepared for the scale of the disease they were to combat, with healthcare services experiencing unprecedented difficulties. In some, high death rates were observed and the need to select which patients shall be helped. One of the most glaring problems concerned a shortage of medical equipment such as medical masks, gloves and uniforms, and ventilators. From the political context, this provided favorable circumstances for China to make use of the difficult situation. Firstly, it was the world's biggest manufacturer of this kind of products. Secondly, at the time when the rest of the world was struggling with a rapid increase in the number of infections, China, according to the official data, appeared to have ceased control over the situation and was gradually returning to normality. This paved the ground for a public diplomacy offensive, which we will call 'coronavirus diplomacy.'

This article aims to review public diplomacy activities undertaken by China in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the Spring 2020 shock. The goal is to determine what messages Chinese government attempted to send through those activities. The investigation was qualitative, and the main research method employed is content analysis. Within the research, the authors analyzed statements of China's representatives in search of the messages that were supposed to be communicated. The statements included, in particular, speeches by China's leader Xi Jinping and by China's Foreign Ministry spokespersons, although to a lesser extent the research also included secondary sources such as articles published in electronic versions of the world's leading media. This allowed observing what activities China's 'coronavirus diplomacy' included and determining the key themes of Chinese rhetoric.

Theoretical considerations

Soft power should be a starting point of this analysis since public diplomacy is strongly embedded in this concept, created by Joseph Nye. It refers to the states' possibility of influencing other states and non-state actors and persuading them



to follow their lead (Nye 2008). Modern states notice the need to build their soft power, manage it and shape their international image, and spread positive perceptions which as a result can contribute to their political, economic and cultural interests (Kaneva 2011; Melissen 2005; Dinnie 2016). According to Nye (2004), soft power has an international meaning and is supposed to contribute to the way a certain state is perceived by the foreign public. The core meaning of soft power, therefore, refers to the external dimension. However, the Chinese perspective on soft power is more specific and complex. In China, soft power has a significant internal meaning as well—besides influencing external goals, strengthening soft power and conducting specific image measures (for example, staging mega-events) is supposed to shape the internal self-image of the Chinese society. Zue Xuejin from Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences highlighted that for the developing country soft power has a crucial meaning for international perceptions as well as internal development and wealth (Barr 2011). Such a perspective on soft power can be derived from two different aspects. Firstly, the People's Republic of China is an ethnically diverse country with more than 50 minorities. Therefore, it has to make an extra effort to provide unity and build a unified national identity and feeling of belonging. Chinese identity as a nation has to be created. Secondly, a country with an authoritarian rule, through strengthening soft power can build loyalty and legitimization of the ruling party. In terms of external goals of soft power and public diplomacy efforts, exhibiting China as a significant and peaceful international player, an advocate of other developing countries and potential counterweight to the US hegemony can be named. Therefore, Chinese foreign policy concentrates on seeking strategic partners, new areas of influence and promoting the idea of peaceful rising (McCormick 2008).

The research presented in this article concerns a specific example of shaping a certain image of a state through the so-called coronavirus diplomacy. The term can be used as a specification of health diplomacy which shall be explained later. It does not have an established position in the scientific discourse. It has appeared in the media worldwide in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic in March and April 2020, in several contexts. Most commonly, it refers to Chinese international activity—its assistance and aid to other countries in their struggle against the disease (Bocchi 2020). Kelman (2020) referred to the 'coronavirus diplomacy' in the context of attempts to create lasting peace among those who might not have been friendly before—through working together to combat the crisis. Kelman (2020) provided an example of Chinese medical aid for Italy and other countries, but appears to perceive the term in a rather idealistic perspective, contrary to many international observers. Some authors have also referred to 'coronavirus diplomacy' in another context; for example, Majda Ruge and Janka Oertel discussed the issue in reference to the behavior of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić who criticized the EU and praised China for their help in the context of COVID-19 pandemic (Ruge and Oertel 2020).

In many of the publications, including Chinese, 'coronavirus diplomacy' gained a pejorative meaning referring to the Chinese attempt to make political use of the global crises (Wenting 2020). Another approach has been presented by Burhanettin Duran (2020), who used the term 'corona diplomacy' more generally, in reference to the pursuit of joint action against the virus.



Another term that has appeared in the media is ‘mask diplomacy.’ Originally it concerned the donations of medical equipment from China to Japan, alongside the general improvement of relations after Japan provided help for China at the beginning of the epidemic and after the Japanese government has initially imposed travel ban only on Hubei Province (Fischettli and Roth 2020; Li and McElveen 2020). Many observers have noticed the improvement of bilateral relations and expressions of mutual sympathy between both nations, particularly after China received medical equipment from Japan (Lam 2020). ‘Mask diplomacy’ as a term was later popularized and used more generally in the context of providing protective gear with the aim of reaching diplomatic goals.

While the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic reached many countries in the Autumn 2020, China is still pursuing its ‘coronavirus diplomacy.’ However, it is evolving toward so-called vaccine diplomacy. Financial Times states that at the beginning of October 2020 Beijing decided on joining the World Health Organization initiative to ensure just distribution of COVID-19 vaccines once they are available. This decision is perceived as part of a broader public relations strategy of China, which is supposed to counteract negative perceptions of this country as well as to present it as a responsible citizen of a global society (China’s vaccine diplomacy..., 2020). Mercator Institute for China Studies from Berlin even claimed that ‘mask diplomacy’ has been replaced with ‘vaccine diplomacy (MERICS 2020); however, it still fits into a more general category of ‘coronavirus diplomacy.’

In this research, we will consider ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ in the context of pursuing foreign policy goals through building a positive image of an aid provider and trustworthy partner, by the example of China which appears to be the most active country in this field, although Russia has also gained its impetus.

Coronavirus diplomacy should be considered in conjunction with such of the established scientific categories of diplomatic studies as public diplomacy and health diplomacy (or medical diplomacy). According to van Ham (2001), having a bad reputation can be a serious impediment for a state that wishes to play a significant role in the international arena. Therefore, image and reputation became a significant element of states’ strategies. In a globalized world, there is no time for in-depth analysis of information; therefore, perceptions of other states or nations are based mostly on clichés or stereotypes that shape opinions and influence the decision-making process to a much extent (Anholt 2007).

Public diplomacy is one of the key terms used in this research. It is aimed at reaching foreign publics and shaping foreign perceptions, which are to serve as a fundament for the actions of other countries. At first, public diplomacy was perceived as a tool for hostile states to influence foreign societies and then through grassroots pressure, to impact the foreign government (Gilboa 2008). Szondi (2008) outlines the main goals of public diplomacy as changing the behavior and political attitudes, as well as promoting economic interests. Even though public diplomacy encompasses mostly long perspective initiatives, some efforts can be perceived as ad hoc tools of responding to potential challenges or threats as well, especially when states have to face unexpected circumstances. This can be exemplified by a wide category of development aid provided in crisis situations like pandemics or natural disasters.



Chinese public diplomacy pursued in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic was strongly based on providing assistance to other countries. Even though it is not its pure example, it is strongly connected with international development aid, one of the typical public diplomacy tools. Usually, it is perceived as transfers from rich countries to poorer countries. OECD defines official development aid as ‘*government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries.*’ According to the OECD, development aid may include such measures as grants, soft loans, and technical assistance. Financial support like loans or credits for military purposes is excluded from accepted forms of development aid (OECD 2020). Other forms of development aid include administrative overheads of development agencies or debt forgiveness as well (Kharas 2007). Current assistance provided by China, therefore, cannot be treated as a pure example of development aid, since their beneficiaries also include rich and developed nations. Nevertheless, the situation in Spring 2020 was extraordinary, with states having had problems with acquiring necessary supplies regardless of their financial capabilities. Apart from that, the world is facing a threat of global recession on an unprecedented scale. Thus, the assistance provided by China even to developed countries may contribute to softening the scale of the crisis.

‘Coronavirus diplomacy’ in principle should be perceived as a specification of health diplomacy. The most frequent understanding of health with regard to diplomacy encompasses rather the process of cooperation and negotiations between IGOs and NGOs to counteract serious medical and health challenges or threats (Fidler 2013). The first example of such diplomatic activity took place in the mid-nineteenth century when the first International Sanitary Conference was organized in Paris, in 1851 (Ersoy et al. 2011). After establishing the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948, the spectrum of health issues subject to diplomatic activity has widened significantly, as well as new structural possibilities of conducting such diplomacy flourished (COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak 2020). However, speaking of actors of health diplomacy, we should not forget about states, the fundamental players within diplomacy of any kind. In terms of health diplomacy, since health is subject to the governments and is shaped by political decisions, it is no surprise that states play a central role. Extremely high funding costs of the development of the healthcare system also make the state the most efficient player. Health-related issues have also been used by states in pursuing foreign policy goals.

One way of understanding health diplomacy is a perspective adopted by the WHO which defines it as:

1. a process through which various subjects like states, IGOs and NGOs negotiate with each other to meet international health challenges, like communicable diseases;
2. using different health concepts in their policy-shaping and negotiation strategies with the aim of reaching non-medical objectives, for example political, social or economic (Fidler 2013).



The definitions offered by authors of scientific papers, in principle, comply with the WHO's definitions. They refer to such aspects as negotiations (which is similar to the first understanding offered by WHO) and the impact of health issues on non-political aspects (Feldbaum and Michaud 2010). Kickbusch et al. (2007) defined health diplomacy as relating to multi-level and multi-actor negotiations that influence the health areas of global policy, which again corresponds mostly with the WHO's first understanding of health diplomacy. In turn, Fauci while defining medical diplomacy (which should be regarded as a synonym for health diplomacy) highlighted the fact that in the current globalized world communicable diseases impose a threat to political, economic and social stability. Consequently, medical diplomacy is about '*winning of hearts and minds of people in poor countries by exporting medical care, expertise and personnel to help those who need it most*' (Fauci 2007). Those two perspectives on health (or medical) diplomacy correspond with the latter understanding of health diplomacy proposed by the WHO. Following those two concepts, health diplomacy is perceived from the perspective of soft power, where medical assistance is aimed at reaching non-medical goals. This refers particularly to economic and political objectives and is very similar to the understanding of 'coronavirus diplomacy,' which can be in a way perceived as health diplomacy pursued by China in reference to COVID-19.

Health diplomacy is associated with several theoretical and philosophical concepts. States, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations all evoke human rights, solidarity, social justice, compassion and equity as basic concepts being a driving force for health diplomacy (Fidler 2013). Those are values that are historically embedded in Western societies and their sense of altruism (Fauci 2007). It is not typical only for health diplomacy since public diplomacy can be based on all those concepts and values as well. Such motivations as social justice, compassion and solidarity are listed as some of the PRC's motivations in providing aid in combating COVID-19 pandemic as well.

Health diplomacy has been dominated by aspects of communicable diseases since they affect many different levels of states' activity—political, economic, social. The potential of the international spread of such diseases can pose a threat to many interests of states. Infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, SARS, AH1N1 or currently COVID-19 together with increasing linkages between health and economic development result in attaching higher political priority to such threats. What is more, governments understand that counteracting communicable diseases that can threaten their interests requires cooperation, surveillance and sharing information (Fauci 2007).

In contemporary health diplomacy pursued by states, the typical aim is to use health-related issues to reach non-health political (and economic) goals. Such health diplomacy is usually implemented on a bilateral level. In this context, health diplomacy here can have two different meanings—the state may provide assistance to counteract mutual threats deriving from health or medical situation or to strengthen and improve their bonds with other countries (Fidler 2013). Strengthening or improving bonds can relate, for example, to maintaining or expanding already existing influence in a certain region. This is the case of development aid provided by China in many African states. Already during the Cold War, China decided on using



health issues as one of the aspects of development aid, provided to socialist countries in particular. Later Beijing decided to reach other developing countries (not only those included in the Soviet bloc) in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The main motive behind such health or development aid was to expand the socialist revolution (Huang 2010). Health is still widely used in Chinese development aid, but the motivation has changed into extending economic cooperation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than 600 Chinese teachers and more than 15,000 Chinese doctors have worked in sub-Saharan Africa (McCormick 2008). Similar initiatives had been undertaken by the Soviet Union or the USA during the Cold War (Twigg 2010). Another example that can be evoked when discussing health diplomacy is Cuba, which in 2007 sent more than 32,000 Cuban health workers to 76 countries as well, while Cuban professors trained more than 47,600 foreign students from 126 countries participating in University courses (Berman 2008). An interesting example of the motivation behind Cuban health diplomacy is gratitude and feeling of duty to help other states in need in order to 'pay the debt' since Cuba once was in such need itself and received a lot of support (Feinsilver 2008). Health has also been incorporated into soft power endeavors by the US military. Within foreign operations, Americans provide ad hoc medical care using US navy medical ships *Mercy* and *Comfort* (Lopez 2018).

According to the above, health diplomacy can take many forms, and it encompasses many different methods of conducting it. In reference to this research, the concepts of health diplomacy which refers to the use of medical or health aspects as soft power assets appears most adequate. Accordingly, health-related issues are used to reach foreign policy goals. In this sense, 'coronavirus diplomacy' in principle is the specification of health (or medical) diplomacy, which, on the other hand, is part of the state's public diplomacy.

China's public diplomacy and the COVID-19 pandemic

The international communication that China has been conducting in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, in short, can be divided into two parts. The first one refers to how China managed to handle the disease domestically, the second to the assistance it has been providing to other countries. Each of them will be described below.

China's response to internal COVID-19 outbreak

As noted, China was the first one to combat COVID-19. The virus was observed already in December 2019, when an increasing number of respiratory infections were reported. Once the COVID-19 epidemic broke out in China, the authorities have classified it as a Category B disease requiring Category A measures, which meant the need to do everything possible to minimize its impact. Particular measures were introduced in Hubei Province and its capital city Wuhan—the center of the epidemic, including strict control of the movement of people, sending over 40.000 medics from other parts of China, setting up provisional hospitals (Shanghai



Institutes for International Studies 2020). Special measures that have been introduced in mid-January included the closing of transport to and out of Wuhan, extending holidays of schools and universities, closing shops except those selling food and medicines. Most public transport and private vehicles were barred from the roads, there were severe restrictions concerning leaving homes, etc. (Graham-Harrison and Kuo 2020) Other measures included the use of mass surveillance to track infections (Yuan 2020).

Initially, China has been strongly criticized internationally for its government's conduct during the epidemic in China, particularly in reference to muzzling medics who first warned about the new disease. This criticism reached a peak when doctor Li Wenliang, one of the first whistle-blowers, silenced by the police in December 2019, died of the illness on February 7 (Pei 2020). The measures Chinese government implanted were also subject to criticism, which were often referred to as 'authoritarian' (Huang 2020), although with the passing time they have also received credit for their effectiveness.

The criticism against China was particularly strong in the USA, where it was raised that the Chinese COVID-19 infections have been understated—such findings were to be reported to the White House by the CIA (Barnes 2020). However, it should be noted that China, hence being the origin of the disease, was also one of the first countries to effectively seize control over the outbreak. Since mid-March China began to report no new domestic coronavirus cases, while the few appearing concerned the people arriving from overseas (Givetash and Chen 2020). What is more, unlike many other countries, in early Autumn 2020 China has not been undergoing the so-called second wave of the pandemic.

The success in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in China can be regarded as the first source of its soft power offensive. Chinese highlighted the measures they were able to adopt, and attempted to position itself as a global leader in fighting against the pandemic. Even before China managed to overcome the outbreak, the narrative promoted by Chinese media referred to the supremacy of the Chinese way of fighting the disease. It was also underlined that through its struggle China bought time for the rest of the world to prepare for the pandemic (Yuan 2020). Chinese have also been claiming to act transparently—for example, through using a daily reporting mechanism (Shanghai Institutes for International Studies 2020).

Chinese success in coping with the domestic COVID-19 outbreak was often mentioned by spokespeople of the Chinese government, who stated that 'China set an example' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020a). China's leader Xi Jinping spoke about the 'people's war' that China declared on the virus and that the country had 'strong mobilization capacity, rich experience in responding to public health incidents' (Blanchard 2020). These words summarize the message that China was to send through its successful struggle with the disease—to present China as the country capable of combating such a threat.

Of course, the measures undertaken by the Chinese government to combat the virus were not directly a part of its public diplomacy. The Chinese government was acting under pressure facing an internal health crisis, and all the undertaken measures were first and foremost aimed to avoid further infections and deaths. Once the situation improved, it simply attempted to make use of its success concerning



the international image of the country. However, some public diplomacy measures were introduced instantly; for example, the construction of provisional hospitals was broadcasted online, showing how effective China can be in coping with such matters. China has also attempted to picture itself as transparent, through reporting the information about the outbreak. This, on the other hand, contrasted with the initial reactions of Chinese authorities which appeared to have downplayed the first symptoms of the crisis.

Assistance to other states in combating COVID-19

The second, probably even more important aspect of China's public diplomacy, connected with the COVID-19 outbreak referred to the assistance China provided to other countries struggling with the pandemic. Of course, it is not entirely separated from the first one, since China was able to help others only after it controlled the situation in its own country. In the early period of the disease, it benefited from the foreign aid itself, which was later reflected in its rhetoric concerning its assistance to other countries.

Beginning from March 2020, China initiated a massive aid to other countries. The assistance included sending products that were the most necessary in fighting the outbreak of COVID-19, such as testing kits, ventilators, masks. Apart from that, it has sent medical staff to particular countries. There were many aid recipients; for example, as of March 31, the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spoke about providing masks to 120 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020a). It was, however, not only free aid delivered by the government. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aid was provided through four channels: government-to-government assistance, cooperation on health technology, assistance on sub-national level provided by local governments and non-governmental assistance from Chinese companies and non-governmental institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020b). Donations of the necessary supplies by Chinese private companies included, for example, Huawei sending face masks to Spain, Italy and the Netherlands (Braw 2020), Alibaba foundation sending 1 million protective masks to Italy (Peel et al. 2020), ZTE donating 2,000 face masks to the city of L'Aquila in central Italy where it runs a development center (Fallon 2020), and Bank of China donating masks, protective clothing, goggles and gloves to Canada (Jackson 2020). As of March 23, Chinese companies donated medical supplies to 20 countries, while local governments donated medical supplies to sub-national entities in 19 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020c). These figures are not accurate and subject to changes since new countries keep receiving Chinese assistance. Apart from that, China has been criticized that many of the supplies it delivered were sold rather than donated. For example, Croatia had received medical supplies from China which it purchased, although future aid was also announced (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020d). This, however, did not make China resign from the assistance rhetoric—Li Keqiang while talking with Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković promised that *'China will do its best to support Croatia in fighting the outbreak and facilitate its purchase of medical supplies from China*



through commercial channels' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020e). If deliveries to Italy are considered, some were donated by the Chinese red cross, while others had to be paid for (Braw 2020). It is therefore difficult to estimate the exact size of Chinese assistance. On the other hand, certain countries used diplomatic channels to request the Chinese government for assistance in arranging such purchases, so in the light of the global crisis, such deliveries were in fact assisted by the Chinese government.

It should be noted that the Chinese attempted to utilize the aid and assistance they provided to other countries in a way typical for public diplomacy. This has been done, for example, through films showing the scale of the aid (See CGTN 2020). Chinese have been publishing videos of the people grateful for the aid it provided. These undertakings are probably aimed to communicate with the Chinese audience in particular (Fallon 2020), but it should be remembered that public diplomacy has both an internal and external dimension, which are interconnected. Consequently, the same measures can be reaching both internal and external audiences.

Another issue refers to grateful speeches by politicians in the countries receiving Chinese assistance, which can be regarded as a very welcome consequence of China's assistance. A particularly glaring example concerns Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić who claimed that European solidarity did not exist and that he only believed in Chinese help (Myers and Rubin 2020). Italian foreign minister Luigi Di Maio hailed the arrival of Chinese supplies and medics, which coincided with a more general dissatisfaction among the Italian elites about insufficient aid from the EU countries (Barigazzi 2020). When Italy asked its European partners for help at the beginning of March through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, there was no response. It was China to airlift 30 tons of medical supplies to Rome. Di Maio's reaction posted on the Internet can be regarded as a *'public diplomacy triumph for China'* (Fallon 2020). Gratefulness was also expressed by Spain's Foreign Minister, who tweeted that he had told his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi that he hoped to see easier trade between the two countries (Scimia 2020). This kind of message is exactly what a country which aims to improve its international image seeks.

The assistance China provided to other countries fighting the pandemic in Spring 2020 can be connected to several declared motivations. They include showcasing China's gratitude for the aid it received while struggling with the outbreak itself, presenting China as an international, responsible power, and to lay the grounds for boosting future cooperation.

China as the source of the coronavirus outbreak was the first one to struggle. At the time, it accepted donations of the necessary supplies from many countries. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020g) informed about 79 countries and 10 international organizations to have provided aid for China. Once China seized control over the domestic crisis and other countries had to combat the outbreak in their countries, China used gratitude and reciprocity rhetoric. As a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry Geng Shuang said during one of the press conferences, *'it is China's traditional virtue to repay goodwill with greater kindness. We will never forget the political support from the international community during our hardest times'* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020f). Several days later he added that *'for countries that have assisted China in its fight against the epidemic, we will*



reciprocate their kindness without any hesitation if they need it’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020c). Similar statements were also raised by another Ministry’s spokesperson Hua Chunying, who said that China helps other countries to *‘to reciprocate these countries’ earlier support for us, and out of humanitarian considerations*’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020g). China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spoke in a more general manner, but also raised the gratitude motivation in reference to assistance to particular countries, such as Iran, Italy, Czech Republic, Republic of Korea or European countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020f, h, i).

Chinese appreciation for international aid was raised not only by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also by key state leaders. Xi Jinping in his speech to the G20 leaders during the extraordinary summit referred to the assistance China received from the members of the global community in their most difficult moments, and that such *‘expressions of friendship will always be remembered and cherished by the Chinese people*’ (Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Poland 2020a). Similar remarks about remembering the help from other countries were also raised by Xi in phone calls with state leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Poland’s President Andrzej Duda, French President Emmanuel Macron or President of Egypt Abdul Fatah Al-Sisi (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020j, k, l; Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Poland 2020b). Chinese gratitude was also claimed by Foreign Minister Wang Yi when he spoke with Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva and Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn. Wang thanked them for supporting Chinese efforts and promised China’s assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020m). Similar issues were raised during the talk between Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020n). References to reciprocity were present in statements by Chinese leaders, but also in the countries that were receiving Chinese assistance. For example, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen noted after China promised to help the EU with the pandemic that *‘China had not forgotten that in January... the EU helped.*’ (Valero 2020).

China’s assistance to other countries struggling with the COVID-19 outbreak in the context of gratitude and reciprocity was connected with the aid China received itself. According to some experts, reciprocity was also visible in another context, which for obvious reasons was not expressed by Chinese authorities. It refers to the earlier political relations between China and other countries. Elizabeth Braw connected no Chinese assistance to Sweden with its support for the imprisoned Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhai (Braw 2020). On the other hand, Italy, one of the biggest beneficiaries of Chinese aid and at the same time one of the countries most severely hit by the pandemic, was the first G7 state to endorse China’s Belt and Road initiative. As Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio noted, that gesture was then paying off (Poggioli 2020). Similarly, China has been reacting differently to the aid it was receiving, with similar gestures being commented with a different tone (Kim 2020). On the other hand, Chinese leader Xi offered assistance to the USA (Goh 2020) despite the so-called tongue war which included the US President Donald Trump speaking of the disease as the ‘Chinese virus,’ while Chinese officials suggest it might have originated in the USA and was deployed



in China as a biological weapon (Yuan 2020), and the general deterioration of bilateral relations in recent years. This issue, though very interesting, is not the subject of this research which is focused on Chinese COVID-19 assistance as a public diplomacy tool. The most important observation from this section is that one of the prime motivations China declared was its will to reciprocate the help it received while being in need.

The second of the declared motivations which can be attributed to Chinese international assistance in combat against the COVID-19 outbreak has a more general character, and can be characterized as showcasing the country as an international power, with a responsible attitude and oriented at international cooperation, effective and countable leader that can be trusted. As in the case of gratitude and reciprocity, this has been very often raised by representatives of the Chinese government, who spoke about China fulfilling its role as a responsible major country that puts into practice *'the vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind'* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020c), working *'together with other countries to defeat the virus through mutual assistance'* and contributing *'our wisdom, experience and prescription to the international community'* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020o).'

What can be derived from many of the statements from Beijing is an emphasis on international cooperation, so much needed in the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic. As China's leader Xi Jinping said during the G20 Extraordinary Summit in late March, China was ready to provide assistance to other countries and to contribute to a stable world economy (Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Poland 2020c). China has been stressing the need for international cooperation in fighting COVID-19 from the beginning of its massive spread worldwide. In March 2020, a report *International Cooperation for The Coronavirus Combat* was issued by Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (2020), a government-affiliated think tank. Its authors stressed that frontline countries gave the world time to prepare to fight the disease, the contribution of Chinese scientists in learning about the new virus and their cooperation with scientists in other countries, and last but not least—the international aid concerning shortages of medical supplies. They also observed that in some countries China was criticized for the draconian measures introduced to combat the epidemic, which in the end proved to be right. These statements refer to other public diplomacy messages investigated in this article as well, but the stress on cooperation was particularly strong, reflected even in the title of the report to which there are links on Chinese governmental websites.

The emphasis on international cooperation raised by China's authorities complies with the general messages China has been sending through public diplomacy channels for last decades—to an image of a state which cooperates, loves peace and wants to play a constructive role in international politics (van Ham 2010). Even though this aspect was dedicated slightly less attention than its gratitude, it should be considered as just as important, or even more significant concerning its compliance with the general public diplomacy strategies.

The last segment of declared motivations of China's medical assistance to countries struggling with COVID-19 outbreak refers not to presenting a desirable image of the country, but has a more instrumental character. It appears that through



providing aid and assistance China seeks to boost cooperation and trade with other countries.

Contrary to earlier mentioned motivations, boosting future cooperation has not been underlined this strongly by Chinese spokespeople. Nevertheless, such statements were occasionally reported. While providing aid to Spain, a country with one of the most severe outbreaks in March 2020, Chinese leader Xi Jinping told Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez that both countries should step up cooperation and exchanges after the outbreak. Italian prime minister heard from Xi he had hoped that a health silk road could be established as a part of the initiative of One Belt and One Road (Kuo 2020). Xi also spoke about boosting future cooperation as a result of a current partnership in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in his message to Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2020p). The issue of boosting cooperation was also raised by the Premier of China's State Council Li Keqiang, who offered to sell the EU medical supplies and at the same time expressed Chinese eagerness to advance negotiations on the investment treaty (Givetash and Chen 2020).

The aspect of boosting future cooperation as a result of collaboration in combating the COVID-19 pandemic has a slightly different character than the two motivations mentioned earlier. Most importantly, its public diplomacy character was not similarly evident, and the Chinese willingness to continue cooperation was rather raised in g2g relations. Still, in the end, such messages were sent in conjunction with Chinese medical assistance, which is something that has a clear public dimension. This motivation can be regarded not only through the perspective of declared, but also actual motivation. Chinese power has been built on international trade and any limitations in this area can be regarded as a threat. Considering the situation from before the pandemic, with the trade war against the USA, the country might be seeking to find strategic partnerships elsewhere, and Europe, one of the biggest outlets for Chinese products, appears to be a perfect destination of such undertakings.

Concluding remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic, undoubtedly the greatest crisis the world has faced since World War II, created a very favorable ground for China's public diplomacy. Problems the Western countries faced in combating the disease, and the fact that at the time China managed to seize control over the crisis domestically, allowed Beijing to play a proactive role in the global combat. At the same time, China attempted to make use of the situation in the context of its international image even though most probably it was the source of the deadly disease.

Chinese public diplomacy conducted in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, which can also be referred to as the 'coronavirus diplomacy,' in principle has been pursued through two channels. Firstly, China underlined its success in fighting the disease, which at the same time gave precious time to the rest of the world to prepare itself. The second channel included assistance to other countries—through deliveries of medical equipment, sharing know-how and sending teams of medics. About this assistance, the Chinese



emphasized three main motivations: to express Chinese gratitude for the help it received from other countries, to present China as a global, responsible power which aims to cooperate with the rest of the world and to signal the will to boost future cooperation. These motivations should be considered as declared, although particularly in the case of the two latter ones, they can also be regarded as actual. For decades, China has attempted to create its international image of a country that loves peace and is ready for international cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic gave it a chance to express those messages in an even more explicit way, through the actual assistance. This allowed China to strengthen the earlier public diplomacy endeavors, which might put it in a more favorable international position concerning the deterioration of the relations with the USA since the Donald Trump presidency. China, through showcasing how effective it was in combating the domestic outbreak, and through providing the so much needed assistance, when at the same time the USA did little to help its allies and later became the epicenter of the pandemic itself, could picture itself as a global leader. Of course, in the end, it is hardly possible that China will take the place of the USA in the international arena, at least at the time, simply because of its political system, but for sure through its ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ at least to some extent, it might be able to re-orient the international political system.

Health diplomacy can be associated with the goal to counteract mutual threats deriving from health or medical situation or to strengthen and improve the bonds with other countries. Through ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ China appears to be realizing both of these objectives, probably with a slightly higher priority attached to the second one. Through the assistance it has been providing, it showcased itself as an effective partner that can be counted on. On the other hand, China as one of the biggest exporters worldwide should do anything to prevent the global economy from collapsing, and limiting the pandemic is very important for this purpose. Thus, it appears that both of these objectives typical for health diplomacy are being pursued through Chinese ‘coronavirus diplomacy.’

The study presented in this article focused on Chinese international medical assistance in Spring 2020. After the first shock, when most states at least temporarily gained control over the situation, medical assistance became less urgent, although as of mid-October 2020 China still provides it to other countries. However, since the pandemic is not over and it is hard to determine when it would end, there is still a place for using it for diplomatic purposes. The whole world is awaiting a safe and effective vaccine for SARS-COV-2. Once developed, it will probably become the next most desired good, just as protective masks were in Spring 2020. Even though no vaccine is available yet, the Chinese have already begun using it in their public diplomacy efforts, promising deliveries and loans to selected countries such as the Philippines or Bangladesh (Wee 2020). Consequently, if only China makes it to win the race to develop the coronavirus vaccine, or will be able to manufacture it in large amounts, we will probably observe similar Beijing’s public diplomacy offensive as in Spring 2020. What is more, China engages itself in global initiatives related to COVID-19 vaccines under the auspices of the World Health Organization, showcasing itself as a responsible global citizen.



Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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