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COVID-19 and China's soft power ambitions

By Anthea Mulakala and Hongbo Ji
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For many years, China has been a major contributor to global development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Much of this Chinese South-South Cooperation (SSC) has flown under the radar of Western media and traditional aid discourse. Chinese aid, including its humanitarian assistance, is political and a core element of the country's foreign policy. In fact, much of Chinese assistance is not traditional aid, but a mix of aid, concessional loans, and other mechanisms to provide needed infrastructure and assistance to countries of interest to China.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and COVID-19 have brought Chinese SSC out of the shadows and into the spotlight, where it has been scrutinised, [challenged](#), lauded, and even [derided](#). The mixed response to China's COVID-19 assistance has been useful to analyse. To some [observers](#), this assistance is a needed and sought-after contribution to countries with few resources, weak health systems, and emergency situations. To [others](#), primarily in the West, it is seen as China taking advantage of a tragedy of its own making to extend its soft power. COVID-19 has become a factor in the [competition between the US and China](#) over who is the better global citizen. Some commentaries have even interpreted China's humanitarian response as an attempt to whitewash its internal missteps or "[cover-ups](#)" during the early days of the crisis by portraying itself as a country that is handling the crisis well at home while being an international benefactor abroad. China's pandemic response provides new insights into the future of China's SSC and its aspirations to play a leading role in shaping global governance.

Quick and comprehensive response

China seized an early opportunity to leverage its soft power through a comprehensive and well-targeted humanitarian response. The Chinese government [describes its global response](#) as "the most intensive and wide-ranging emergency humanitarian operation since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949." Humanitarianism is embedded in

Chinese culture and history. China's global experience has included responses to some of the most dramatic domestic and international crises of the past decade, including the [2004 tsunami](#), the 2003 SARS epidemic, the 2015 [Nepal](#) earthquake, and the [2014 and 2018 Ebola](#) outbreaks. These experiences readied China to be a [first responder as COVID-19 gripped Italy](#).

By March 31, the [Chinese government had provided](#) 120 countries and four international organisations with surgical masks, N95 respirators, protective suits, nucleic acid test kits, ventilators, and other assistance, including [loans](#). At the subnational level, Chinese local governments sent medical items to their sister cities in more than 50 countries, and Chinese provinces dispatched medical teams to neighbours in need, including Guangxi to Cambodia, Yunnan to Laos and Myanmar, Xinjiang to Pakistan, and Fujian to the Philippines. China has used video conferencing to share experiences and provide expertise on testing methods, contact tracing, prevention and control measures, clinical treatment, and asymptomatic cases in partnership with the [ASEAN Secretariat](#), [The Arab League](#), and individual countries including India, Malaysia, and Russia. When the next global disaster strikes, China will have already demonstrated its agility and readiness to play a significant role in humanitarian efforts.

Diverse partnerships

Historically, Chinese SSC has emphasised government-to-government transactions, unlike traditional aid, which relies more significantly on civil society partners to deliver humanitarian assistance. Less by Chinese design than by urgent circumstance, COVID-19 has highlighted the diversity and potential of China's cooperation channels. It cannot be denied that China has vast resources, and the large scale of its humanitarian assistance has proven to be a successful soft-power strategy, regardless of its skeptics and critics.

[Chinese customs statistics](#) show that between April 1 and 12, China exported USD 2 billion in preventive and diagnostic medical materials. Additionally, Chinese companies, both state-owned and private, especially those specialising in medical supplies, financing, and logistics, have donated medical materials to over 100 countries and international organisations. Companies with overseas operations—e.g. China Communications Construction Company ([Malaysia](#)) and the Laos branch of Three Gorges China Hydropower—have provided medical supplies or virus-prevention materials for local populations. China's tech sector (AI, 5G, big data) enabled quick hospital construction, rapid and widespread access to information and telemedicine, online education, and remote working, even internationally.

[Chinese private philanthropies](#) have also been active. The Alibaba and Jack Ma Foundations

[donated medical supplies to almost 100 countries](#), shared diagnostic manuals in eight languages on the internet and social media, and launched an [online, real-time exchange platform](#) for frontline public health workers. Chinese civil society organisations have also ramped up their efforts. The [China Red Cross Foundation](#) is mobilising funding from the Chinese public and business enterprises to provide supplies and logistical support to Chinese medical teams. The [China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation](#), one of a few Chinese NGOs with offices in partner countries, is installing up to 180 handwashing stations in Nepal and working with local partners to provide sanitizers, handwashing facilities, and virus prevention training.

Multilaterally, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), of which China is the largest shareholder, has created a [US \\$5 billion crisis recovery fund](#) to support countries and businesses during the pandemic. Following two recovery loans, to the cities of Beijing and Chongqing, the AIIB is now considering similar packages for Indonesia and India. China's increased support to and collaboration with the World Health Organization, and China's position as a [major contributor](#) to the UN's general budget, has [shrouded the UN agency](#) in a cloud of suspicion and partisanship.

Post-pandemic, China should continue to maximise the diversity of its cooperation channels and continue to collaborate with the private sector, philanthropies, multilateral agencies, and civil society actors in its SSC. The participation of China and other global powers will preserve their seats at the table of multilateral agencies and help to uphold the standards of shared responsibility, accountability, and transparency.

Revitalising the Health Silk Road

COVID-19 is already leaving its mark on the Belt and Road Initiative. Several projects are at a [standstill](#), much of the Chinese workforce has been repatriated, and with economies spiraling downwards, partner countries will struggle to finance existing debt burdens. China, given its own [economic slowdown](#), was already concerned about debt sustainability for some partner countries and maintaining the pace of BRI. But in hardship there is also opportunity, and China's COVID-19 response has reinforced the BRI's partnership network. For example, through the [Health Silk Road](#) initiative, China has extended COVID-19 assistance to 120 countries while enhancing its soft power diplomacy.

COVID-19 represents a pivotal opportunity for China to shift gears and recalibrate BRI using lessons learned from its pandemic response. China can focus on local capacity building, rely more on local labour and resources, consider debt flexibility/forgiveness, increase knowledge sharing and learning around international safeguards and standards, and expand

its BRI efforts to include connectivity, health, and disaster management.

COVID-19 may usher in a new era of global governance, marked by shared responsibility for global public goods, multilateral action on the SDGs, and reciprocal partnerships. It could also see countries increasingly turn inward, building barriers rather than bridges to cooperation. Prior to the pandemic, China was already positioning itself to provide leadership on global issues. COVID-19 may have provided a new opportunity for China to realise these ambitions. At the same time, suspicions run high that China's response is part of its grand strategy for [global domination](#). To counter these misgivings, China will need to demonstrate a commitment to multilateralism and transparency. If China continues to display solidarity with partner countries, pursue a collaborative approach with domestic and international stakeholders, and utilise its soft power to help steer the world out of this crisis, it may indeed find itself commanding the respect and influence that it desires.

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