

# Chinese and Russian geopolitical games

Katarzyna Sidło looks at how China and Russia  
have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to improve  
their international standing in the MENA region

**A**s the coronavirus pandemic takes a tragic toll, devastating people's lives and ravaging economies, authoritarian regimes around the world keep on playing their geopolitical games. Two prominent players include a pair of United Nations Security Council permanent members, namely the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, both of whom have been exploiting the situation to achieve their geopolitical goals and improve their status internationally.

For China, the overall goal of its 'health (or mask) diplomacy' is to divert attention from the fact that not only did the pandemic start on its own territory, but also that Beijing did initially conceal the outbreak in Wuhan, allowing the epidemic to get out of hand and spread not only throughout China but the entire world.

Thanks to the mismanagement of the situation by the US and multiple European countries, as well as the general tardiness of the EU's reaction, Beijing has, however, been moderately successful in salvaging its international reputation.

It has also increasingly managed to position itself as a responsible and reliable global power – at least in the eyes of some of its partners globally – ostensibly more willing to cooperate with international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) than the US, which has recently cut its funding to the organization.

Russia, which incidentally remains reluctant to acknowledge the scale of infections on its own territory, has seen the pandemic as yet another occasion to sow discord and undermine the EU and the US. As such, purposely or not, it has been helping Beijing to achieve its goals by spreading disinformation about the origins of the coronavirus.

Some analysts have also expressed concerns that Russia may have used medical aid to Western countries for intelligence purposes, particularly in the case of the doctors and equipment sent to Italy and the paid-for shipments to the US.

Other observers pointed out to the serious doubts regarding the usefulness of these supplies. Moscow has also tried to exploit its well-publicized campaign of delivering medical aid and expertise to countries in the West to score political points, pushing for the lifting of the sanctions against it.

More recently, the Kremlin changed its strategy and announced that Russia will not ask the EU for the withdrawal of the sanctions, but should Brussels do so, *“Russia will be ready to reciprocate”* (the European External Action Service [EEAS] confirmed the EU will keep the sanctions in place as they do not *“prevent [Russia] from fighting the virus”*).

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In the MENA region, the coronavirus-related activities of both countries followed their global goals. For the Kremlin, it has been all about disinformation. Indeed, an analysis conducted by the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force showed that three of the five most popular Russian disinformation articles (by their number of social media engagements) identified in the study were spread in Arabic, with the most popular messages in the region being that the US is responsible for the pandemic and coronavirus is *"an Anglo-Saxon biological warning."*

The actual help on the ground has been very limited, however, with a number of discussions about the crisis held with Iranian, Saudi, Turkish, Israeli, Palestinian, and Syrian authorities, but few details on any physical shipments available. The only one confirmed was a cargo of 500 coronavirus testing kits to Iran, together with reported talks about further consignments.

On April 8, Russian media also reported that Syria officially requested Russian assistance, but no follow-up information has been published so far (in fact, Russia blocked United Nations-sponsored coronavirus-related humanitarian efforts in parts of Syria that remain under control of the opposition).

China, on the other hand, has been extensively promoting its in-kind assistance efforts. Beijing has very publicly sent medical equipment and experts to a number of countries across the MENA region, from Egypt and Israel, through Turkey and Iran, to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Oman received 100,000 surgical face masks.

A large cargo of ventilators, testing kits, and PPE equipment arrived to Algeria, as a courtesy of the state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation – a prominent player in the region, responsible, among others, for the construction of the Great Mosque of Algiers and contracted to build Egypt's 'new capital'.

Chinese experts and authorities have been also sharing their experiences and lessons learnt during teleconferences organized by the Arab League as well as individual countries (eg. in Saudi Arabia). All these activities, no matter how trivial or inconsequential, have been extensively covered by both Chinese and local media.

Delivery in Egypt, during which representatives of national authorities of both recipient and benefactor countries were present, was live-streamed. During other transfers, elaborate ceremonies, attended by officials and journalists, were arranged for as well.

China has, moreover, enhanced its use of Twitter, conveying Beijing-approved messages through official accounts of its diplomatic missions and their representatives. Russia has been using this strategy to spread its disinformation for a long time; indeed, most recently the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs twitted that certain Western *“cynical Russophobe”* politicians and media cannot comprehend that *“Russia simply... helps”* during the pandemic.

In another move that could have been copied from a Russian playbook, an international arm of China Central Television published videos in Arabic discussing the possibility that the virus may have in fact originated in the US, and accusing the *“Western propaganda machine”* of spreading *“conspiracy theories (...) that China is the source of the virus”* only to distract attention from its own incompetency in fighting the pandemic.

Beijing has also been using the assistance of Arabic-speaking Chinese journalist influencers such as Fayhaa (Xin) Wang. Through her Facebook page, followed by nearly half-million users, and her presence in the media outlets in Egypt – as well as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and United Arab Emirates – this influencer has been keeping her audiences up-to-date on the common Sino-Arab fight against the coronavirus.

Official Chinese Twitter channels have also been trying to promote hastags such as # معا\_ضد\_كورونا (#Together\_Against\_Coronavirus) and # ابطال\_الصحة (#Health\_Heroes) – as well as (rather unsuccessfully) a sentimental Arabic-language song tribute to health workers fighting the coronavirus – in an effort to underline common struggle of the Arab and Chinese peoples.

Notably, while politicians (as many state media journalists) have been going out of their way to express their gratitude to China, the mood on the streets has not always been equally appreciative. People of Asian heritage have been reportedly targeted for ‘spreading the coronavirus’.

Most publicized cases include a Chinese man thrown out of a taxi in Cairo and videos accusing a local Chinese restaurant in Morocco of being an epicentre of coronavirus, brought to the country by Chinese tourists. Needless to say, any and all displays of racist behaviour should always be unequivocally condemned.

It is, however, difficult to resist the impression that authorities in the MENA countries in question were more concerned about appeasing Beijing than fighting xenophobia. Indeed, in both the Egyptian and Moroccan incidents the culprits were swiftly arrested and very public displays of apology ensued.

The extent to which China and its policies are exempted from any criticism has been witnessed first-hand by the Iranian Minister of Health, who imprudently called Chinese official coronavirus figures “a joke” – and found himself publicly issuing an apology after a rebuke from the Chinese Ambassador to Iran. Any genuine help, no matter where it comes from, should naturally be always condoned. However, Chinese and Russian ostensibly selfless assistance must be put under scrutiny. For one, Moscow’s aid is mostly in the sphere of promises, and when it does arrive, it has often been found not suitable for use or non-adequate; as have in fact been thousands of Chinese testing kits delivered to, among others, Turkey.

Where the Kremlin does have an impact, it is usually an unwelcome one. Indeed, a number of media outlets and journalists throughout the MENA region, consciously or not, reiterated Russian disinformation about the American origin of the virus, accusing the US of using the virus as a biological weapon created specifically to undermine China.

Moreover, both Russian and Chinese assistance has been delivered under circumstances that have not always been exactly transparent. Questions about how many of the shipments have not been aid but purchases are hardly mentioned in media reports and official statements. Equally, if not more worryingly, the price for Chinese assistance seems to be paid in a much more precious currency than renminbi or dollars: compliance.

While the WHO has been dodging questions about Taiwan, governments of multiple countries receiving Chinese aid and investments – both during and previous to the pandemic – conveniently dissemble Beijing's misleading reporting on the spread of the virus, which seriously inhibited preparedness for the crisis in the rest of the world.

Chinese aid receptors also tend to omit the fact that China continues to censor the results of the COVID-19 related research conducted by its scientists (in fact, countries like Turkey and Egypt deployed similar tactics).

As noted by EU HRVP Josep Borrell, *"there is a global battle of narratives going on in which timing is a crucial factor."* Indeed, when Brussels sent 70 tonnes of medical aid to China at the beginning of the year, European leaders reportedly obliged Beijing when it *"explicitly asked for discretion."*

Needless to say, China has had no qualms publicizing its own assistance. As a result, it is Beijing that has been praised throughout the region, especially in the GCC, as a *"role model"* and *"the only country that reformed well"* during the crisis. On March 21, the Iraqi Minister of Health, Jaafar Sadiq Allawi, complained that *"America has not*

*provided [Iraq] with a single vile [of medicine] – unlike China.”* The EU has not been mentioned at all; its own package of €240 million to support Iraq and other countries hosting Syrian refugees amid the coronavirus crisis has only been announced ten days later.

In another display of effectiveness of Beijing’s strategy, Washington’s protests were ignored by some of its closest allies the region when a Shenzhen-based genomics company BGI was setting up a testing laboratory in the United Arab Emirates and closing a deal on a similar facility in the Gaza Strip. Saudi Arabia paid the company USD265 million for six laboratories staffed by 500 Chinese experts and a bundle of 9 million testing kits.

As explained in a rather ominous manner by an Arabic-speaking anchor in the Chinese state CGTN TV, *“[t]he balance of power in the world is expected to change when the coronavirus crisis is over. A lot has been said about the progress of China, which will take a leading role in the new world order at the expense of America’s power and position.”*

Whether this prediction become reality or not depends to a large extent both on how the EU and US continue to manage the pandemic and exert their soft power throughout the region and beyond. ■

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