

To Craft a Covid-19 Narrative, China needs Africa

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Abstract

China faces tremendous international scrutiny concerning the initial mismanagement and lack of transparency surrounding its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which included efforts to stifle dissent. If the comprehensive review of the global response to COVID-19 confirms China as the source as is being widely portrayed, the economic and socio-political fallout for Beijing could be severe. It would therefore be critical for China that it gets ahead of the global war of narratives that will naturally ensue. President Xi's address at the 73rd World Health Assembly where he focused specifically on Africa, is a step in that direction. This article examines the role of African countries in this narrative building exercise. Furthermore, it analyses the changing nature of African solidarity to China and discusses how African countries have gained from this relationship. It also underscores how COVID-19 threatens this dynamic and how implicit support from African nations cannot be presumed anymore. The pushback surrounding China's COVID-19 overtures in the continent brings to the fore anti-Chinese sentiments that have been simmering for a while and have now snapped the African agency into action.

Keywords

China, Africa, Covid-19, Economy, Geopolitics

Western narratives have dominated the discourse in international relations for years and this essentially means that our understanding of global events and even the portrayal of regions are almost often crafted by European-Atlantic perspectives. However, it is worth noting that there is a strong non-western, particularly, Chinese worldview that is gaining traction in Africa. While Chinese engagement in the continent has garnered significant attention since setting up of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation two decades ago, the widespread acceptance of the ‘Chinese way of doing things’, is rather recent. This by no measure undermines the visceral and often violent pushback Chinese citizens have faced in various African countries. While these are often alluded to the difference in work ethic, cultural dissimilarities, social apathy and insensitivity; racism and deep-seated xenophobia are also contributing factors.

Nevertheless, fact remains that not only is China’s diplomatic and economic footprint across the region substantial, but the portrayal of China as a reliable partner to countries in the region is gaining ground. This narrative building exercise is positively underway and has been amped up during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese media outlets like China Daily and CGTN have opened online platforms that focus entirely on China-Africa health cooperation during the pandemic. From live-streaming teleconferences between Chinese

doctors who have fought in the front lines in Wuhan transferring knowledge to African health experts to hosting panel discussions and providing updated information, the motto of these broadcasters is clear: China’s foray as a leader in global public health will be told from the Chinese perspective.

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The China-Africa Partnership

Most interestingly, Africa has also found a coveted place in China’s foreign policy matrix. Often the ‘go to example’ for Beijing’s top brass, the efforts of Chinese actors - in bridging Africa’s 130 to 170-billion-dollar infrastructure gap, building its health, educational sectors, improving telecom and internet services - are oft quoted (African Development Bank 2018). Regular call backs to the historicity of these interactions, the loyalty of each partner and the promise and potential of this relationship is also constantly highlighted and backed with economic pledges and regular high-level diplomatic visits. In addition to the powerful tradition of the Chinese Foreign Minister visiting the continent annually, a study found that China’s top leadership made 79 visits to 43 African countries in between 2008 and 2018 and they seemed to be prioritizing the poorest countries, visiting 26 of the 33 least developed

countries of the region in the last decade (Development Reimagined 2018).

The direct and indirect damage inflicted by the pandemic affects Chinese political and economic interests in the region.

Furthermore, China is not only the largest trading partner of most African countries - with trade amounting to \$208 billion in 2019, stock investment reaching \$110 billion (South China Morning Post 2020) and Chinese debt to Africa estimated at \$152 billion (China Africa Research Initiative 2020) - Beijing is also steadily increasing its presence across the African landscape with a growing diaspora. Therefore, the direct and indirect damage inflicted by the pandemic affects Chinese political and economic interests in the region. For instance, data from the World Bank (World Bank, 2020) suggests that the economic fallout from global trade disruptions, drop in oil and commodity prices could send Africa, that currently houses 5 of the world's fastest economies, into its first recession in 25 years while IMF forecasts suggest that Sub Saharan Africa's GDP is expected to contract by 1.6 percent this year (IMF 2020). This is bound to impact ongoing large-scale projects carried out by Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOE's), Chinese private companies as well as thousands

of medium and small-scale industries set up by Chinese entrepreneurs.

On the ground, Chinese presence is obvious in African cityscapes just as they are in the rural areas. From selling chickens in the local markets in Lusaka, to processing copper sheets from waste collected at dump sites in Chingola, buildings, tunnels and roads flaunting red banners with Chinese characters are dotted along urban spaces in Nairobi and Addis Ababa. Contractors working on mega infrastructure projects like the Dar es Salaam port project or the Zanzibar International Airport in Pemba island are keen on proving 'Brand China' - with its unique work ethic, standards and technology - as viable alternatives to Western entities. While Union representatives in the Copperbelt province in Zambia lament the working conditions in Chinese mines, officials heading the vocational training institutes in Lusaka, argue that most students want to work in Chinese mines equipped with modern technology after graduation as the syllabus as well as the equipment in most colleges are outdated. They talk in detail about how the Chinese government is improving the human and institutional capacity of these colleges by pairing them with partner institutes in China, whereas western mines that have been operational for decades have, in comparison, only marginally contributed to local communities.¹ With more young Africans

¹ Insights collected during fieldwork in Ethiopia in 2017, Tanzania and Kenya in 2018 and Zambia in 2019 to examine Chinese investments in these regions.

receiving training in Chinese institutes and universities, as the number of students who go to China for education surpassed those heading to the US or the UK in 2014 (Quartz Africa 2017), the perception of China is bound to be positive.

A positive perception of China alone doesn't affect Beijing's narrative - but it will support it - and this becomes very critical in the post-pandemic world order, when China will tell us its version of the virus story. This is especially so given that China already faces tremendous international scrutiny concerning the initial mismanagement and lack of transparency surrounding its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which included efforts to stifle dissent.

The draft resolution calling for comprehensive review of the global response to the pandemic that has been proposed by over a hundred nations and supported by China (The Sunday Morning Herald 2010), seeks to '*identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population*' (World Health Organization, 2020). If the review confirms China as the source as is being widely portrayed, then the circumstances become crucial. Either way, the economic and socio-political fallout for Beijing could be severe. Given the magnitude of the losses to both humankind and the global economy, it is likely that the issue would be taken up at other multilateral forums, with member countries

calling for stricter investigations in more strongly worded resolutions.

Validating the Chinese Perspective

It would therefore be critical to China that it gets ahead of the global war of narratives that will naturally ensue. President Xi's speech at the 73rd World Health Assembly on 18 May, 2020 is a step in that direction (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2020).

Prioritizing Africa even as several other parts of the world require assistance to fight the pandemic, signals a unique affinity that China confers on the region.

It was not only a defense of China's handling of the virus but also laid out a roadmap on the steps ahead, identified central actors and underscored the need for international cooperation to fight the pandemic. The tonality of the speech was clearly not one of a victim, but of a country that perceives itself as a leader in the midst of a global crisis, exhibiting authority, deliberating on the long-term consequences and calling for nations to look beyond their borders. It is in this context that Africa was mentioned, as a continent that has '*weaker public health systems and therefore, helping them build capacity must be our top priority*'. President Xi called for more '*material, technological and personnel support*' for African countries and listed out the extent of Chinese assistance provided in the regions fight against COVID-19 including the presence of 46

resident medical teams, sending medical supplies, establishing cooperative mechanisms by pairing up with 30 hospitals, accelerating the building of the African CDC headquarters and sharing the vaccine, once it is available (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2020). However, prioritizing Africa - even as several other parts of the world including developing economies in South Asia and Latin America require assistance to fight the pandemic - signals a unique affinity that China confers on the region. A fact that was evident in Foreign Minister Wang Yi's statement on the sidelines of the 13th National People's Congress on Sunday that *"China and Africa are good brothers who have shared weal and woe together. Our people, having fought shoulder-to-shoulder for national liberation, are partners for common development"*. Stressing on African solidarity he added that *"in the battle against COVID-19, China and Africa have again stood by each other. Over 50 African leaders have expressed solidarity and support in phone calls or public statements"* (CGTN 2020).

President Xi followed up again on the significance of the China-Africa relationship by hosting an online summit with several African leaders on the 17 June, 2020 titled 'Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19'. In his remarks, he further pointed out that *"China shall always remember the invaluable support Africa gave us at the height of our battle with the coronavirus. In return, when Africa was struck by the virus,*

China was the first to rush in with assistance and has since stood firm with the African people." He added that China would support the G20 initiative of providing debt relief to relevant African countries and of extending the period of debt suspension for others. President Xi also called for African support in 'upholding multilateralism' as China opposes the *"politicization and stigmatization of COVID-19"*. He continued stating that *"We oppose racial discrimination and ideological bias. We stand firm for equity and justice in the world"* (CGTN 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens the myriad ways in which Africa extends its support to China and brings to the fore the fact that it cannot be presumed anymore.

This unique attention that Africa seems to be receiving could be because endorsement of countries in Africa becomes incredibly crucial as China goes about crafting a COVID-19 narrative. African support to China has traditionally been in platforms like the UN, where its collective votes have helped sway the results in Beijing's favour or isolated incidents such as backing the Beijing Olympics when Western nations threatened to boycott citing human rights concerns. However, in the more recent past, the promise of China's economic diplomacy in the continent has encouraged nations to further the 'One China Principle' and

every country in Africa except for eSwatini has ended diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Solidarity with China also means that pressure tactics employed by the West on Chinese actors, for instance in banning Huawei, has had almost no impact in Africa, as the telecom major is involved in several large scale projects in various African countries including the National ICT Broadband Backbone in Tanzania (Vaidyanathan, Veda (ed.) 2019).

African countries have also gained from their solidarity with China. An AidData Working paper pointed out that while Chinese aid (ODA) was largely responsible - aid generally going to poorer countries and not disproportionately to corrupt regimes - one area that followed the quid pro quo formula was buying votes (Samantha Custer 2018). It said that “if African countries voted with China in the UNGA an extra 10% of the time, they would get an 86% bump in official development assistance on average.” No surprise then that a draft proposal put forward by Estonia to discuss COVID-19 at the UN was obstructed by China with the help of South Africa.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens the myriad ways in which Africa extends its support to China and brings to the fore the fact that it cannot be presumed anymore. Charges of racism and xenophobia that were until now dormant in the larger Sino-Africa engagement led to a diplomatic furore when African

nationals in Guangzhou were evicted from their apartments and were discriminated against. In a strongly worded retort, a group of African ambassadors in Beijing “*immediately demanded the cessation of forceful testing, quarantine and other inhuman treatments meted out to Africans*” (Reuters 2020). The Speaker of the House of Representatives in Nigeria, Femi Gbajabiamila, summoned Chinese ambassador Zhou Pingjian, showed him a video of mistreatment of Nigerians in China, admonished him and uploaded the entire exchange on social media (Channels TV n.d).

What the pandemic essentially does to the China-Africa relationship is that it brings to the fore the fault lines that were until now, acknowledged but not engaged with.

In another instance, a 15-member medical team from China that included experts in infectious diseases, respiratory illness, neurology etc had arrived in Abuja on the invitation of the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and the Nigeria Medical Association and the Nigerian Union of Journalists responded with hostility (The Charleston Chronicle 2020). Even the Minister of Health in Nigeria, Osagie Ehanire, stated during a press briefing that they were not guests of the federal government and did not want to be asked questions about their whereabouts. However, what set these incidents apart was the strong reactions from African governments and leaders, probably to offset the

increasing anti-China sentiments domestically. This is of course not a localized reaction, reports (Aljazeera 2020) already suggest that in several parts of the world there is a palpable increase in Sinophobia (Mayberry, K, Uras, U and Siddiqui, U 2020).

What the pandemic essentially does to the China-Africa relationship is that it brings to the fore the fault lines that were until now, acknowledged but not engaged with. This is precisely what will make the exercise of post pandemic narrative building more complicated for Beijing. If the pushback surrounding China's COVID-19 overtures in African countries are anything to go by, it is clear that their support cannot be taken for granted especially as anti-Chinese sentiments that have been simmering for a while now, have snapped the African agency into action. Therefore, as China seeks to emerge from this crisis as a leader of global public health - promising funds and assistance to WHO as President Trump threatens to curtail both - it will need to work with its stakeholders on the ground in Africa to rebrand its image and woo their African counterparts. Not only will the support of countries in Africa be vital but China's role in helping the continent overcome the pandemic, will in the time to come, serve as a testimony to the commitment of one and the allegiance of the other.

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