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CHINA'S GLOBAL COVID-19 ASSISTANCE IS HUMANITARIAN AND GEOPOLITICAL. THAT'S WHY PEOPLE ARE WORRIED.

By Dr. David Dorman *

When China delivers much needed medical equipment or expertise to countries experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic does its motivation matter? China's state-run media expend significant resources to ensure both Chinese domestic and international audiences see and understand the scope and cost of China's international pandemic assistance. International audiences want to believe China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson when she assures them that this assistance is purely humanitarian, and Beijing would never use pandemic assistance as a geopolitical weapon or tool.¹ Geopolitics should not be an issue for stricken locations receiving unconditional assistance from China, even in the United States,² nor should this type of assistance be made one. Nevertheless, pandemic geopolitics are an issue. China is making them one.

The main thrust of the Chinese Communist Party's domestic propaganda work since late January has focused on masking the early role of the Party in stifling public health transparency and creating the pandemic crisis. The primary propaganda message, widely disseminated in domestic state-run media, highlighted the "political and organizational advantage" of the Communist Party in tackling the health emergency once the decision to contain the crisis was made in Beijing.³ It was a risky campaign, as the Party's credibility was already weakened by events unfolding in Wuhan. But as the often draconian measures implemented to contain the crisis showed success, state-run media was quick to link this success with the "political and organizational advantages" of the authoritarian system that led it. Based on this success, the Party's domestic propaganda campaign expanded with new themes.

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The first addition supported General Secretary Xi Jinping's ongoing efforts to consolidate Communist Party control over society, but in this instance, some self-defense was needed. State-run media highlighted that "real communists" who saw the epidemic crisis emerging and acted were rewarded and those who procrastinated were penalized.⁴ The intent was to both restore domestic confidence in the Party and to highlight that Party members as a whole were guiltless in masking the viral outbreak when it first appeared. In short, as the story is told the epidemic helped the Party cleanse itself of the "frauds" who were responsible.

The second theme was more strategic. The Party's success with its containment measures was melded with Xi Jinping's central campaign to demonstrate the superiority of China's governance system.⁵ One Party theoretical journal noted in early April that "epidemic prevention and control was a major test of [China's] system of governance and political capabilities,"⁶ a test the Party is winning in "stages."⁷ The self-evaluation is a cautious one, likely based on concerns over the possibility of an import-driven resurgence of the virus. Even so, an important amendment to thinking on China's epidemic response highlighted that it would be politically superior to others, based simply on the governance system that produced it.⁸ This line of thinking, the inherent superiority of China's plan, would later underlie the Party's geopolitical campaign to create a China-centered response to the pandemic.

General Secretary Xi Jinping publicly laid out his geopolitical vision for a China-centered response to the pandemic at the G20 Virtual Leaders' Summit on March 26th.⁹ This vision was grounded in Xi's wider concept of a "community of common destiny for mankind," a central feature of the Party's national strategy and roadmap to "[transform] the international environment to make it compatible with China's governance model and emergence as a global leader."¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the "community of common destiny" was a standard part of China's diplomatic outreach both bilaterally and regionally in February and early March. But like its domestic approach, Beijing used the phrase defensively to shield itself from external criticism.¹¹ China, as a responsible great power and member of a "community of common destiny" would never have acted in a way that harmed other nations.¹²

The Communist Party's media mouthpiece reported on March 27th that Xi Jinping had delivered an important speech to the G20 Virtual Leaders' Summit, printing the news on its front page in red ink to emphasize its significance. Readers were informed that China, "upholding the concept of a community of common destiny for mankind, was willing to provide assistance within its capacity to other countries in order to contribute to the stability of the world economy."¹³ State-run media published in English trumpeted that Xi's speech charted the course for the global COVID-19 fight.¹⁴ Party commentators further explained that the "concept of a community of common destiny for mankind had become a major spiritual force driving international cooperation to fight the epidemic."¹⁵ No longer defensive, China was now demonstrating its great power status through the superiority of its pandemic response and its ability to influence public health governance globally through the acceptance of its superior model.

Xi Jinping's four proposals at the G20 Virtual Summit remain the touchstone in state-run media discussions of China's global response to the pandemic.¹⁶ Media commentators in China have routinized how Xi's language at the summit is described and grouped it into three broad categories to provide readers context on China's global pandemic efforts and interests.¹⁷ First, Xi introduced "China's Experience" to the G20

Virtual Summit, the act of a great power upholding the “concept of a community of common destiny for mankind” by highlighting China simultaneously fighting its own domestic epidemic while supporting international pandemic cooperation.¹⁸ Second, Xi articulated “China’s Plan” to the summit leadership, a transparent reference to the “concept of a community of common destiny for mankind.” Party literature explains that the “community of common destiny” is “China’s Plan” for a system of global governance that would better support world peace and development.¹⁹ The third category consolidates all of Xi’s specific recommendations to the G20 Virtual Summit and also reveals linkages between the domestic and international propaganda work supporting China’s pandemic effort.

One media commentator explained that each of the recommendations in Xi’s third category, “China’s Initiatives,” represent a refinement of “China’s experience” and a rational expansion of “China’s plan.”²⁰ Nearly all of Xi’s recommendations call for an expanded G20 role (i.e. G20 health minister’s meeting, G20 COVID-19 assistance initiative, and G20 platform for communication and coordination) or expanded World Health Organization (WHO) role (i.e. WHO-led global effort to develop science-based methods of epidemic control and treatment). While it is not surprising that Xi would raise proposals like these at a G20 summit, Communist Party commentary previously highlighted the G20 as a useful platform for Beijing to introduce new global economic governance initiatives²¹ and the WHO has recently come under fire for actions that question its impartiality with regards to China.²²

Finally, Xi also recommended to G20 leaders that they adopt enhanced international macro-economic policy coordination to deal with economic dislocations caused by the pandemic. While this is a reasonable recommendation in itself, Xi also called on all G20 members to take collective action to cut tariffs, remove barriers and facilitate free trade, almost certainly a reference to the ongoing U.S.-China trade war. This final point highlights a parallel between the international and domestic components of the Communist Party’s propaganda work in support of its pandemic effort. Not only do both components use propaganda, albeit a different form and to a different audience, to mask the Party’s early missteps that created or fanned the pandemic, both components also attempt to identify guilty parties other than Beijing. Domestically, the Communist Party identified “frauds” within the Party who mishandled the outbreak. Internationally, state-run media and official sources produce a steady stream of news, propaganda and disinformation consistently identifying the U.S. as the guilty party, both in terms of virus origin and disease outbreak, and domestic and global management of the pandemic.²³

The Communist Party’s geopolitical coloring of nearly every aspect of its international pandemic response, including China’s so-called “mask diplomacy,” makes neutral views of China’s intent difficult to reach.²⁴ Further, China’s state-run media transparently ties Beijing’s global initiatives and efforts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic to the Communist Party’s national strategy to transform global governance, in this case exploiting a seam in global health governance during a pandemic. Should countries accept an offer of unconditional assistance from China if its only “condition” is to acknowledge the Communist Party’s political principles, like the “community of common destiny?” Some states already have, and these transactions are trumpeted in Chinese media.²⁵ We should, however, carefully consider the circumstances before we question the transfer of badly needed medical assistance during a pandemic. If it is unconditional, albeit political with Chinese characteristics, we will have to accept it for now. If it is a business transaction, albeit colored with the rubric of a “community of common destiny,” we should label it

for what it is: a geopolitical tool. In the future though, let's not forget that China saw geopolitical advantage in a pandemic and designed a humanitarian plan to harness it.

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