

China's Global Aid Blitz and "Mask Diplomacy"

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Background

China is reporting very few locally transmitted instances of COVID-19, with new cases increasingly linked to international travelers [returning to China](#). This signals, at least for the time being, a domestic reprieve from the now global pandemic. Accordingly, China has turned to assist, with medical supplies and expertise, other nations faced with rising cases of COVID-19, in what has been called "[mask diplomacy](#)." Geng Shuang, a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, [stated](#) that China "will do whatever it can to support and assist its friendly neighbors in the spirit of solidarity amid adversity, deepen cooperation with other countries, share its experience in pandemic control and treatment, and work with others to uphold regional and global public health security."

China has outlined four main channels of global [assistance](#):

1. **Government-to-government** channels, to "82 countries, WHO and the African Union, [providing] testing reagents, masks and protective suits";
2. **Cooperation on health technology**, including sharing "diagnostics and therapeutics", medical expert videoconferences, and sending medical expert teams to affected areas;
3. **Sub-national** assistance from local Chinese governments;
4. **Non-governmental assistance**, from Chinese corporations and NGOs

In what it calls the "most intensive and wide-ranging emergency humanitarian operation since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949", the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) has [deployed](#) supplies and medical workers to "28 Asian countries, 16 European countries, 26 African countries, nine countries in the Americas and 10 countries in the South Pacific" plus "four international organizations." This list is likely growing, and is in addition to aid efforts from Chinese philanthropic organizations like the [Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation](#), local Chinese government bodies, and Chinese embassies. In total, China [exported](#) US\$1.4 billion worth of medical supplies from March 1 to April 4.

This report is not meant to be an all-encompassing or comprehensive list of China's aid efforts, instead it aims to provide an overview of the current destinations and flows of aid:

China's COVID-19 Aid: Overview

The Bank of China has donated "30,000 medical masks, 10,000 sets of protective clothing, 10,000 goggles and 50,000 pairs of gloves, followed by N95 medical masks" to **Canada**, according to a [tweet](#) sent by the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa. Huawei, the embattled Chinese telecommunications firm, has also [reportedly](#) donated over one million masks, 30,000 goggles, and 50,000 pairs of gloves to provincial governments across Canada. Global Affairs Canada

and Canadian Red Cross had previously sent 16 tonnes of medical equipment to China in February in a move that attracted media criticism. Some have wondered if this cooperative act was negligent, given the already short supply of medical gear in Canada. Adam Austen, a deputy communications director for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, [noted](#) when asked about the donation that “[g]lobal pandemics require global co-operation” and Canada had already received reciprocal donations in return.

The Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation have also [donated](#) supplies to both Canada and to the **United States**. The U.S. came under fire on March 20 from China's Foreign Ministry for allegedly [failing](#) to deliver on promises to provide coronavirus-related financial support. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged that the U.S. would provide “up to \$100 million to assist China and other countries affected by the outbreak.” A spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry claimed that “we haven't received \$1 from the US government.” There does not appear to be a large amount of direct “aid and assistance” flowing from China's government to the US directly. The U.S. has, instead, purchased mass amounts of supplies from China. According to a report the New York Times, it has scheduled 22 flights [that](#) “White House officials say will funnel much-needed goods to the United States [from China] by early April as it battles the world's largest coronavirus outbreak.” This is the result of a public-private partnership between White House officials and major American healthcare distributors, who are purchasing the supplies from China and various other global manufacturers.

The report also notes that American officials at the state and city level are also working to arrange their own supply pathways with China, using “sister cities and province relationships, liaison offices they had set up in China to attract investment and connections with state-run Chinese companies to try to secure scarce equipment.” New York, the hardest hit U.S. state, received 1,000 donated ventilators in a shipment [facilitated](#) by the Chinese government. Massachusetts procured the [team airplane](#) of the New England Patriots to bring 1.2 million N95 protective masks from China, after initially being outbid by the federal government on supplies that were destined for the state.

Europe has been hit hard by COVID-19, with Italy, Spain and Germany sitting just behind the U.S. in terms of total [confirmed cases](#). China's assistance was swift, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stating that “China has not forgotten that in January, when China was the centre of the virus outbreak, the European Union helped.” The European Union initially [pledged](#) in February that it was “ready to provide any assistance necessary” to China in combating the spread of COVID-19. It [supplied](#) China with 12 tonnes of protective gear and “provided €10 million (US\$11.07 million) for research to find a vaccine.” China [provided](#) Europe with 2 million masks and 50,000 testing kits in return, presumably to be distributed among member states based on need.

Italy has emerged as an epicenter for COVID-19 and a primary destination for Chinese assistance. Zhejiang Province, in east China, [sent](#) a team of 12 medical experts, 35 tonnes of supplies, and “commonly used drugs.” Fujian Province [sent](#) a team of 14 medical experts on March 25th, along with 30 ventilators, 20 sets of medical monitors, 3,000 protective suits, 300,000 medical masks, 20,000 N95 masks and 3,000 face shields. Xiaomi, a Chinese electronics company, has [donated](#) tens of thousands of masks to the Italian government. The Red Cross Society of China [contributed](#) a team of nine medical staff and 30 tonnes of

equipment. A further 500,000 masks and 100,000 test kits were donated by the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation to the Italian Red Cross.

Chinese President Xi Jinping [pledged](#) continued “support and assistance” in a March 18 phonecall to the Prime Minister of **Spain**, Pedro Sanchez. This came [after](#) 1.8 million masks were delivered for use in both Spain and Italy. Spain has likewise [received](#) half a million masks from the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation.

Chinese companies, including Huawei, Alibaba, Oppo and Xiaomi, have [donated](#) millions of masks to countries across the European continent. The Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation, in a March 18 press release, states that it has also [donated](#) nearly a million medical masks to **Germany, France, Slovenia, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland**. It is unclear if this number is included in the aforementioned 2 million masks provided to the EU by China.

Poland is [receiving](#) a further “20,000 masks, 5,000 protective suits, 5,000 medical goggles, 10,000 single-use medical gloves and 10,000 shoe covers” from China. **Greece** [received](#) 550,000 masks and other protective gear from China on March 22, in what the Chinese ambassador in Athens called “evidence of the deep friendship between the two nations.” China is [sending](#) six doctors and an unspecified number of ventilators and medical masks to **Serbia**.

Iran had the highest recorded number of cases outside of China and had [rejected](#) offers of assistance from the United States. It turned to the Chinese government, who quickly deployed specialists and diagnostic kits. China’s Embassy in Iran [donated](#) “250,000 face masks and 5,000 nucleic acid test kits to Iran’s public health, medical, and education authorities.” This was [followed](#) by the Chinese Red Cross Society, who also sent volunteer medical experts and supplies. The Tehran Times, an Iranian English-language paper, also [notes](#) the donation of 100,000 facemasks from a “a number of Chinese tourists, who have traveled to Iran over recent months.”

Japan initially received a [donation](#) of 1 million masks from the Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation. Beijing Zhaotai Group, a Chinese developer, [donated](#) an additional 800,000 masks to two Japanese municipalities in conjunction with the Chinese embassy in Tokyo. China’s Ambassador to Japan [announced](#) another “planned” batch of Chinese aid on March 29. This effort may be viewed as a reciprocal gesture, as Japan [contributed](#) resources in early February to the Chinese fight against COVID-19.

South Korea also provided early aid to China amid shortages, sending \$5 million worth of face masks, medical masks, hazmat suits, and goggles to Wuhan, the virus’s epicentre. China has reciprocated, [approving](#) “exports of 5 million protective masks to Korea, in addition to the 1.1 million masks and 10,000 hazmat suits the Chinese government had already pledged to support Korea’s fight against the virus.” [Beijing Municipality](#) (who also donated supplies to Japan), [Charhar Institute](#) (a Chinese think tank), and [Xiamen Airlines](#) have also all donated supplies to support South Korean efforts in fighting the pandemic.

Lebanon has [received](#) equipment, and the promise of more to come, from the Chinese government, while **Israel** has [received](#) donations from the Alibaba Foundation and Jack Ma Foundation. A Chinese medical team based in **Iraq**, currently aiding local efforts against COVID-19, [announced](#) that it would also visit the semi-autonomous region of **Kurdistan** to

provide assistance and supplies. China is also reportedly [building](#) a “makeshift hospital” for **Pakistan**, in addition to sending medical teams and supplies.

The Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation have also [announced](#) contributions to **Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Mongolia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Vietnam and Uzbekistan**. Collectively, the organization has contributed 3.8 million masks, 360,000 test kits, along with ventilators, face shields, and protective clothing as of late March, to countries across the Asian continent.

China will also [donate](#) US\$1.9 million in cash and medical supplies to **Fiji** and “other” **Pacific nations** (the report does not specify which), in addition to other assistance being [offered](#) by “Chinese local governments, enterprises and friendship associations.”

In Africa, the Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation pledged to donate 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks, and 1,000 protective suits/face shields to **each of the 54 African nations**. **Rwanda** and **Ethiopia** [received](#) the first shipments of supplies. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abi Ahmed, in [conjunction](#) with African Union's Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, will oversee and coordinate the distribution of medical equipment to each African nation.

China is cooperating with various Latin American countries to provide aid, where a Reuters report indicates that **Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Venezuela** have all [accepted](#) offers of aid. This broad effort also includes donations from Alibaba, Huawei, China Communications Construction, and the Bank of China.

Issues & Criticism

While many countries have been receptive to Chinese aid, it comes as no surprise that *some* view the effort as an extension of China's global soft power and alleged “influence” campaign. China's aid efforts in Europe, for example, were questioned by Josep Borrell - a top European Union diplomat. Borrell [cites](#) the “global battle of narratives” in which “China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner.” This, he states, is connected to a global reality defined by ever-changing perceptions and “a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the ‘politics of generosity’.” Borrell acknowledges the dangers of politicization in an unprecedented time where global cooperation is needed more than ever.

While China is [not](#) the only country to actively provide assistance for countries in need, its highly publicized effort has led some to question its motives. James Richardson, Director of the Office of U.S. Foreign Assistance Resources, stated in a March 26 media [briefing](#) that “the Chinese Communist Party has a special responsibility to provide no-strings-attached assistance around the world and take responsibility for what everyone realizes is the result of the coverup that happened in Wuhan.” Richardson compares this to the “Belt and Road Initiative writ large”, explaining that China often demands heavy return on investment for action (and assistance) that could be perceived as generous. This skepticism has been underscored by [reports](#) that some European nations, including Spain, Turkey, and the Netherlands, have rejected Chinese-made equipment for being “below standard or defective.”

It should be expected that Chinese sources vehemently deny the implication of political motivation. The Global Times, a Chinese tabloid, [has](#) downplayed this narrative and “called on the West to stop politicizing China’s goodwill gestures” in the face of a global pandemic. Accusations against China, it claims, are based on “distorted facts and political motives.” And in response to reports of shoddy or defective Chinese equipment, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying [stated](#) that “[p]roblems should be properly solved based on facts, not political interpretations.” To this point, EU Industry Chief Thierry Breton [announced](#) that he had found no evidence of an ulterior motive or “quid pro quo” behind the donations made by Chinese companies in Europe.

While some media reports and statements from politicians have portrayed Chinese assistance as being purely charitable, countries may still be paying for the materials in some cases. Forbes Magazine, quoting Lucrezia Poggetti, a China analyst at the Mercator Institute, notes that “not all aid is without strings... [s]ome is in the form of purchase contracts that serve to help Chinese manufacturers striving to restore production after China’s weeks-long lockdown... [while] [o]ther support serves a domestic political agenda in Europe.” Ireland’s Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, recently [tweeted](#) that he had spoken with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang “to thank China for sending essential medical supplies.” In fact, Ireland has [spent](#) more than €200m sourcing extra supplies from China. This is not to say that Chinese sources have not provided “free” aid to Ireland - the Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation have, for example - but Varadkar’s statement could be interpreted, incorrectly, to mean that China was donating the supplies.

China’s manufacturing sector [reported](#) unexpected growth in March, with both the Caixin/Markit Manufacturing Purchasing Managers’ Index (PMI) and official government sources reporting strong data. It appears that China’s vast industrial capacity will allow it to focus on producing much needed medical supplies for export to international markets. Whether this is by donation or purchase, these exports will fill a vital need for countries struggling to contain the virus.

The EU has also faced criticism for not acting sooner to assist hard-hit areas like Italy and Spain which some argue might have helped give prominence to China’s aid. Some members, including Italy and Spain, have called for further measures, such as the issuance of EU debt (so-called ‘corona bonds’) to help states pay for COVID-19 response measures. This route was condemned and ultimately blocked by richer, northern members of the bloc (read: Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands) who [fear](#) that “it would effectively mean their taxpayers are underwriting spending by poorer member states.” The lack of concrete economic assistance measures [angered](#) many Italians who have felt abandoned by their European neighbours.

In a similar vein, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic was critical of the EU’s response to non-member European states, citing the bloc’s March 15 [decision](#) to enact an “EU-wide export ban for some medical protective equipment in a bid to keep sufficient supplies.” Vucic [claimed](#) that European solidarity exists only “on paper” and that “only China can help us in this situation.”

This perhaps speaking to a larger issue of unity within the bloc, which has become apparent in the current crisis. Even before the lack of financial measures, the New York Times [quoted](#) Michele Geraci, a former undersecretary in the Italian economic development ministry, as saying “If somebody is worried China is doing too much, the gap is open to other countries...”

This is what other countries should do." China, some believe, is stepping in to fill a void left by the lack of a unified European response, and a US inability to assist when its own economy is shut down and its hospitals burdened by COVID-19.

While one might hope that a pandemic would be a cause for international unity and cooperation, the reality is that Great Power politics is not absent, especially between the US and the PRC. While China struggled in the early stages of confronting COVID-19 its apparently comprehensive recovery gives Beijing an opportunity to strengthen its relations with much of the world. Even if part of the Chinese rationale is to burnish its international image, the medical assistance that China is uniquely able to provide is desperately needed by a world struggling to contain COVID-19.