

The Coronavirus Pandemic Is a Defining Moment for the EU and its Relations with China

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The crisis surrounding the coronavirus pandemic has not been a shining moment for EU unity. Brussels stumbled in its initial slow and haphazard response. Because healthcare is not an EU core competency, most member states spent the first few weeks of the crisis launching new national measures intended to protect their citizens. Those included export bans on personal protective equipment and the closing of borders. As time went on, however, national leaders appeared to grasp the ramifications of those policies on EU unity. France and Germany rolled back their export bans, and, after Italy's original call for help was met with silence, member states gradually started coming to the aid of their neighbors. That said, the lasting effects of the virus on the future of the European project remain unpredictable. The EU is in the process of launching several new forms of assistance to citizens and businesses. But the degree to which it will weather what will no doubt be a long-term and crippling financial crisis is an open question. What, for example, will the EU do if the Italian economy collapses? Will it learn from its handling of the 2008 financial crisis? Or will it apply the same set of financial tools as last time? And what to do about the rollback of democracy in Hungary, whose leader just used the pandemic as cover to secure power to rule by decree indefinitely?

China, meanwhile, has used this moment to exploit EU disunity, moving quickly to send aid to Italy and Spain after both countries complained of early unheeded calls for help from their European neighbors. In the weeks since, large shipments of masks, ventilators, and test kits have been arriving at European airports from China with regularity. Beijing has successfully taken advantage of the EU's fractured response to the coronavirus as well as the absence of U.S. leadership in this crisis to pursue an intense campaign of "mask diplomacy" aimed at burnishing its image and shoring up relations in Europe. Alongside traditional diplomatic outreach such as leader-level pledges of support and virtual meetings with European health officials, Beijing has also deployed a large-scale disinformation and propaganda campaign. After facing global criticism for its initial response and suppression of information related to the virus, it has unleashed a concerted effort to rewrite the narrative surrounding its actions so that it is seen as a benevolent global actor.

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In the early weeks of this effort, China's actions were rewarded with positive news coverage and praise from some European leaders, including Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, who claimed that "European solidarity does not exist. Only China can help." However, there are signs that it may be overplaying its hand with such an

aggressive push in Europe during a time of crisis. Recent press reports describe pressure on governments to publicly thank Beijing for its assistance, and revelations that many of its “donations” were actually purchased by European governments at considerable cost. In other examples, Chinese medical supply companies have been accused of price gouging, while shipments to countries including the Czech Republic and the Netherlands were found to contain mostly faulty and sub-standard equipment. France’s government has twice rebuked China for publicly criticizing its pandemic response, and the EU’s top diplomat warned of a battle for geopolitical influence in the wake of the pandemic, calling for EU solidarity vis-à-vis China. As the curtain is pulled back on China’s “altruism,” there are also signs that European audiences are wise to, and wary of, its Russian-style disinformation tactics. But the EU must do more to push back on these activities, and not, as reports indicated last week, yield to pressure from Beijing to soften criticism of China in a public report about coronavirus disinformation.

Will Beijing’s coronavirus strategy backfire or draw Europe closer to it? So far European reactions to its “mask diplomacy” have been mixed, and it is too early to predict its impact on long-term relations. The strategy’s effectiveness could wane if the EU is successful in finding some degree of solidarity in the face of the pandemic. Although Brussels was slow to come to the assistance of its member states, France and Germany have now quietly donated more masks to Italy than were sold to the country by China—but they, and others in Europe, should make their assistance more visible. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, ends her tweets with the hashtag #strongertogether and now China’s Mission to the EU uses the hashtag to bolster its own coronavirus narrative. There is simply no question, however, that the pandemic will be a defining moment for the EU and for the future of its relationship with China.

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