



# ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 2 / 2022

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## US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by  
Giulio Pugliese  
Andrea Fischetti  
Michelguglielmo Torri

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A large, intricate, golden mandala pattern is positioned on the right side of the cover. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and floral designs, with a central circular motif that radiates outwards in multiple layers.

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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# COVID-19 AND CHINA'S GLOBAL IMAGE

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*With the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the PRC experienced one of its worst internal and international crises, in economic terms but above all in terms of image and prestige. The COVID-19 pandemic, in fact, came at a critical juncture in both China's internal and international relations, given that in recent years the communist Government has become a target of criticism on various internal and international issues. At the same time, it represented a crucial challenge for the CCP, while preparing the celebrations for its 100th anniversary and the achievement of its first «centenary goal».*

*Beyond the undeniable effects on the country's economy, undoubtedly the most relevant effects were recorded in terms of image and reputation, as has emerged in different global opinion polls. Despite the Chinese authorities' highly effective management of the health emergency crisis after a first period of inaction, Beijing's authoritarian rule has again been an object of consistent criticism from liberal Western democracies, both on the intrusive methods adopted to cope with the crisis and its aggressiveness in imposing its official narrative regarding events. After analysing the effects of COVID-19 on China's global image, the paper focuses on the importance of «image» for China and its quest for prestige and image-building throughout history, with special reference to the communist experience. In the last part, it reflects on the opportunity that vaccine diplomacy may represent for China to recover its reputation.*

KEYWORDS – China; COVID-19; global image; prestige; CCP's legitimacy; official narrative; aid (vaccine) diplomacy.

## 1. Introduction

2020 was a real *annus horribilis* for China as it experienced one of its worst international crises, being the first epicentre of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Beyond the effects on the country's economy, which cannot be neglected – in recent years China has recorded its lowest growth rates since 1978 – undoubtedly the most relevant effects were recorded in terms of its image and reputation.

In this article, I first analyse the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's global image in a very crucial period in which the Chinese Communist Party was preparing to celebrate its 100th anniversary and the achievement of its first «centenary goal». I also underline how the crisis contributed

to precipitating a situation for the country that was already evident. In the following section I briefly focus on the significance of «image» for China and the Chinese, while China's quest for prestige and image-building throughout history, with special reference to the communist experience, is examined in the successive section. In the conclusion, I reflect on the opportunity that vaccine diplomacy may represent for China to recover its image.

## 2. *The effects of the pandemic on China's global image*

In the 30th group study session of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee focused on strengthening China's international communication capacity, held in Beijing on 31 May 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping told senior Communist Party officials that it was important for the country to be “open and confident, but also modest and humble” and present an image of a “credible, loveable and respectable China” (要注重把握好基调, 既开放自信也谦逊谦和, 努力塑造可信、可爱、可敬的中国形象). He also spoke of the need for China to “incessantly expand its circle of friends” (不断扩大朋友圈) by revamping its image.<sup>1</sup> These remarks were quite distinct from the belligerent, arrogant and at times threatening tones Xi Jinping has repeatedly adopted in the last few years. To observers they represented a rare admission of Beijing's growing isolation, which was exacerbated by the novel coronavirus (henceforth COVID-19) pandemic, and marked a possible shift in China's diplomatic approach, considered by analysts increasingly antagonistic. The Chinese leader's comments, in fact, came amid deteriorating relations with key global powers and negative perceptions of China at record high levels in many parts of the world. The Chinese observers agree in considering Xi's call to be a recognition of Beijing's international isolation, which is exacerbated by aggressive «wolf warrior» diplomacy and ineffective propaganda, and an attempt to influence campaigns abroad to impose the country's narrative on COVID-19. It is even possible that the Chinese president had been persuaded by those, including party loyalists, who have been arguing that the «wolf warrior» approach has been counterproductive and has contributed to undermining the country's global image.<sup>2</sup>

1. ‘加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国’ (Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work to Demonstrate a Realistic, Three-dimensional and Comprehensive China), *Renmin Ribao*, 2 June 2021.

2. ‘Xi Jinping calls for more «loveable» image for China in bid to make friends’, *BBC*, 2 June 2021. Despite this apparent sort of break with a recent «Wolf Warrior» posture in Chinese political communication, in fact both the language and the arguments used by Xi Jinping in this speech are quite consistent with previous messages on the country's external political communication.



In fact, the net deterioration in the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s global image can be considered one of the worst consequences of the outbreak of the coronavirus, one which has consequently led to a marked worsening of its international environment. As emerged in different global opinion polls conducted in 2020 and early 2021, public attitudes to China have sharply changed as a direct consequence of the spread of COVID-19 in the world. Especially in relation to the initial mismanagement of the crisis and the aggressive narrative imposed by Beijing in the attempt to change the general perception of the country from «virus infector» to «world saviour». In particular, surveys by the Pew Research Center revealed that China's image had reached its lowest point since the think tank began surveying global perceptions of the country in the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> More than two-thirds of people in the countries surveyed – fourteen largely Western and advanced economy nations, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, South Korea, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States – declared they had no confidence in the Chinese President to do the right thing with regard to world affairs, and more than three in five on average thought China had done a bad job in dealing with the coronavirus outbreak. The most negative views on China's coronavirus performance came from three countries in its close proximity, namely Japan, South Korea and Australia. In specific contexts like in the US, the negative feelings were directly linked to China's lack of respect for human rights, together with economic issues. Similarly, in the European context there was a generalized sense of growing mistrust of the Chinese leadership and a consequent decline in Chinese soft power, as was confirmed in a report published in April 2021 by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), significantly entitled *China's Soft Power in Europe Falling on Hard Times*.<sup>4</sup> Other studies conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic (in partnership with other European researchers) in June and November 2020 respectively showed similar results. In particular, the Czech University's study, which was conducted in 13 European countries (including 10 EU members), revealed how perceptions of China significantly worsened in 10 of the countries, with Serbia being one of the exceptions.<sup>5</sup>

While these results could be considered an obvious outcome, the situation was no better in the PRC's neighbourhood. Particularly interesting are the results in central Asian countries, key actors in relation to the expansion

3. 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020.

4. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report\\_ETNC\\_China\\_Soft\\_Power\\_in\\_Europe\\_Falling\\_on\\_Hard\\_Times\\_2021.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report_ETNC_China_Soft_Power_in_Europe_Falling_on_Hard_Times_2021.pdf).

5. 'China, Europe, and Covid-19 Headwinds', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 July 2020; 'European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19', *Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS)*, 16 November 2020.

and reach of the Belt and Road Initiative, as Bonnie Girard showed in an article written for *The Diplomat*.<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that it was not directly related to the spread of the coronavirus. In southeast Asia the picture is mixed, as was shown by a poll conducted by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) and published in February 2021. The study revealed that while most countries acknowledged that the PRC had contributed the most to the region in coping with the pandemic, the respondents appeared to be sceptical about China's prowess in the region.<sup>7</sup>

In other contexts where Chinese influence is well consolidated, the situation was apparently the same, but on closer inspection some differences can be seen. In Latin America, surveys showed a rise in anti-Chinese rhetoric at the beginning of the crisis, even in friendly countries such as Brazil and Venezuela, which imitated Trump's US in downplaying the gravity of the pandemic and calling COVID-19 «the Chinese virus». Some countries (Argentina, Brazil and Mexico) which had always expressed favourable opinions about China witnessed significant manifestations of anti-Chinese xenophobia as soon as the coronavirus reached the region.<sup>8</sup> However, Beijing's capacity to move quickly to rebrand itself as a donor rather than a recipient of aid, especially as the US interrupted international supply chains and directed all its efforts domestically (also in the context of vaccine policy giving priority to vaccinations at home), contributed to inverting the trend and strengthening the country's status in Latin America.<sup>9</sup>

In Africa the situation appeared to be more complex and multifaceted. Despite the discrimination African nationals had suffered on Chinese soil, as was exemplified by the Guangzhou incident in early April 2020, China has intentionally kept Africa high on its agenda. Its aid diplomacy has contributed to rescuing its image in the continent,<sup>10</sup> as a cooperative partner thanks to its mask and vaccine diplomacies carried out through both bilateral channels and multilateral initiatives, such as the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX initiative).

On the other hand, other reports have contributed to highlighting how Beijing used the pandemic crisis instrumentally to boost its image in

6. 'At 100 Years Old, China's Communist Party Still Can't Get Along with Its Next-Door Neighbors', *The Diplomat*, 21 June 2021.

7. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.

8. 'Latin America Used to Be Positive Toward China. COVID-19 Might Change That', *The Diplomat*, 10 April 2020.

9. 'Vaccine diplomacy strengthens China's stature in Latin America, US congressional panel hears', *South China Morning Post*, 21 May 2021.

10. 'Coronavirus: how China plans to restore its image in Africa', *The Africa Report*, 20 April 2020; 'How «Mask Diplomacy» Rescued China's Image in Africa', *Defense One*, 10 March 2021.

global media coverage. A study by the International Federation of Journalists conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 and involving about fifty journalists from as many countries from six regions of the world (Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America and MENA) is particularly interesting. It revealed how China's state media helped improve Beijing's image around the world during the pandemic by resorting to successful media internationalization tactics which the PRC has adopted for several years now – content-sharing agreements, free tours to China for journalists and memoranda of understanding with international outlets and unions – with results that are easy to imagine.<sup>11</sup> That said, according to Maria Repnikova, director of the Center for Global Information Studies at Georgia State University and a China specialist, interviewed by *The Guardian*, the question of how effective those efforts were in shaping public perceptions about China remained open since information flooding did not necessarily equate to a change in perceptions.<sup>12</sup>

What is certain is that the general worsening in perceptions of China globally did not go unnoticed by the Chinese communist authorities. According to the Reuters news agency, an internal report published in April 2020 by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR),<sup>13</sup> and presented to China's top leaders at the beginning of May, revealed Beijing's awareness of the deterioration in its global image by emphasizing that global anti-Chinese sentiment was at its highest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. According to the internal sources who spoke with Reuters, the CICIR report even warned that China should be prepared for a possible armed confrontation in a worst-case scenario.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic came at a critical juncture in China's relations with the West and has accelerated a process that was already in motion. In recent years, the Chinese communist Government has become a target for criticism on a number of issues affecting both the internal – repression of Hong Kong's democratic activists; human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang – and the international sphere – the trade war with the United States, criticism of the *modus operandi* of the Confucius Institutes and the alleged «debt trap diplomacy»

11. 'The Covid-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy', May 2021 ([https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/IFJ\\_-\\_The\\_Covid\\_Story\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_-_The_Covid_Story_Report.pdf)). On Chinese media internationalization, see Daya Kishan Thussu, Hugo de Burgh & Anbin Shi, *China's Media Go Global*, Routledge, 2017.

12. 'China has used pandemic to boost global image, report says', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2021.

13. A think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security.

14. 'Exclusive: Internal Chinese report warns Beijing faces Tiananmen-like global backlash over virus', *Reuters*, 4 May 2020.

exercised by Beijing within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>15</sup> This converging crisis, combined with many politically delicate commemorative anniversaries (from the centenary of the May 4th Movement to the 30th anniversary of Tiananmen), led the Sino-American political scientist Minxin Pei to define 2019 as an *annus horribilis* for China. Even more relevant is the fact that the Chinese president in a speech at the Central Party School of the CCP at the beginning of the same year sounded the alarm and warned officials that sources of turmoil and points of risk were multiplying globally. Therefore, China had to be ready to face major risks (重大风险) on all fronts, such as «black swan» (黑天鹅) and «grey rhino» (灰犀牛) events.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, many articles have been written equating the outbreak of the coronavirus with a «black swan» and/or a «grey rhino», with the majority inclined to see it as a «grey rhino», considering the pandemic was wholly predictable.<sup>17</sup> In fact, many observers had predicted it – from Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who in 2007 coined the term «black swan» in his best-selling 2007 book with that title, to Bill Gates, who in a 2015 TED talk entitled *The next outbreak? We're not ready*, spoke about the spread of a potential virus and stressed the need for the world to be well-equipped to tackle the crisis. In their views the pandemic was “a portent of a more fragile global system”.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that COVID-19 translated into a deterioration of China's image, both externally and internally, with potential consequences for the party and the Chinese political system in a very crucial period.<sup>19</sup> On 1 July 2021 the CCP celebrated its 100th anniversary, confirming itself as the longest-lived and most resilient communist party in con-

15. See, for instance: Giulio Pugliese, 'A Global Rorschach Test: Responding to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Defence Strategic Communications*, NATO Excellence Centre Riga, Vol. 7 (2), December 2019, pp. 113-32; Giulio Pugliese, 'COVID-19 and the Reification of the US-China Cold War', in Jeff Kingston-edited special issue 'COVID-19 in Asia', *Asia-Pacific Journal*. Volume 18, Issue 15, Number 3, Article ID 5436.

16. Barbara Onnis, 'China's Foreign Policy 2019: Xi Jinping's Tireless Summit Diplomacy Amid Growing Challenges', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, p. 48.

17. A «black swan» refers to a serious, unforeseen incident that defies conventional wisdom; while a «grey rhino» indicates a potential risk that is highly obvious but tends to be overlooked. Generally, the terms are used in investor jargon, indicating surprise economic shocks and financial risks hiding in plain sight.

18. 'The Pandemic isn't a Black Swan but a Portent of a More Fragile Global System', *The New Yorker*, 21 April 2020.

19. Internally, the death of Doctor Li Wenliang – who first warned of the possible outbreak of an illness that resembled SARS in Wuhan at the end of December 2019, and was punished for this, before being declared «a hero» in the aftermath of his death after contracting the disease himself – led to an outpouring of national grief, angry, mistrust and criticism of the CCP and president Xi, even from executives, academics, and provincial officials. See '«Hero who told the truth»: Chinese rage over coronavirus death of whistleblower doctor', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020; 'Death of coronavirus doctor Li Wenliang becomes catalyst for 'freedom of speech' demands in China', *South China Morning Post*, 7 February 2020.

temporary history. At the same time the PRC celebrated the realization of the first of its «two centenary goals» (两个一百年): completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects (小康社会).<sup>20</sup> The stakes were therefore very high for China and its paramount leader, who has put the «Chinese dream» and the renewal of the nation at the top of his political agenda.

### 3. *The significance of «image» for China and the Chinese*

In Chinese the word 面子 literally means «face» but it also refers to reputation and social status in terms of prestige. In Chinese culture, in fact, different factors such as prestige, dignity and reputation converge in the concept of «face». Therefore, «losing face» (丢面子) is one of the worst things that can happen in the life of a Chinese, while «saving face» (挽回面子) is an aim to be preserved at all costs. This discourse can also be applied at the level of international politics. An emblematic case is represented by the tense relations between the PRC in Xi Jinping's first mandate and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) of Kim Jong Un, when Pyongyang's erratic behaviour threatened to make China lose face, making it look like a «paper tiger» (纸老虎).<sup>21</sup>

Many scholars agree on the relevance of image considerations in the minds of Chinese decision-makers.<sup>22</sup> For Ingrid d'Hooge, very few countries «are as sensitive to their image in the eyes of other nations as China».<sup>23</sup>

20. The second refers to the centenary of the founding of the PRC in 2049, when China will have built a prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country (富强民主文明和谐美丽的社会主义现代化国家). The two goals are an integral part of the Chinese dream and are strictly related to the rejuvenation of the Chinese people, as clearly emerges from the collection of speeches made by Xi Jinping since his coming to power and contained in the first of the three volumes dedicated to *The Governance of China* (Foreign Language Press, Beijing 2014). For an analysis of the economic implications of the goals see Ding Lu, 'China's tough battles to achieve the centenary goals', *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, Vol. 18, 3, 2020, pp. 203-207.

21. Barbara Onnis, 'La responsabilità della Cina «a rischio». I rapporti sino-nordcoreani nell'era di Xi Jinping e Kim Jong-un', in *Wenxin Lessenza della scrittura. Contributi in onore di Alessandra Lavagnino*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2017, pp. 577-590. On the importance of «face» and «face-saving» in Beijing's international relations, see Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism. Pride, Politics and Diplomacy*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 2004, esp. chap. 1; Jessica Weiss Chen, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

22. See Simon Rabinovitch, 'The Rise of an Image-Conscious China', *China Security*, Vol. 4, 3, Summer 2008, pp. 33-47; Ingrid d'Hooge, *China's Public Diplomacy*, Routledge, 2015; Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy. The Rise of the Confucius Institute*, Routledge 2016.

23. Ingrid D'Hooge, *China's Public Diplomacy*, p. 2.

Despite its unquestioned growing weight in world politics and the global economy, China often feels misunderstood and misjudged by the international community and perceives a potentially hostile international environment due to mainly negative reporting about the country in Western media.<sup>24</sup> These perceptions are relevant to the Beijing leadership since they are believed to influence foreign governments' conduct toward the country. Therefore, the Chinese leadership keenly seeks to improve foreign perceptions of China and its policies through active public diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> A negative image is detrimental to China's national interests and can have heavy repercussions on both the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and the country's soft power appeal. Interestingly, in 2007 Joshua Cooper Ramo<sup>26</sup> argued that China's national image and the misalignment between its image of itself and how it was viewed by the rest of the world might represent its greatest strategic threat in the near future in its quest to win «hearts and minds».<sup>27</sup> Against this background, Chinese scholars agree that China needs to communicate with the world to counter the negative demonizing images spread by Western media and present the true image of the real China.

Since Xi Jinping took power, the phrase «tell China stories well» (讲好中国故事) has become a fundamental guide to China's approach to public diplomacy, and «an encouragement to use China's own communication channels to promote and testify to official Chinese views and opinions and

24. Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy*, chap. 2.

25. The Chinese have long referred to the term «external propaganda» (对外宣传 or 外宣) to publicize their successes and strengthen the country's image abroad. Unlike its English translation, in the Chinese language the term «propaganda» has in fact a positive connotation, being associated with essentially benign activities. It was only with the beginning of the reform policy, and as a direct consequence of the globalization process, that China's communication and external propaganda underwent a gradual process of modernization and expansion and started to be considered no longer from the perspective of propaganda, but rather from the perspective of public diplomacy. In particular, the concept of public diplomacy (公共外交) has been enthusiastically embraced by Chinese academics and bureaucratic actors since at least the early 2000s, and it was especially in the second term of Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration, that the term began to be used in place of that of external propaganda, as the Party-State became increasingly aware of the harmfulness of the term «propaganda» abroad. A concise but effective analysis of how the Chinese Party-State has attempted to present «propaganda» in a different light since the new millennium, is provided by David Bandurski, 'Public Diplomacy', in Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen (eds.), *Decoding China Dictionary*, 2021, pp. 46-48, available at [https://rwi.lu.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Decoding-China-Publication\\_FINAL.pdf](https://rwi.lu.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Decoding-China-Publication_FINAL.pdf).

26. In 2004 he coined the term «Beijing consensus» to label China's model, which was increasingly attracting many developing countries in search of their own development path away from the impositions of the «Washington consensus». See Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004 (<https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/09/244.pdf>).

27. Joshua Cooper Ramo, *Brand China*, The Foreign Policy Center, 2007.

to strengthen the international influence of China”.<sup>28</sup> Xi first introduced the concept in a speech to the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference on 13 August 2013, explaining his approach to propaganda and international messaging to win the trust of international public opinion and better serve the national interest. In his words, “It is necessary to meticulously do a good job in external publicity, innovate in external publicity methods, strive to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate China and foreign countries, tell Chinese stories well and spread Chinese voices well” (要精心做好对外宣传工作, 创新对外宣传方式, 着力打造融通中外的新概念新范畴新表述, 讲好中国故事, 传播好中国声音).<sup>29</sup> It goes without saying that Xi Jinping’s understanding refers to stories that reflect the external propaganda objectives of the CCP and are premised on the Party’s control of the narrative both at home and abroad. Good examples of this understanding are the different diplomacies deployed during the pandemic, from «mask diplomacy» (口罩外交) to «vaccine diplomacy» (疫苗外交) and «wolf warrior diplomacy» (战狼外交). The first was aimed at promoting (and consolidating) an image of China as a responsible power, making effective its efforts in tackling the virus, and in particular fighting against criticism related to its initial mismanagement. Similarly, «vaccine diplomacy» presenting the vaccine as a «public good» was aimed at changing the general perception of the PRC as the spreader of the virus, instead promoting a new vision of China as the saviour of the world. While the first had mixed results,<sup>30</sup> the role played by Beijing in the global distribution of vaccines, both to single countries and within the COVAX initiative, is still under scrutiny. In fact, its success or failure depends on many factors, starting with the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccines and the availability of other vaccines.<sup>31</sup> As for «wolf warrior diplomacy», which is officially conducted by the Chinese Government through prominent diplomats and spokesmen for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the use of quite unusual channels, such as social media platforms banned in mainland China (primarily Facebook and Twitter), it was firstly intended to cope with the US narrative on the origins of the virus, which insisted on calling it the «Chinese virus» or the «Wuhan

28. Zhao Alexander Huang and Rui Wang, ‘Building a network to «Tell China Stories Well»: Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter’, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol.13, 2019, pp. 2984-3007, p. 2094.

29. ‘习近平：意识形态工作是党的一项极端重要的工作’ (Xi Jinping: Ideological work is an extremely important task of the party), *Xinhuanet*, 20 August 2013.

30. Sylvain Kahn & Estelle Prin, ‘In the time of COVID-19, China’s mask has fallen with regard to Europe’, *European Issues*, No. 569, 7 September 2020; Charles Dust, ‘How China’s Mask Diplomacy Backfired’, *The National Interest*, 20 April 2021.

31. Vaccine diplomacy deserves a separate article, but for the purpose of this analysis I will briefly reflect in the conclusions whether vaccines can represent an opportunity to repair China’s damaged reputation. In fact, the vaccines game is still open, while the global vaccine shortage is offering the PRC an international soft power boost, given its prior engagement in health diplomacy.

virus», and to propose a different narrative on its origins by referring to conspiracy theories.<sup>32</sup>

All these actions adopted by the Chinese Government to change the COVID-19 narrative and disassociate itself from the novel coronavirus were emblematic of China's concerns about its image. In the words of Indian scholar Raj Verma, while intending to "portray itself as a Good Samaritan, a responsible and reliable partner and an essential global power", Beijing's efforts to change the COVID-19 narrative also derived from "the need to maintain the CPC's regime legitimacy" considering that the outbreak had created discontent among Chinese citizens about the initial mishandling of the virus by the central and local governments.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. *The quest for prestige and image-building in China's foreign policy*

To fully understand the importance of a good reputation and prestige for China it is important to underline that the pursuit of international status was a constant behind Chinese foreign policy even in imperial times, when China had the presumption to present itself as the centre of civilization. During the 1930s, the communists guided by Mao Zedong also aimed to create a good image and reputation for themselves, both internally and externally, in their fight against the Japanese invaders, as opposed to the nationalists headed by Chiang Kai-shek. Since 1949 it has been a key driver of the PRC's foreign policy, with restoration of China's great power status identified as a central goal of Beijing's sovereign foreign policy after the historical trauma of foreign domination during the notorious «century of national humiliation» (百年耻辱). This quest for recognition characterized China's posture in the international communist movement, where Beijing presented itself as an alternative source of ideological authority to Moscow.<sup>34</sup> Prestige continued to orient Chinese foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, when new «identity management strategies» were formulated to achieve international recognition.<sup>35</sup> While in the mid-1990s Beijing opted for a strategy of

32. Barbara Onnis, "Serve the Nation. 'Wolf Warrior' diplomats in defense of the official narrative on Covid-19 between fake news and disinformation", in G. Borzoni, B. Onnis, C. Rossi (eds.), *Beyond Fake News. Governments, Press and Disinformation through International History*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2021, pp. 229-245. For a brilliant analysis of the role played by China's diplomatic corps in the making of an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy, see Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army. The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

33. Raj Verma, 'China's diplomacy and changing the COVID-19 narrative', *International Journal*, Vol. 75, 2, 2020, pp. 255-256.

34. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

35. Deborah Welch Larson & Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy', *International Security*, Vol. 34, 4, 2010, pp. 63-95.



«social competition» with Washington, on the assumption that the international system was undergoing an inevitable process of multipolarization, in the late 1990s recognition that the international system would remain unipolar for the foreseeable future led to a new strategy of «social creativity». Since status requires acceptance by others, the “Chinese elites realized that they had to alter their behaviour to win recognition from the West”.<sup>36</sup> Great power status was therefore pursued by advancing China’s prestige through development of bilateral partnerships, involvement in existing multilateral settings and establishing new regional organizations rather than by competing with the leading hegemon.

Image-building has followed the same trajectory. During the Maoist era (1949-1976) China attempted to convince outsiders that it was a revolutionary socialist power,<sup>37</sup> projecting international soft-power messages beyond conventional diplomatic channels that consisted mainly in inviting so-called «foreign guests» (外宾) to carefully planned tours around the country, often with all expenses paid.<sup>38</sup> In the reform era (1978-present) the Beijing Government has been more committed to being recognized as a cooperative responsible player in the international system, and participation in global governance has provided an important avenue for the PRC to build a benign and responsible image. In general, China has been seeking to build a good international image, with shaping a favourable external environment for domestic development as a primary goal.<sup>39</sup> The approach has differed according to the multiple identities with which China has chosen to identify itself depending on the circumstances (a developing country; an emerging economy; a rising great power),<sup>40</sup> and therefore on the country’s capacity and international standing. In the early 1990s guided by

36. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

37. Simon Rabinovitch, ‘The Rise of an Image-Conscious China’, *China Security*, Vol. 4, 3, Summer 2008, p. 33. See also Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic*, Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc, 2003.

38. Julia Lovell, ‘The uses of foreigners in Mao-era China: «Techniques of Hospitality» and international image-building in the People’s Republic, 1949-1976’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 25, December 2015, pp. 135-158.

39. Rosemary Foot, ‘Chinese power and the idea of a responsible state’, *The China Journal*, Vol. 45, 2001, pp. 1-19; Li Mingjian, ‘China debates soft power’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, 2, 2008, pp. 287-308.

40. China’s «multiple identities» influence Chinese leaders’ articulation of foreign policy discourse and impact the country’s international image, since its political discourse is perceived differently at the global level by different countries. On the rationale behind China choosing different types of identities according to the audience, see Dominik Mierzejewski & Bartosz Kowalski, *China’s Selective Identities. State, Ideology and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. On the consequences generated by this contradictory posturing in decoding China’s foreign policy, see Pu Xiaoyu, *Re-branding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order*, Stanford University Press, 2019.

Deng's principle of "concealing one's strength and biding one's time" (韬光养晦) and "not seeking leadership" (绝不当头) China's international behaviour featured relative cooperation but limited contribution. In fact, China needed to recover from the Tiananmen crisis, which risked compromising the reform and opening-up policies and the focus on modernization. In an international environment that was openly hostile to Beijing – as China was the only great power left to represent Marxist socialism – it necessarily had to work to rebuild its image and increase its influence. Its turn to multilateralism, with gradual engagement in UN peacekeeping operations, offers a good example in this sense.<sup>41</sup> In the 2000s, a major aim of Beijing's diplomacy was to address the negative impact on its image caused by the so-called China «threat theory» (中国威胁理论), which emerged among American neoconservatives as a direct consequence of China's tremendous economic rise, soon followed by a military and geopolitical rise. As part of the new strategy, Beijing increased its contribution to and engagement in regional and global governance, conveying a message that China's development would benefit the world. The Chinese Government adopted the idea of being a responsible power and advanced a narrative that China's development was peaceful (和平发展) and represented an opportunity instead of being a threat.<sup>42</sup> China's behaviour during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and its decision to not depreciate its currency, is widely perceived as the beginning of the effort to build and project the image of a «responsible major power» (负责任大国).<sup>43</sup> A decade later, the global financial crisis created new opportunities for the country to increase its say in global affairs, as the crisis shook faith in the liberal economic order. Many observers, including ones that had sceptically welcomed the «Beijing consensus idea» proposed in 2004 by Cooper Ramo, had to recognize the effectiveness of the so-called «China model» in dealing with the crisis.<sup>44</sup>

While the narrative of responsible power and peaceful development contributed to a relatively positive international perception of China in the 2000s, concerns and criticisms remained. Of particular concern were issues such as the Darfur crisis, China's protection of military rule in Myanmar, its growing quest for energy and other resources, and environmen-

41. M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's attitude toward U.N. peacekeeping operations since 1989', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, 11, 1996, pp. 1102–1121. See also Joan Wuthnow, Li Xin & Qi Lingling, 'Diverse Multilateralism: Four Strategies in China's Multilateral Diplomacy', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 17, 2012, pp. 269–290.

42. Zheng Bijian, 'China's 'peaceful rise' to great-power status', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, 5, 2005, pp. 18–24.

43. Deng Yong, 'China: The post-responsible power', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, 4, 2014, p. 120.

44. '杨继绳：我看“中国模式”' (Yang Jisheng: How I see the China model), *Yun-huang Chunqiu*, 1 January 2011.

tal pollution.<sup>45</sup> Increasingly active international behaviour and a firmer position on issues such as the South China Sea and East China Sea disputes, as well as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even Xinjing and Tibet – part of the so-called «core interests» (核心利益)<sup>46</sup> – were also key. These led to Xi Jinping's new China, strongly showing itself as a great power, making its voice heard by exercising its 话语权, namely its «discursive power», that broadly indicates the power to dictate international rules and set the political agenda. Xi Jinping's definitive abandonment of Deng's «low profile» posture, which was accompanied by a wise and refined exercise of discursive power, trespassing often and willingly into aggressive language, on the one hand contributed to putting an end to the sense of victimization once and for all. On the other hand, started a new era of growing assertiveness and arrogance (combined with an authoritarian drift domestically) that affected China's image and its attractiveness to the detriment of its reputation and soft power.

### 5. Conclusions: Can vaccines «save» China?

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the worst internal crises in the last few decades for the PRC, with huge repercussions on multiple fronts (political, economic, social, geopolitical), even though the Chinese Government, after a first period of inaction, demonstrated highly effective management of the health emergency crisis. When Europe, the US and most of the advanced countries were still closed in their repeated and highly debated lockdowns, daily life in China had already gone back to normal and it was one of the few countries that registered economic growth in 2020.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the Chinese party-state once again demonstrated its resilience and ability to transform a crisis into an opportunity, to generate political consensus and further nourish nationalist sentiments. Its use of highly sophisticated instruments to contain the spread of the virus domestically was a clear demonstration of the level of high technology

45. Stephanie Kleine-Ablbrandt & Andrem Small, 'China's new dictatorship diplomacy: Is Beijing parting with pariahs?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, 1, 2008, pp. 38-56.

46. The «core interests» include a set of interests that represent the non-negotiable bottom lines of Chinese foreign policy. In other words, they comprise issues on which Beijing is unwilling to compromise. See Michael Swaine, 'China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On "Core Interests"', *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 34, Winter 2011; Zhou Jinghao, 'China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice', *Pacific Focus*, 21 April 2019.

47. 'China's economy grows 2.3% in 2020 as recovery quickens', *CNN Business*, 18 January 2021.

development it had achieved.<sup>48</sup> The aid diplomacy and the production of its own vaccines and their distribution to less developed countries – in line with the Chinese view considering vaccines to be «global public goods», and in stark contrast with US President Donald Trump’s vaccine nationalism<sup>49</sup> – aimed to emphasize China’s role in international governance as a «responsible stakeholder». Nonetheless, this did not translate into a more positive view of China worldwide. With a few rare, but in some cases significant exceptions,<sup>50</sup> Chinese methods, of misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) and intrusive technology, and the surveillance system employed to track the movement of citizens in collaboration with the country’s three most famous tech giants (Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu) have been heavily criticized, as extremely invasive tools limiting the already scarce individual freedom. In other words, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Government, that made a quick and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis possible, has generated consistent criticism from liberal Western democracies. It thus confirmed something that was already well known: the fact that “the second largest economy in the world, perhaps soon to be the first, is still a society in which little or no space for personal privacy and freedom of speech is guaranteed”.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, COVID-19 contributed to reviving longstanding debates about China’s lack of democracy and its authoritarian practices, often and willingly set aside for economic and business reasons, further complicating its relations with the world and (again) questioning its role in the international system.

The extent to which vaccine diplomacy can help restore China’s reputation remains to be seen. According to data from Bridge Consulting, an independent mission-driven consultancy that tracks China’s impact on global health, it seems that Chinese vaccine diplomacy is working well. Despite many doubts about the effectiveness of «made in China» vaccines

48. Beyond the sophistication of the devices adopted, it was above all the political will of the Party-State to apply technologies for mass surveillances to public health management that provided China with an immediate advantage in the fight against COVID-19, at least before the introduction of the vaccines complicated the cost of so-called «zero-COVID» strategies.

49. ‘Trump signs order putting Americans at head of vaccine line, while vowing to work with world’, *The National Observer*, 9 December 2020.

50. Italy was one of these exceptions but, as is shown in the previously mentioned study by the International Federation of Journalists, it seems strictly related to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic the country was the object of a heavy campaign of disinformation and misinformation.

51. Silvia Menegazzi, ‘China 2020: A foreign policy characterized by growing resilience, fading responsibility and increasing uncertainty’, *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, p. 49.

(Sinovac is 51% effective, while Sinopharm is 79% effective),<sup>52</sup> the global vaccine shortage is giving China an international soft power boost since, according to experts, Chinese vaccines work better than no vaccines.<sup>53</sup> So far Beijing has distributed almost 1 billion doses, mainly in the Global South, and by the end of 2021 the PRC plans to have distributed 2 billion vaccine doses abroad.<sup>54</sup> There are at least three aspects of China's vaccine diplomacy that deserve to be considered. First, the speed with which China rolled out vaccines to countries with few other options – in the first few months of 2021 it was reported that Beijing had prioritized exports over a then sluggish domestic rollout, in stark contrast with the strategy pursued by the US and Western countries in general. Second, the scale, with reference to both the number of vaccine doses shipped around the world by China, and also to the number of new vaccine candidates in the clinical stage – in early June 2021 there were 20, eight of which in phase 3. Third, the simpler logistics of Chinese vaccines compared with Western ones. The fact that the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines require only standard refrigeration while Pfizer and Moderna need extreme sub-zero temperatures represents an advantage for many low and middle-income countries in the Global South, because of their hot climates and poor logistical systems.<sup>55</sup> In addition to exporting huge quantities of vaccines, China is also building manufacturing plants around the world, casting itself as a good global citizen even if there is no doubt that Beijing sees strategic gains from its conduct.<sup>56</sup> That said, as has already been pointed out, the vaccine game is still open and it is difficult to make any kind of prediction. Only time will tell if vaccines will be able to save China's image and reputation, and at the same time redeem its leader, who is about to receive his third term.

52. These two vaccines have been at the forefront of the PRC's vaccine diplomacy, with Sinopharm's vaccine having obtained full or emergency approval in 53 nations and Sinovac's jab in 29 countries. They were approved by the WHO in May and June 2021 respectively, while they are both awaiting acceptance by the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

53. Smriti Mallapaty, 'China's COVID vaccines have been crucial — now immunity is waning', *Nature*, 14 October 2021; Carol Pearson, 'China Promotes Vaccines Around the World but Critics Point to Lower Efficacy', *Vonnews*, 16 December 2021.

54. 'China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy Reaches 100-Plus Countries', *Vonnews*, 18 September 2021.

55. Darren Choi & Sean Janke, '«Vaccine Diplomacy»? – China's Global Vaccine Efforts and Controversies', 21 July 2021.

56. 'China's global vaccine gambit: Production, politics and propaganda', *Asia Nikkei*, 12 October 2021.

