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CHINA, RUSSIA, AND GEOPOLITICAL GAMES IN PANDEMIC-STRICKEN MENA REGION

*Katarzyna W. Sidło**

As the coronavirus pandemic takes a tragic toll, devastating people's lives and ravaging economies, geopolitical games continue to be played by authoritarian regimes around the world. Two prominent players include a pair of the United Nations Security Council permanent members, namely the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, both of whom have been exploiting the situation to improve their status internationally.

For China, the overall goal of its "health (or mask) diplomacy" is to divert attention from the fact that not only did the pandemic start on its own territory, but also that [Beijing did initially conceal the outbreak in Wuhan](#), allowing the epidemic to get out of hand and spread not only throughout China but the entire world. Thanks to the mismanagement

of the situation by the US and multiple European countries, as well as the general tardiness of the EU's reaction, Beijing has, however, been moderately successful in salvaging its international reputation. It has also increasingly managed to position itself as a responsible and reliable global power, ostensibly more willing to cooperate with international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) than the US, which has recently cut its funding to the organization.

Russia – for which the pandemic has been another occasion to sow discord and undermine the EU and the US – purposely or not has been helping Beijing to achieve its goals by spreading [disinformation about the origins of the coronavirus](#). Some analysts have also expressed concerns that [Russia](#)

*Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department, Center for Social and Economic Research (CASE)

may have used medical aid to Western countries for intelligence purposes, particularly in the case of the doctors and equipment sent to Italy and the paid-for shipments to the US. Other observers pointed out to the serious doubts regarding the usefulness of these supplies. Moscow has also tried to exploit its well-publicized campaign of delivering medical aid and expertise to countries in the West to score political points, pushing for the lifting of the sanctions against it. Most recently, the Kremlin changed its strategy and announced that Russia will not ask the EU for the withdrawal of the sanctions, but should Brussels do so, “Russia will be ready to reciprocate”.

In the MENA region, the coronavirus-related activities of both countries followed their global goals. For the Kremlin, it has been all about disinformation. Indeed, an analysis conducted by the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force showed that three of the five most popular Russian disinformation articles (by their number of social media engagements) identified in the study were spread in Arabic, with the most popular messages in the region being that the US is responsible for the pandemic and coronavirus is “an Anglo-Saxon biological warning”. The actual help on the ground has been very limited, however, with a number of discussions about the crisis held with Iranian, Saudi, Turkish, Israeli, Palestinian, and Syrian authorities, but few details on any physical shipments available. The only one confirmed was a cargo of 500 coronavirus testing kits to Iran, together with reported talks about further

consignments. On April 8, Russian media also reported that Syria officially requested Russian assistance, but no follow-up information has been published so far.

China, on the other hand, has been extensively promoting its in-kind assistance efforts. Beijing has very publicly sent medical equipment and experts to a number of countries across the MENA region, from Egypt and Israel, through Turkey and Iran, to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Oman received 100,000 surgical face masks. A large cargo of ventilators, testing kits, and PPE equipment arrived to Algeria, as a courtesy of the state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation – a prominent player in the region, responsible, among others, for the construction of the Great Mosque of Algiers and contracted to build Egypt's “new capital”. Chinese experts and authorities have been also sharing their experiences and lessons learnt during teleconferences organized by the Arab League as well as individual countries. All these activities, no matter how trivial or inconsequential, have been extensively covered by both Chinese and local media. Delivery in Egypt, during which representatives of national authorities of both recipient and benefactor countries were present, was live-streamed. During other transfers, elaborate ceremonies, attended by officials and journalists, were arranged for as well.

China has, moreover, enhanced its use of Twitter, conveying Beijing-approved messages through official accounts of its diplomatic missions and their representatives. Russia has

been using this strategy to spread its disinformation for a long time; indeed, most recently [the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs twitted](#) that certain Western "cynical Russophobe" politicians and media cannot comprehend that "Russia simply... helps" during the pandemic. Similarly, the Arabic branch of the [China Global Television Network, recently published a](#) video discussing the possibility that the virus may have in fact originated in the US. Beijing has also been using the assistance of [Arabic-speaking Chinese journalist influencers](#) such as Fayhaa (Xin) Wang. Through her [Facebook page](#), followed by nearly half-million users, and her presence in the media outlets in Egypt – as well as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and United Arab Emirates –, this influencer has been keeping her audiences up-to-date on the common Sino-Arab fight against the coronavirus.

Notably, while politicians have been going out of their way to express their gratitude to China, the mood on the streets has not always been equally appreciative. People of Asian heritage have been reportedly targeted for "spreading the coronavirus". Most publicized cases include [a Chinese man threw out of a taxi in Cairo](#) and [videos accusing a local Chinese restaurant in Morocco](#) of being an epicentre of coronavirus, brought to the country by Chinese tourists. Needless to say, any and all displays of racist behaviour should always be unequivocally condemned. It is, however, difficult to resist the impression that authorities in the MENA countries in question were more concerned about appeasing Beijing than fighting xenophobia. Indeed, in both the Egyptian and

Moroccan incidents the [culprits were swiftly arrested](#) and very public displays of apology ensued. The extent to which China and its policies are exempted from any criticism has been witnessed first-hand by the Iranian Minister of Health, who imprudently called [Chinese official coronavirus figures "a joke"](#) – and found himself publicly issuing an apology after a rebuke from the Chinese Ambassador to Iran.

Any genuine help, no matter where it comes from, should naturally be always condoned. However, Chinese and Russian ostensibly selfless assistance must be put under scrutiny. For one, Moscow's aid is mostly in the sphere of promises, and when it does arrive, it has oftentimes been found not suitable for use or non-adequate; as have in fact been thousands of Chinese testing kits delivered, among others, to Turkey. Where Kremlin does have an impact, it is usually an unwelcome one. Indeed, a number of media [outlets](#) and [journalists](#) throughout the MENA region, consciously or not, reiterated Russian disinformation about the American origin of the virus, accusing the US of using the virus as a biological weapon created specifically to undermine China.

Moreover, both Russian and Chinese assistance has been delivered under circumstances that have not always been exactly transparent. Questions about how many of the shipments have not been aid but purchases are hardly mentioned in media reports and official statements. Equally, if not more worryingly, the price for Chinese assistance seems to be paid in a much more

precious currency than renminbi or dollars: compliance. While the WHO has been dodging questions about Taiwan, governments of multiple countries receiving Chinese aid and investments – both during and previous to the pandemic – conveniently dissemble Beijing’s misleading reporting on the spread of the virus, which seriously inhibited preparedness for the crisis in the rest of the world. Chinese aid receptors also tend to omit the fact that [China continues to censor the results of the COVID-19 related research](#) conducted by its scientists.

As noted by EU HR/VP Josep Borell, [“there is a global battle of narratives](#) going on in which timing is a crucial factor”. Indeed, the EU must be vocal about its actions. When Brussels sent 70 tonnes of

medical aid to China at the beginning of the year, European leaders reportedly obliged [Beijing when it “explicitly asked for discretion”](#). Needless to say, China has had no qualms publicizing its own assistance. At the same time, the EU must act faster. At times of crisis, hardly anyone remembers continuous support and financial aid transferred throughout years; what matters are the most recent actions. On March, 21, [the Iraqi Minister of Health, Jaafar Sadiq Allawi, complained](#) that “America has not provided [Iraq] with a single vile [of medicine] – unlike China”. The EU has not been mentioned at all. Its own package of €240 million to support Iraq and other countries hosting Syrian refugees amid the coronavirus crisis has only been announced ten days later.

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