Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: Pros and cons of China’s soft power projection

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Abstract
China’s health diplomacy has received international attention, especially during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This study centers on the question, why did China dispatch needed medical aid across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic? How effectively has China transformed its “pandemic health diplomacy” into soft power? Beijing has taken advantage of this pandemic to exhibit its soft power, win narrative battles, or shape outcomes through the selective delivery of relief toward the world. Beijing has launched a high-tempo program of pandemic diplomacy through good deeds, such as supplying emergency medical equipment to the world to create a positive image and strengthen China’s soft power in the future. The following assumption must be clarified: The COVID-19 soft-power push of China increased in developing regions that are heavily indebted to Beijing and where China has huge investment but showed a declining trend in Western European countries and the United States.

KEYWORDS
China, COVID-19, pandemic health diplomacy, soft power

INTRODUCTION

The world is in the midst of a serious crisis and experiences a severe pandemic in recent history. “An acute respiratory disease, caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, previously known as 2019-nCoV), the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread throughout China and received worldwide attention” (Guo et al., 2020, p. 1). Owing to the severity level, the
World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the COVID-19 epidemic as a public health emergency of global concern on January 30, 2020. Scientists called the pandemic’s source “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2” (SARS-CoV-2); however, Coronavirus disease 2019 or “COVID-19” is a serious lethal virus with minor symptoms, including fever, aches, dry coughing, and shortness of breath and poses life-threatening conditions from respiratory failure to multiorgan dysfunction (Weible et al., 2020).

The number of COVID-19 cases is currently increasing and patients seeking medical care have strained the entire global healthcare system. In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has overwhelmed hospitals and medical professionals. COVID-19 pandemic badly affects every sector of the society—food supply chain, education, and supply chain of the economy. Thus, while the coronavirus is biological, our responses to it are social. While scientists work on a vaccine and health system professionals work on treatments, for the many additional and interconnected problems, we must change our mindset and think more about how many areas of our world are connected and affected by this problem. Indeed, this is more than a health problem: Our social, economic, educational, and political systems have been seriously disrupted with many unexpected negative outcomes. To navigate, we need novel and creative ideas from everyone; not merely from health professionals (Paek & Starr, 2020, p. 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic is the worst crisis since World War II (Gössling et al., 2020; Lippi et al., 2020) and can be a common security issue. Humanitarian missions can exceed state capacity. The widespread influence of COVID-19 explains why it has received the attention of the global community. Without international involvement and cooperation, national governments cannot fight against this pandemic. Whether the COVID-19 pandemic boosts the soft power of the countries extending their medical cooperation on this crisis and opens up an opportunity to countries that already controlled this pandemic such as China must be investigated. Beijing has launched a high-tempo program of pandemic diplomacy through good deeds such as supplying emergency medical equipment and protective gear to Europe, Asia, and Africa (Kynge & Lockett, 2020). By sending medical supplies to European countries, Beijing is seeking to boost its image as a responsible world leader (T. Wong, 2020). Analysts from the Eurasia Group said that “this is the first international crisis where China is actively taking a global leadership role and it stands in particular contrast to the United States, which has disdained international cooperation and invested more political capital in criticizing China for its role in allowing the outbreak to spread.” China has continuously promoted its emergency medical supply and health advice toward the COVID-19 hard-hit countries, such as Italy, Spain, and Brazil. Through these initiatives, Beijing can repair its image globally regarding the blame that China is responsible for the origin of this lethal virus (H. Tan, 2020).

However, there were questions regarding the role of China during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Many have interpreted China’s international reaction to the coronavirus as a soft power triumph but China’s pandemic response is in fact a strain on its relations with many international partners” (Patey, 2020). “China’s international image was already facing difficulties well before the epidemic struck, and Beijing’s missteps since are not going to improve matters, its current charm offensive and ‘facemask diplomacy’ notwithstanding” (Gill, 2020, p. 98). China’s external propaganda efforts would not be able to repair its image into the West which was damaged by the Chinese authoritarian regime and COVID-19 (Gauttam et al., 2020). However, by supplying medical assistance, Beijing has tried to prove itself as generous and
effective in response to this outbreak. Beijing’s COVID-19 emergency medical aid and assistance have been welcomed by many countries and created a good image of China (MacDonald, 2020). Besides, China has also achieved social power regarding expertise to control the coronavirus. Social power has enhanced the trust between China and developing countries. Corrales (2009) argued that “as a foreign policy tool, social power is a spectacularly effective way for world leaders to earn allies, even admirers abroad. Spending lavishly on social projects abroad seems a noble enterprise immune from criticism” (p. 98). Therefore, “although China was blamed for the origination of COVID-19 concomitantly, the same country had exploited the global health emergency by putting its global health diplomacy in practice as a soft power tool” (Gauttam et al., 2020, p. 318). Through the “pandemic health diplomacy,” Beijing has attempted to maintained its normal ties with the world to keep its smooth “go global” journey after the pandemic (Shambaugh, 2020).

In this regard, why did China dispatched the needed medical aid across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic? How effectively has China transformed its “pandemic health diplomacy” into soft power? On the basis of these puzzles, this policy review attempts to clarify the process of pandemic assistance by China to the world and its soft power projection. Additionally, China’s efforts on COVID-19 as a strategic tool to counter the normative appeal of the United States in the world are discussed.

All of these arguments demand closer scrutiny. However, there is a variation in the reception of developing and more advanced countries regarding China’s medical aid and assistance through COVID-19 health diplomacy. This article, thus, argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has offered both opportunities and strain, especially in the realm of soft power policy, and suggests that Chinese soft power concerning COVID-19 has increased in developing countries with few resources, weak public health systems, and emergency situations, but Beijing's image in the Western European countries and the United States has declined. China’s policy and initiative on this pandemic are seen as nontransparent and undemocratic by the many Western countries and described as deadly peril to humankind, made in China virus and blamed China for spreading this virus (Horton, 2020; Moeller, 2020). With accusations of hiding information and a non-cooperating attitude in sharing the genome sequence of COVID-19, Beijing's image in Western Europe and the United States has been further eroded. Most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has inflamed the US–China relationship by blaming each other for spreading this virus. This blaming game further aggravates US–China competition over matters of culture, norms, values, and ideas (Gill, 2020). For example, the Shanghai laboratory that first discovered the world’s first genome sequence of the lethal coronavirus causing COVID-19 has been shut down by the Chinese government (Pinghu, 2020). The United States asserted that Beijing hid the extent of the coronavirus epidemic and accused the former of seeking to shift the blame for its own handling of the outbreak. On the first week of March 2020, Vice President of United States, Mike Pence also said that “what appears evident now is that long before the world learned in December that China was dealing withthis, and maybe as much as a month earlier than that, that the outbreak was real in China” (Bloomberg, 2020). Many scholars perceived this competition as a “soft power struggle” between China and the United States (Gill, 2020).

Moreover, China’s international image has been challenged even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Gill, 2020). On the basis of its ancient concept “Tianxia” (All-Under-Heaven), China has promoted Hu Jintao’s “harmonious world” with Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “peace and development” as its new foreign policy shift. Many prominent Westerns experts claimed that China is a status quo power that is not intended to challenge the international system. The goal of China is not only to “save China” but also “save the world” (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011, p. 2).
However, the United States perceived that China is a “revisionist.” Thus, through its soft power projection, Beijing has ascertained that China is not an imperialist power, nor a threat to the world (Ding, 2010).

Beijing has taken the COVID-19 pandemic as a golden opportunity to kick anti-Chinese propaganda and processed pandemic assistance to the world mostly because of three reasons. First, China wants to reconstruct its image against the blame of origination and spreading of Coronavirus. Second, exhibit its national face as a benevolent country. Third, polish up its image against blameworthiness to its human rights violation in Uighur, Tibet, Hong Kong, and growing hostile relationship with Taiwan. In this context, the key focus of this article is to investigate how China used its pandemic health diplomacy as a soft power tool? The analysis in this article has implications for the extant literature on Chinese soft power projection during the pandemic. This article promises to be a positive contribution to the literature of soft power providing a theoretically nuanced treatment of soft power concerning ‘pandemic health diplomacy’. Assumptions about the connection between health diplomacy (e.g., pandemic assistance “mask diplomacy” and “vaccine diplomacy”) and soft power influence are outlined in the soft power framework.

This policy review proceeds by briefly outlining the health diplomacy of the Chinese government to improve its global image by providing pandemic medical assistance and financial aid to countries worldwide. The subsequent sections detail China’s COVID-19 efforts in the perspective of soft power projection during the COVID-19 pandemic. The review concludes by discussing how China’s case illustrates the need for a comprehensive understanding of soft power policy related to a pandemic such as COVID-19.

**PANDEMIC MEDICAL ASSISTANCE AND SOFT POWER: AN ANALYSIS**

Soft power was initially coined by Nye (1990) in response to the decline of US hegemony in global politics. Illuminating the logic behind the soft power, Nye (2014) explained that “after looking at American military and economic power resources, I felt that something was still missing—the ability to affects others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment. In his book “Bound to Lead,” he differentiated two types of power. The first is commanding power or “hard power,” with which “you get other states to do what you want.” The main basis of hard power is force and inducement. The “second face of power” is what Nye termed as “co-optive” or “soft power” that translates as “you make others want what you want?” (Huang & Ding, 2006, p. 23; Nye, 2005, p. 12). Nye (2008) also mentioned, “one can affect others’ behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion (“sticks”); inducements and payments (“carrots”); and attraction that makes others want what you want (Nye, 2008, p. 94). “Soft power is the ability to attract and the attraction to shape the preferences of other people or state” (Nye, 2004a), and “it is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2008, p. 94). In “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” Nye further highlighted the importance of applying “noncoercive” instruments for attaining required strategic consequences. Great powers belief in “persuasion,” “attraction,” and “incorporation” which can support to keeping their hegemony compared with absolute demonstration and exercise of hard power. Powerful nations must set the strategy of soft power and create appeal to others countries in global politics to coerce them to alteration by threatening hard power, such as military power or economic embargos.
Heydarian (2015). Nye (2009) also mentioned the three elements and means soft power of a state: “Culture (when it is pleasing to others), values (when they are attractive and consistently practiced) and policies (when they are seen as inclusive and legitimate)” (Nye, 2009, p. 161). Most scholars acknowledged the following soft power definition: “The ability to get what one desires through attraction, rather than force or payments” (Blanchard & Lu, 2012; Gill & Huang, 2006; Wilson III, 2008). Therefore, this power is the capability to attract others to line up with another state to attain its expected policy outcome (Stetar et al., 2010, p. 192).

Nye (2004a) argued that soft power is highly problematic to exercise. Various important resources are not controlled by government policy and mainly rely on the level of international acceptability and acknowledgment from other states and people. Soft-power resources also influence policy settings and require a long time to yield the expected result (Nye, 2004a, p. 99). However, Fan (2008) asserted that “in a communist state such as China, as the party still controls almost all vital resources, particularly the media, the party/state does have control over the use of soft power, either in the form of public diplomacy or state propaganda” (Fan, 2008, p. 153). Additionally, “Nye’s notion of soft power is largely ethnocentric and condescending as it is based on false assumptions of that American culture is superior and should be liked and adopted by other nations and that western values and culture that will continue to define the rules of the world” (Fan, 2008, p. 160). In agreement with Wang’s (2006) explanation, Fan (2008) maintained that two complications aroused: “Firstly, a country has many different actors. Some of them like attraction and others do not. Whether the attraction will lead to the ability to influence the policy of the target country depends on which groups in that country find it attractive and how much control they have on policymaking. Secondly, policymaking at the state level is far more complicated than at the personal level, and has different dynamics that emphasize the rational considerations. This leaves little room for emotional elements thus significantly reducing the effect of soft power. Given the nature of soft power, being uncontrollable and unpredictable, it would be impossible to wield soft power in any organized and coordinated fashion as Nye suggested” (Fan, 2008, p. 147). Li (2018, p. 7) also mentioned that Nye does not provide a systematic approach for assessing soft power to explore how countries move prospective soft power resources to achieve power. Additionally, Nye failed to differentiate between the sources of soft and hard power. Variations between hard power and soft power regarding goals and objectives are unclear (Chaw, 2019; Yukaruc, 2017; Zheng & Zhang, 2012). Therefore, Nye’s notion of soft power failed to answer some important puzzles, such as “how do we know soft power is in play in any given instance? How do we measure soft power? More importantly, how do we know that soft power, as defined by the existing approach, translates into policy outcome?” (Chen et al., 2009, pp. 3–4).

Varying definitions and classifications have been proposed for soft power. Kurlantzick (2007) classified two types of soft power: High soft power concerning targeting elites and low soft power intentions to the majority of the population. On the contrary, Heng (2010) suggested public soft power (country/governmental level) and private soft power. Nagao (2016) also mentioned two categories of soft power: Direct and indirect soft power. The former includes direct payment from one government to another government (or organization) to build benevolent projects or programs, and the latter includes scholarships and training investments for individuals and professionals, including nonmonetary cultural influences (Nagao, 2016, p. 15). By contrast, Noya (2006) argued that soft power should be called “symbolic power” because it can only function in its hard form—a ideology (Noya, 2006, p. 57). Despite its acceptance, the idea of soft power remains undertheorized. Its definition is still not well accepted and also vague. Owing to these confusions, the notion of soft power has been widely misunderstood.
Noya (2006) also argued that “soft power is not a type of power at all; rather, any resource, including military capabilities, can be soft inasmuch as it is perceived as legitimate for a soft purpose, for example, humanitarian aid” (Noya, 2006, p. 66). Blanchard & Lu (2012) remarked that although the extant literature on soft power provides a great deal of understanding, additional studies are needed to develop theoretical improvement and empirical accuracy. Therefore, soft power explanation has been defined in inconsistent ways, including culture, political values, and foreign policy.

For soft power concerning health/medical diplomacy (Adams et al., 2008), some analysts (e.g., Chan et al., 2010; Donahue et al., 2010; Thompson, 2005; Vanderwagen, 2006) claimed that medical assistance positively affects international relations, but the relationship between health diplomacy and soft power deployment has not been directly implied. J. S. Nye (2004a) mentioned that political legitimacy is boosted by medical information and public health activities, including humanitarian assistance, but he did not mention the relationship between medical assistance and soft power. Some reports on Chinese soft power influence in Africa concerning medical assistance claimed that China's medical assistance and healthy relationship with African countries have created a positive image for China (Burton, 2020; Cooke, 2009; Little, 2009; Youde, 2010). On the basis of the review of existing theoretical literature surrounding soft power, a knowledge gap exists in the literature of soft power concerning pandemic-related medical assistance. Only a few studies acknowledged medical assistance and advice as soft power tools (Burton, 2020; Cooke, 2009; Mulakala & Hongbo, 2020).

On the basis of Campbell's conceptualization of foreign policy, Callahan and Barabantseva (2011) argued that foreign policy is a performance by a state that serves to reproduce the construction of state identity. It refers to all means and practices of the state. In this essence, soft power is a part of foreign policy. Nye claimed that foreign policy is a source of soft power. However, he mentions that a country's foreign policy can also negatively affect other actors if it is not legitimized by the people (Hall, 2010). For example, Nye (2004b) explains that “unpopular foreign policies” might be spilling over and weakening the attractiveness of a country's soft power such as the US foreign policy of “global war on terror” that undermined its image in many countries (Nye, 2010; Zahran & Ramos, 2010). Thus, foreign policy is not always enabled to produce a country's soft power. However, as a foreign policy tool, “health diplomacy” may create soft power (C. Kelly, 2015) through persuasion since it is directly related to saving the lives of human beings. In this study, thus, medical cooperation is not directly conceptualized as a foreign policy. Alike other foreign policy instruments of a country, such as culture, values, and education (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011; Gill, 2020; Parmar & Cox, 2010; Shambaugh, 2020), soft power can also be manifested by the “health diplomacy” because it is legitimized by the people.

Furthermore, soft power is a relatively new concept in Chinese foreign policy and it has been subject to debate and misunderstanding (Parmar & Cox, 2010). In general, a country's health diplomacy does not directly linked to its “sticks” (hard power) policy. Thus, it can easily attract people or countries who have been suffered from serious health crises due to the pandemic like the COVID-19. In this regard, through health diplomacy, a country can attain its desired foreign policy outcome (Khodayari-Zarnaq et al., 2019; Lee & Gomez, 2011; Lock, 2010).

Several studies (e.g., Burton, 2020; Khodayari-Zarnaq et al., 2019; Little, 2009) claimed that as a tool of soft power, Chinese medical assistance has created a positive image in many developing countries. China has exercised soft power, defined as applying cultural tools and economic clout to shape the preferences of the other actors (McBride et al., 2019, p. 10). During
this pandemic, medical cooperation can be considered more a soft power tool rather than a country's regular foreign policy instrument. Apart from this, pandemic medical cooperation is a soft power attempt that does not follow a country's formal foreign policy direction and foreign relations.

From the discussion and critical analysis of extant literature of soft power, this article agreed that “health has been a matter for international co-operation. It has thus been used as a tool of soft power in diplomacy; specifically, to make a state look better in the eyes of others and to establish a state’s reputation” (Loewenson et al., 2014, p. 2). Thus, I conceptualized that “pandemic health diplomacy” can create a positive image for a donating country, particularly in countries with poor medical facilities. The recent history of infectious disease outbreaks, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, suggests a possible move away from traditional “health diplomacy” to “pandemic health diplomacy” with global participation and acceptance. Compared to traditional health diplomacy, pandemic health diplomacy through the medical assistants (e.g., experts’ advice, masks, personal protective equipment, ventilators) is more effective to build a country's image that can also achieve “non-health-related” foreign policy goals of a country (Fazal, 2020).

Furthermore, the majority of medical and health assistance is considered as “aid,” which is a tool of soft power (Gill & Huang, 2006; Kurlantzick, 2007; Nagao, 2016, pp. 9–10). Beijing traditionally offers financial assistance (e.g., aid, concessional loan) as its soft power tool in developing economies (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 100) and has increased its COVID-19 recovery loans to these areas to overcome the financial distress created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese loans into developing economics during this dire time have translated success against COVID-19 into a factor for China’s soft power.

This policy review suggests four types of tools and means of pandemic health diplomacy that can build the “goodwill” of a country. These are (1) medical experts, technology, and innovation, (2) medical devices and equipment, (3) philanthropic organizations concerning health, and (4) pandemic financial aid and assistance. These health tools can positively affect soft power by managing the pandemic health risks that spill into and out of every country (Drager & Fidler, 2007). Moreover, pandemic health diplomacy has humanitarian aims with the goal of serving global public health and seems like a way of “winning hearts and minds” of the people of affected countries (Vanderwagen, 2006).

Under this nuanced theoretical framework, the article explored Beijing’s health diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic and worldwide perception of China’s health diplomacy worldwide.

CHINA’S COVID-19 HEALTH DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

China has a long history of conducting active “health diplomacy” programs with developing countries, particularly African and Middle Eastern countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has provided medicine and medical equipment (personal protective equipment) free of charge to many developing countries and has created active programs to jointly prevent and treat this infectious disease (Thompson, 2005). China has sent medical teams and huge of essential supplies to the countries battling the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, China's president, Xi Jinping, pledged to send additional medical experts to European countries, especially Italy. Some European countries have formally requested Beijing for assistance to face
this pandemic situation. For example, Aleksandar Vucic, Serbian President, declared that “European solidarity does not exist,” during the declaration of the state of emergency in the country. He also mentioned that “that was a fairy tale on paper. I believe in my brother and friend Xi Jinping, and I believe in Chinese help.” However, China is the first victim of COVID-19. The virus was first detected in Wuhan, Hubei Province, and then entered the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market where it infected many others. Despite the disbelief about the number of total infected cases and death from COVID-19, China has almost controlled the spread of this deadly virus (Knight, 2020). China has recently received a donation of masks and other medical supplies from nearly 80 countries and 10 international organizations to fight against this lethal coronavirus (Myers & Rubin, 2020) and is now aiding other infected nations. This medical aid and cooperation immediately built the positive image of Beijing in countries facing a serious shortage of masks, personal protective equipment (PPE), mechanical ventilation for the intensive care unit, and other equipment.

From February to March 2020, China expanded its pledge and sent medical equipment and safety gear, such as masks and rapid diagnostic tests kits, to several countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Jack Ma Foundation, a charity created by Alibaba cofounder Jack Ma, also sent medical supplies and COVID-19 testing kits to South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and even the United States (Knight, 2020). Jack Ma donated 500,000 testing kits and 1 million masks to US hospitals that were facing shortages despite having weeks of notice to prepare. This foundation also donated to dozens of countries, including all 54 sub-Saharan African nations (Myers & Rubin, 2020).

China has previous experience with virus outbreaks and humanitarian activities. In the past decade, Beijing has responded to several pandemic crises at national and international levels, such as the SARS epidemic (2003) and Ebola outbreaks (2014 and 2018). This domestic and global experience has prepared China to be a quick and first responder in the COVID-19 pandemic. China has also taken the opportunity to increase its soft power through the “well-targeted humanitarian response” through medical assistance. Beijing describes this global response as “the most intensive and wide-ranging emergency humanitarian operation since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949” (Mulakala & Hongbo, 2020). Along with the medical assistance, many European and Asian countries have heavily depended on China for key supplies, such as masks and other PPEs. For example, 70%–80% of Japanese surgical masks are made in China (Shigeta, 2020). Even the US supply chain exhibits heavy reliance on Beijing for medical manufacturing for roughly two decades. Lawmakers and administration officials stated that this virus has exposed the vulnerability of the United States and how it depends on China and other nations to help provide the necessary tools to combat this pathogen. This dependence on China for key supplies, such as masks and gowns, to help protect healthcare professionals has increased in the last few months (Beavers, 2020). In addition, 80% of America’s supply of antibiotics is also supplied by China. According to Citing Commerce Department data in 2018 “China accounted for 95% of US imports of ibuprofen, 91% of US imports of hydrocortisone, 70% of US imports of acetaminophen, 40% to 45% of US imports of penicillin and 40% of US imports of heparin” (Guidice, 2020). As one of the world’s top medical suppliers, China has utilized medical supply and humanitarian aid to repair its reputation, which has been seriously damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 23, 2020, China announced that it will donate another US$30 million to the WHO to help in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, days after Washington announce the frozen funding (The Straits Times, 2020). However, the United States gives 10 times the amount of money to the WHO than China (McKay, 2020). In 2018–2019, the United States contributed WHO US$893.0
million, followed by the United Kingdom at US$434.8 million, Germany at US$292.1 million, and China at US$86 million (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020). With this increased funding to WHO and humanitarian aid, including medical equipment and advice, China has tried to repair its tarnished image worldwide.

**CHINA’S MASK DIPLOMACY: GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused economic and social dislocation, employment loss, and leads to global poverty. The acute mask shortage might be the top coronavirus-induced problem worldwide and might be the most unsolved. Particularly, healthcare workers and grocery workers have been facing a serious crisis due to the shortage of N95 masks (Khazan, 2020). In this regard, the demand for China-made KN95 masks and respirators has increased during this global public health emergency. After China’s success in slowing the spread of the virus, it has provided or pledged humanitarian assistance in the form of donations or medical expertise. Its humanitarian assistance has reached Asia to Europe and Latin America. This aid blitz has given China the chance to reposition itself not as the authoritarian incubator of a pandemic but as a responsible global leader in this pandemic (Knight, 2020; Myers & Rubin, 2020). Beijing donated masks, PPEs, and testing kits to 127 countries and four international organizations and sent 13 medical teams to 11 countries with 70 video conferences for the sharing of COVID-19 experience and data with 150 countries and regions and international organizations. Moreover, China’s local governments, state-owned companies, and organizations have donated medical supplies to more than 100 countries (CGTN, 2020) (Table 1).

Beijing declared that this pandemic should be an arena for political cooperation and not competition. China has also sent its donations of medical equipment and protective gear to many countries, including the United States. China provided medical assistance to over 150 countries and nine international organizations and sent 36 medical teams to 34 countries in need. Beijing supplied over 200 billion masks, 2 billion protective suits, and 800 million testing kits around the world.1 European countries, particularly the Irish government, formally expressed their gratitude to the Chinese authority for their help in organizing a shipment of supplies worth US$30 million (Knight, 2020).

Beijing also provided its medical supports and largesse for countries where the United States has long-term domination. Kristen Lee from the Centre for a New American Security and coauthor of China’s “Belt and Road Report” stated that “the Chinese choose countries where there is a struggle for influence with the US and other powers” (Jabłońska, 2020). In mid of March 2020, China sent a seven-member medical team to Iraq with medical equipment. Beijing sent test kits to Iraq to establish a COVID-19 testing laboratory in Baghdad. Moreover, China shared its medical experience and knowledge with the doctors, nurses, and researchers in Abu Dhabi; sent medical supports to Egypt and Lebanon; and build a small hospital for the local people of Algeria. Many the Middle East and Asian countries such as Palestine tried to apply a Chinese-style lockdown system to control the COVID-19 pandemic (Burton, 2020). Chinese efforts on COVID-19 to Middle Eastern countries are strongly correlated with Beijing's energy interest such as oil. Approximately half of China's oil is imported from Middle East countries (Zhou, 2020), particularly Saudi Arabia (16.8% of China’s total imported crude oil), Iraq (9.9%), Oman (6.9%), and Kuwait (4.5%), which all have good diplomatic relations with the United States (Workman, 2020; Burton, 2020). Besides, China’s “mask diplomacy” has also boosted its economic statecraft in the traditional American zone of influence (Stott, 2020).
China has sent its medical supplies worldwide. By March 31, 2020, Beijing had provided surgical masks, N95 ventilators, safety suits, COVID-19 testing kits, ventilators, and other supports, including loans to 120 nations and four international organizations. Furthermore, province and local governments also sent medical items to their sister cities in more than 50 countries. Chinese provinces sent medical teams to several neighboring countries, such as Guangxi Province sent to Cambodia, Yunnan to Laos and Myanmar, Xinjiang to Pakistan, and Fujian to the Philippines. Moreover, China shared its pandemic experience by providing expertise on testing methods, contact tracing, prevention and control measures, clinical treatment, and asymptomatic cases in partnership with the Arab League, ASEAN Secretariat, and individual countries, including India, Malaysia, and Russia. Additionally, Chinese state-owned and private companies, particularly those specializing in medical supplies, financing, and logistics, donated medical materials to over 100 nations and international organizations (Mulakala & Hongbo, 2020). Beijing also provided two million surgical masks, 200,000

| **Receiving countries/regions** | **Number of masks donated** |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) | 75,000 (2,000,000 from Jack Ma) |
| Japan | 1 million (2nd phase 800,000) |
| South Asia (including India) | 1 million<sup>a</sup> |
| Iran | 250,000 |
| Africa (each of the 54 countries) | 100,000 |
| Latin America | 2 million<sup>b</sup> (from Jack Ma) |
| Brazil | 50,000<sup>c</sup> (450,000 from Byte Dance<sup>d</sup>) |
| Europe | 2 million |
| Greece | 550,000 |
| Italy | 300,000 (including 20,000 N95) |
| Poland | 20,000 |
| Spain | 5000 |
| Slovakia | 1 million |
| Canada | 30,000 |
| The United States | 1 million |

Source: Data compiled from Alton (2020; China’s global aid blitz and mask diplomacy. China Institute, University of Alberta. https://www.ualberta.ca/china-institute/news-events/the-latest/2020/04/mask-diplomacy.html).

<sup>a</sup>China's Sany Group donates 1 million masks to India and other South Asian countries. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-s-sany-group-donates-1-million-masks-to-india-other-south-asian-countries/story-r8wKvVZllyEy16V8Fv0sK.html

<sup>b</sup>Jack Ma donates masks and medical supplies to help coronavirus fight in Asia and Latin America. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3076319/jack-ma-donates-18-million-masks-medical-supplies-help

<sup>c</sup>Chinese embassy delivers donations of medical supplies to Brazil. http://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-07/04/content_76235705.htm

<sup>d</sup>https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/world/2020/06/brazils-foreign-ministry-stifles-chinas-mask-diplomacy.shtml
advanced masks, and 50,000 testing kits to Western European countries, which are also considered as a strong US belt (Myers & Rubin, 2020).

Beijing is making “aggressive” attempts to prove that different from the United States, China is a reliable partner for Europe and the developing regions, particularly in this pandemic situation (Jabłońska, 2020). Joshua Kurlantzick noted that “China is trying to capitalize now in terms of soft power.” Yu Jie, a senior research fellow on China at Chatham House and a UK think tank, stated that “China is trying to turn its health crisis into a geopolitical opportunity.” He also mentioned that “China is launching a soft power campaign aimed at filling the vacuum left by the United States” (Kynge & Lockett, 2020).

As a part of burnishing its global image, which was damaged by the pandemic that has killed more than 3,299,764 people worldwide, Beijing has promised to make its coronavirus vaccine publicly available. Under China’s “vaccine diplomacy,” President Xi Jinping promised in a speech to the World Health Assembly, WHO, “Covid-19 vaccine development and deployment in China, when available, will be made a global public good, which will be China’s contribution to ensuring vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries” (Gretler, 2020). This pledge from Beijing has increased China’s international image. China trialed its vaccine in 14 countries (Cohen, 2020) and after the emergency approval from the WHO, Beijing sent the “Sinopharm” vaccine, to Asian, African, and Latin American countries. China donated 5.45 million vaccines to 35 African countries and 10.5 million to the countries in the Asia Pacific region (Nyabiage, 2021). China has provided vaccine assistance to 53 developing countries around the world. Many observers claimed that Beijing is seeking to take diplomatic advantage of a “vaccine vacuum” by sending millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses to underdeveloped nations around the world (Nyabiage, 2021; Rudolf, 2021) (Table 2).

Chinese efforts concerning the COVID-19 pandemic have boosted its soft power (Burton, 2020). In February and March 2020, global landmarks, including the Swiss Alps, Burj Khalifa, and the Tokyo Tower, were set alight in the color of the Chinese national flag to support China’s combat against COVID-19. Other landmarks in Egypt and Iran were also lit in the color of the Chinese national flag to support China’s fight against the novel coronavirus. These symbolic supports indicated the positive image of China in these countries regarding its initiatives on the COVID-19 pandemic (Xinhua News Agency, 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic could strengthen China’s debt hold on struggling countries. A recent study by the United Nations University estimated that approximately “half a billion people may fall into poverty if consumption worldwide drops by 20%. The World Bank estimates sub-Saharan Africa’s first recession in 25 years” (Mushtaq, 2020). The China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has created a US$5 billion crisis recovery fund to support the member nations and businesses during this pandemic. India, Indonesia, and many other developing countries also ask for COVID-19 recovery loans from AIIB (Mulakala & Hongbo, 2020). Considering that many developing nations ask for the COVID-19 recovery loans, Chinese President Xi pledged another US$2 billion emergency fund cooperation against the COVID-19 pandemic (C. K. Tan & Regalado, 2020). For example, a South Asian small island country, Sri Lanka, which is already hugely indebted to China’s loans, requested another US$1 billion new loan to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic (Mushtaq, 2020). China also pledges US$23 billion in loans and aid as COVID-19 catastrophe recovery fund to the 22 Arab states (Zhou, 2020). Approximately US$8 billion interest payments of sub-Saharan nations owed to Beijing this year must be scrutinized. African countries such as Nigeria will face difficulties in repaying Chinese debt and lending (Klein, 2020). Between 2007 and 2017, African nations borrowed US$143 billion, which is approximately 20% of Africa’s total debt from China.
(Yu, 2020). Hence, Beijing could either take control of developing the country's assets or forgive debt to boost its soft power (Davidson, 2020). Regarding China's mask diplomacy B. Wong (2020) mentioned that:

Understanding China's mask diplomacy requires more than two opposite and unnuanced positions. One take—embraced by ardent propagandists and spin-doctors seeking to workshop China’s efforts into a pyrrhic PR victory—construes the diplomacy efforts as a sign of China’s benevolence and willingness to step up to global leadership. On the contrary, avid cynics toward the Chinese regime have jumped on the opportunity to portray the Chinese administration as unabashedly opportunistic and detrimental in its securing of medical supplies.

Chinese medical cooperation enables to persuade and attract other countries to supports its foreign policy outcomes in two ways—first, “Chinese global health diplomacy has created a benevolent image among the many countries. Second, Chinese criticism on the part of Western countries and arch-rival alliance under the US leadership vis-à-vis China have been outnumbered by supporting countries under the Chinese umbrella” (Gauttam et al., 2020, p. 333). COVID-19 has shown the vulnerability of the supply chain giving an advantage to China,
which manufactures crucial and emergency medical and other products for much of the world. Most of the developing countries have been receiving Chinese pandemic assistance and welcoming Chinese investment to overcome their economic loss caused by the pandemic (Oya, 2021).

Beijing has been using health diplomacy in many Asian, African, and Latin American countries to create its image as a benevolent global leader (Gauttam et al., 2020, p. 319). For example, in 1963, Beijing sent its first medical team to Algeria after the war of independence. Since then, China has maintained its “soft power of medical diplomacy” in the African region. In 2015, Beijing committed to send 15,000 medical professionals to African countries. As a part of its soft health diplomacy, China actively participated in delivering its disaster response to Pakistan in 2005 during the earthquake by dispatching a 49-member team; sent a 60-member team to Haiti during the earthquake in 2010 (Chattu & Knight, 2019, pp. 152–153).

Moreover, in 2020, partners of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreed to work on China’s proposed “Health Silk Road” (HSR) (Yi, 2020). Under this HSR, Beijing has extended COVID-19 assistance to 120 countries. With the support of HSR, the ASEAN Human Resources Training Program aims to train more than 1000 ASEAN healthcare professionals by 2022, several projects have also been initiated concerning HSR’s apparent increase of Chinese investment statecraft in Asia and beyond (Bing, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating Chinese investment in BRI member countries focusing on the sectors of low-carbon and climate-resilient infrastructure, digital connectivity, and public health benefiting Chinese landers and state-own companies (Ng, 2020). Moreover, China has attracted over 3600 companies from more than 150 countries and regions during the third China International Import Expo in November 2020, which may further increase Chinese trade and investment into these countries (Yi, 2020). As such, emergency medical supply can be viewed as “soft power” instead of “carrot”, which is indicated as hard power. COVID-19 pandemic also gives China an opportunity to prove itself as a market of the world and has extended its economic statecraft in the developing regions. The following section examines why Beijing’s pandemic efforts failed to convert itself into soft power in the developed countries.

Due to the COVID-19, developed countries, particularly Western countries have been badly affected and unable to provide needed health care to the affected people (Gauttam et al., 2020). Pandemic health supports, thus, have become a crucial need for all of the affected countries no matter whether it is developed or underdeveloped countries. The Chinese government has been criticized by several governments and institutions during the COVID-19 outbreak. The major criticism against China is its slow response to the coronavirus and early attempts to cover this incident (Knight, 2020). Beijing’s delayed announcement to the world about the COVID-19 outbreak has become a political weapon in countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. Some scholars said that “they used denial language rather than directly dealing with the health of its citizens. Had the government acted transparently about this infectious disease, others would more likely have behaved safely and many illnesses and deaths could have been prevented’ (É. Kelly, 2020; Paek & Starr, 2020, p. 3). Nouriel Roubini, an economist at New York University and adviser to former US presidents Clinton and Obama, said that “China is building its soft power, they are going to use this crisis.” Beijing’s efforts along with propaganda focused on the government’s response to the outbreak and appeared to be part of China’s “coordinated campaign” to provide humanitarian goodwill and promote its values (Knight, 2020). Many observers think that China has been using this pandemic situation and making business. China has exported a huge number of masks and medical equipment to Europe, the United States, and countries worldwide. In Spain alone, Chinese companies sold
sanitary equipment for over 430 million euros (Jabłońska, 2020). By April 1 and 12, Beijing exported US$2 billion in safety and diagnostic medical materials to the world (Mulakala & Hongbo, 2020). By March and May, China exported 70.6 billion masks. According to Tianyancha, a Chinese data service, more than 67,000 companies have registered in China in 2020 to make or trade masks (Bradsher, 2020). The daily production of masks has increased by more than 115 million (Bradsher & Alderman, 2020). Some people in Europe, such as in Italy, angrily pointed out that China was selling not donating masks, respirators, and other medical equipment and claimed that some of the materials were reserved for Chinese citizens in the country. Others also warned that China only helps its allies in the production and supply of masks and ventilators (Myers & Rubin, 2020). Lídia Pereira, a Portuguese member of the European Parliament, said that “China started this crisis. But now, they are selling medical equipment, testing kits, masks and emerging as some sort of heroes that will save us all. China is selling. Let me underline the sale part here” (Dunst, 2020).

The Chinese government emergency supplies to COVID-19-affected nations have also raised a question in terms of quality. Beijing has damaged its image due to the issue of supplying defective medical masks and equipment. Countries such as the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, and Turkey have found faults with masks and tests from China, and some countries backed the Chinese supplied materials (Dunst, 2020; H. Tan, 2020). Several countries complained that China had failed to meet health professionals’ standards regarding the KN95 respirators and COVID-19 testing kits. The public health authority of Canada mentioned that nearly 1 million KN95 respirators from China failed to meet health professionals’ standards (McGhee, 2020). Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, said that Canada will not pay Beijing for 8 million “substandard” N95 masks (Hindustan Times, 2020). Additionally, Spain’s health ministry also declared that they seek a return for 640,000 defective coronavirus testing kits delivered by China. Australia, Britain, the Czech Republic, Finland, India, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Turkey, and several other countries all purchased medical equipment from China, which turned out to be defective (McGhee, 2020). As a result, China’s image concerning pandemic health diplomacy has declined in Western Europe and beyond. Chinese soft power particularly in Western countries has recently exhibited a declining trend. Several Western European countries and the United States still rely on Chinese medicine and medical equipment, but this phenomenon is not parallel to an increase in Beijing’s soft power in this region. Regarding China’s generous aid to COVID-19 hit countries, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that “we must be aware there is a geopolitical component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the ‘politics of generosity’” (H. Tan, 2020).

The pandemic blaming game has become the order of the day (Gauttam et al., 2020). The world’s two largest economies engaged in propaganda battles concerning the COVID-19 pandemic (J. S. Nye, 2020). COVID-19 epidemic has been used as a source of recent Sino–US rivalry, and Washington and Beijing accused each other of spreading misinformation. Although China’s attempts to contain the virus have been praised by many developing countries, including the WHO, others have criticized the Chinese activities concerning the pandemic. Many in the United States claim that the virus is “made in China” as a result of an exotic diet or poor hygiene habits (Zwart, 2020). Conversely, the criticism of the Chinese government initiatives in the country has led to the restriction of US journalists from three major newspapers, such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post, indicating that this occurrence is a retaliating move by the Trump administration against Chinese journalists in the United States (Myers & Rubin, 2020). Recently, China has banned the BBC World News to continue
airing inside China and in Hong Kong failing to meet the requirement for news to be truthful and accused it of damaging China's national interests.5

The COVID-19 outbreak in China has also triggered a “hysterical” and “shameful wave of Sinophobia” or anti-Chinese sentiment in Western Europe, the United States, and even in Australia (Y. Liu, 2020; Mishra, 2020). Substantial amount of anti-China rhetoric has originated from the United States, particularly under the Trump administration. Barry Sautman, a sociologist and professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said that “now China is being seen as a challenger to US hegemony, and almost every aspect of what the Chinese government does has been criticized heavily. As a result, lots of people around the world pick up on that, and it builds upon Sinophobia that has been historically embedded, like that in Asia” (Wong, 2020). Similarly, this growing negativism is probably related to China’s rise as an economic and political power on the global stage (Zwart, 2020).

Along with Sinophobia, anti-Chinese rhetoric has also increased internationally during the COVID-19 outbreak. Former US President Donald Trump has recently insisted on repeatedly calling COVID-19 either a “foreign virus” or a “Chinese virus” in his speeches asserted that “this is all China’s fault” (K. F. Liu, 2020). Likewise, Republican senator, John Cornyn said in his conversation with reporters that “China is to blame because of the culture where people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that.” “These viruses are transmitted from the animal to the people, and that’s why China has been the source of a lot of these viruses like SARS, like the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), the swine flu, and now the coronavirus” (Kozlowska, 2020). As a result, anti-Chinese rhetoric has spread on social media concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in Western Europe and the United States. Instead of using neutral and scientific language, such as “coronavirus” and “Covid-19,” people are posting online about the “Chinese virus,” “Chinese coronavirus,” “Wuhan virus” or the “Kung Flu.” The majority of this ramping-up can be linked to public statements and social media posts by Republican politicians, including US President Donald Trump (Kozlowska, 2020). However, Chinese government believes that its rivals have used sinophobia and anti-Chinese rhetoric as political capital to dent China’s global image (Wong, 2020).

Nevertheless, China aims to impose its own narrative on the crisis for political advantage and wishes to counter criticisms, especially those stating that the country failed to acknowledge the risk the virus presented or to curb its spread early enough. These criticisms include blunting American attempts to lay the blame for COVID-19 at Beijing’s doorstep by administration officials calling it the “Chinese virus” (Burton, 2020, pp. 25–26). Against the anti-Chinese rhetoric and sentiment spreading, Beijing has also spread propaganda by using its printing, social media, and think tanks to repair its image in the pandemic crisis. Against this accusation, Chinese state media frequently tweet propaganda and what many describe as “fake news.” Beijing has been using the media and its huge number of followers to fight for a favorable perception of China. For example, “Global Times has 1.7 million followers on Twitter; China Xinhua News, 12.6 million; People's Daily, 7.1 million; China Daily, 4.3 million; and China Global Television Network, 14 million.” All of them are regularly tweeting propaganda against the Chinese criticism on the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the United States was responsible for the virus—said Zhao Lijian, spokesman and deputy director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' information department and the virus imported “from outside.” Global Research said that “Coronavirus originated someplace else, in another country” (Boxwell, 2020). Beijing has blamed the US military for the presence of the virus in Wuhan (J. S. Nye, 2020). This concept portrays that Beijing is seeking to control information beyond its borders by creating a “new world media order.” According to the Bloomberg News
report from 2018 referred to by Reporters Without Borders as part of Chinese efforts to increase its soft power, Beijing has invested approximately 3 billion euros in the media in Europe over the last decade (Jabłońska, 2020). However, J. S. Nye (2020) argued that “China has provided aid, manipulated statistics for political reasons, and engaged in vigorous propaganda—all in an attempt to turn the narrative of its early failure into one of a benign response to the pandemic. However, much of Beijing’s effort to restore its soft power has been treated with skepticism in Europe and elsewhere. That is because soft power rests on attraction. The best propaganda is not propaganda” (Jabłońska, 2020). Patey (2020) also mentioned the following statement:

China’s immediate medical assistance offered those critical of the European Union a moment in the spotlight, but it did little to win Beijing many new friends. This is largely because while donating and selling medical supplies, Chinese diplomats and state media have promoted conspiracy theories that the US military is responsible for spreading the pandemic, and that Italy is possibly the origin of the virus.

China intends to brand itself as a responsible global power similar to when its economic stimulus helped lift global demand during the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Nevertheless, in the 2008 financial crisis, Beijing’s efforts were supplemented by the United States’ initiative; by contrast, in the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing’s efforts through the humanitarian donations to COVID-19-affected countries garnered hurtful tirades against the United States (Kynge & Lockett, 2020). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has turned into the “tit-for-tat” conflict of Sino–US. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in China and has killed more than 500,000 people in the United States, hostility has grown between these two countries. Each side asserts its own narrative about the COVID-19 pandemic to abuse the other. Trump’s rhetoric for China has turned into a “trade war” between the two countries. For example, after signed the first trade deal with China in January 2020, the US Commerce Department announced new initiative against China on May 15, 2020. Through this new initiative against Beijing, the US government further blocks key technology supply to Huawei. As a retort, China will restrict US companies such as Qualcomm, Cisco, and Apple and suspend the purses of Boeing airlines. If China executes this decision, then Boeing would also be greatly affected. As an American multinational airplane company, Boeing has already faced trouble and reduced 16,000 jobs or 10% of its workforce. China alone accounted for 13.6% of the airplane manufacturer’s total revenue in 2018. Furthermore, the Greater China region, which includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, contributed more than 16% of the total revenues to Apple (Fang & Yu, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled Sino–US competition and also put a strain on China’s soft power projection. According to the Pew Center for Research, suspicion on China might increase in Western Europe, United States, and Asia, whereas populations in South America, Africa, and Eastern Europe have a positive view of China (Wong, 2020).

In response to the damaging image concerning the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese Communist Party tries to “tell China’s story” (Gill, 2020) and “China has been saying as much for the best part of twenty years” (Munro, 2020). Nonetheless, the Chinese story does not work to rebuild its image in the Western region. In Western countries, political values and ideas, human rights reputation, and cultural issues have been considered as the significant tools of soft power than economic statecraft. Chinese soft power is mostly relying on economic statecraft, which is not soft power at all, particularly in the perception of Westerners. Chinese “economic soft power” (Wong, 2016), such as pandemic aid and assistance, thus have not worked in developed countries. “Beijing mostly builds influence abroad by buying it through economic carrots and sticks—business
opportunities, trade, Chinese investment, infrastructure development, economic assistance, checkbook diplomacy, threatening or implementing boycotts and the expectations, benefits, and political leverage they create within foreign countries” (Gill, 2020, p. 107). In Western countries, particularly in the United States, the Chinese pandemic medical cooperation, mask diplomacy, and emergency assistance have been seen as “economic diplomacy” (Carminati, 2020), which is connected with China's economic interest (e.g., trade of masks and medical accessories) rather than a soft power effort. According to a survey by the Pollster SWG, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the image and rank for China among the G20 countries on average saw a drop of six ranks from 11th to 17th (MacDonald, 2020). It is, thus, likely that China is not winning the hearts and minds everywhere. Beijing’s COVID-19 efforts have been undermined by either poor-quality products, a failure to deliver on promises, or pressing too hard. Nonetheless, China has been using the COVID-19 pandemic as an “epochal moment” to reinvigorated its efforts to cultivate friends in the developing region and even in Europe like Italy and Spain (Smith & Fallon, 2020, pp. 249–250).

CONCLUSION

China has been working hard to establish itself as the global leader in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic (Patey, 2020). This incidence has offered opportunities but also strained its relations to many international partners, particularly Western countries. Beijing has taken advantage of this pandemic to exhibit its benevolent image, win narrative battles, or shape outcomes through the selective delivery of relief toward the world. Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic is giving an unexpected chance to rebuild China's image, which is damaged by the authoritarian types of governance over the years. China has also been blamed by the Western European and North American countries for the origin of this virus. On the contrary, in recent years, China's constant economic foothold in the developing regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia has been criticized in the tag of “debt-trap diplomacy” (Chellaney, 2017; Eszterhai et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, Beijing has tried to restructure its image through pandemic health diplomacy worldwide. “China has been active in the seeking to define a favorable narrative, deflecting blame for its own initial shortcomings while actively pushing alternative narratives and trying to win support through the highly visible provision of aid” (Lynch, 2020, p. 5). Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the US response to control the domestic pandemic has not been admired by the world. The role of the US government toward the world community is also less visible compared with that of China, and this phenomenon might have enduring effects on the US-centric global order. Mulakala and Hongbo (2020) claimed that “China’s pandemic response provides new insights into the future of China’s South-South Cooperation and its aspirations to play a leading role in shaping global governance.” However, China’s COVID-19 aid is not motivated by a desire for global leadership; China’s humanitarian aid contribution to the world befits its capability and is in accordance with its foreign policy principle of noninterference (Bo, 2020). Trump's administration spreading rhetoric against Beijing, which would be turned into China's soft power, particularly in countries with a strong anti-US sentiment. Regarding the Sino–US relationship in this pandemic, Nye proposed the following statement:

If a US president were to choose such cooperative and soft-power-enhancing polices, something good may yet come out of the pandemic—a geopolitical path to a better world. If US policies continue on the current path, however, the new
coronavirus will simply accelerate existing trends toward nationalist populism and authoritarianism. But it is still much too early to predict a geopolitical turning point that would fundamentally alter the power relationship between the United States and China (Nye, 2020).

China’s authoritarian-style lockdown policy has been acclaimed by many developing countries. Some countries officially declared and followed the Chinese style of lockdown and isolation policy to control the COVID-19 outbreak. Many newspaper reports, journal publications, and expert opinions also claimed that Beijing’s authoritarian style is better suited to cope with a viral outbreak than democratic governance. This occurrence is an indication of attraction to the policy of the authoritarian government. Therefore, China's soft power concerning COVID-19 might be increased in developing regions that are heavily indebted to Beijing and where China has a huge investment. Most developing countries have admired and expressed gratefulness to China for its humanitarian aid and assistance during this pandemic.

In summary, China’s coronavirus efforts have mixed perceptions in the world. Developing regions have been attracted by Chinese health diplomacy. This attraction may help to achieve China's foreign policy outcomes, particularly further economic footprint into these countries. However, the Chinese image showed a declining trend in Western European countries including the United States. Through pandemic health diplomacy—“mask diplomacy” and “vaccine diplomacy,” Beijing strives to change the world’s perceptions regarding its handling of the outbreak. Nonetheless, asserting the actual level and impacts of China’s soft power regarding the COVID-19 pandemic health diplomacy remains difficult as several analysts viewed China’s medical supply as a “carrot” instead of soft power. It is also early to assess the actual level of Chinese soft power concerning its COVID-19 pandemic health diplomacy.

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ENDNOTES
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