

BEIJING'S SOFT DIPLOMACY IN WEST ASIA IN TIMES OF COVID-19

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The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) that emerged from Wuhan in China in December 2019 has engulfed almost every country in the world. Critics accuse the Chinese Government of hiding information and mishandling the deadly virus. Some countries, led by the United States (US), have even called it the “Chinese virus”.¹ They have also accused the World Health Organisation (WHO) of collaborating with China and providing misinformation about the spread of the virus. However, most of the countries have avoided getting into the politics of it. The European Union (EU) had to tone down its report on China’s state-backed “global disinformation campaign” on the issue, as it feared that China might retaliate by withholding the much-needed medical supplies.² The West Asian (or the Middle East) countries too have largely stayed out of the blame game and remain neutral.

With the US revitalising its domestic petroleum production through fracking and reducing dependency on the West Asian sources, it is likely to be a relatively less valuable customer than China. Today, Beijing is one of the region’s lead trade partners, importing about 40 per cent of its crude from the countries in West Asia.³ Furthermore, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the capacity to invest and build infrastructure in developing countries, including in the health and education sector, have heightened the expectations among countries of the region. They view China as a potential source for diversifying their revenue streams amid apparent US retrenchment.

Besides, the way China has managed to control the outbreak and move towards economic recovery – while the European powers and the US and Russia have struggled – makes it a more attractive development partner amid the ongoing pandemic. The West Asian countries have in general been supportive of China especially as it struggled to contain the spread of the virus. On several occasions, the Burj Khalifa tower in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was lit up with China’s national flag and the slogan “Wuhan Jiayou” (stay strong, Wuhan).⁴ Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait had initially donated medical supplies worth millions to China.⁵ In a surprising move, Turkey even ordered its local factories that normally manufactured clothing to produce antibacterial suits for supply to China.⁶

Meanwhile, in order to regain trust and portray itself as a benign pillar of international cooperation, China has resorted to soft diplomacy including in West Asia. Beijing is helping countries in the region to strengthen their healthcare infrastructure and has also provided medical and humanitarian supplies.

President Donald Trump’s unilateral decision to withdraw US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, and the subsequent adoption of a “maximum pressure” policy against Iran, has provided Tehran with an opportunity to strengthen its ties with Beijing to escape global economic isolation. Iran considers China as one of its few trade outlets and a powerful ally in the international community. Whereas for China, Tehran is singularly crucial for strengthening BRI in the region.⁷

Iran was among the first countries to express its sympathies and send millions of medical masks to China.⁸ It also strongly condemned international criticism of the WHO and what it considered

as groundless accusations against China.⁹ This speaks volumes about the nature of the relationship between the two countries.

The coronavirus soon unleashed havoc in Iran, making it the worst-affected country in the region. As of June 30, 2020, there were 227,662 confirmed cases and 10,817 deaths officially reported in the country.¹⁰ China expressed its support by supplying humanitarian goods and services,¹¹ which assumes symbolic significance as the US attempts to bar Iran's request for a \$5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹² China had also asked the US to ease sanctions on Iran, stating that they hamper Tehran's ability to respond to the humanitarian crisis within the country and also makes it difficult for the United Nations (UN) and other international relief organisations to deliver aid.¹³

Similarly, Turkey, the second worst-hit country in the region, with 199,906 confirmed cases and 5,131 fatalities as of June 30,¹⁴ too has been looking to strengthen its strategic ties with China through trade and investment, and security and defence cooperation.¹⁵ Given the tensions with the European Union (EU) and the US, and also to reduce its reliance on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Turkey has been looking for increased economic and political cooperation with other major powers like Russia and China. For Beijing, Turkey's strategic location renders it a vital component in BRI's global framework. At present, China provides essential supplies and other services including video conferencing between the medical experts of the two countries to share their experiences. Turkey is also reportedly using a "special drug" sent by China for patients suffering from the virus, cutting their time in intensive care from 11-12 to four days.¹⁶

However, the issue of Chinese treatment of its Turkic-speaking Uyghur Muslim population could continue to pose a challenge for the China-Turkey bilateral ties. It is reported that Uyghurs and other Turkic communities in China's mass detention camps have limited or no access to healthcare or sanitation, leaving them extremely weak from malnutrition. This puts them at a much higher risk of infection from the virus.¹⁷ However, for now, both countries appear to be dealing with this issue amicably, keeping in mind their respective interests.

China has been helping the West Asian countries that have limited capacity to manufacture essential medical supplies. Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine have been provided ventilators, facemasks, swabs, test kits and protective gears for their doctors and paramedics. China has reportedly vowed to resist any attempts to cut off these exports.¹⁸

In Iraq, which has the world's fifth-largest oil reserves and a strategic geopolitical location, China seems to have found the key as regards its aim to dominate trade across Asia and Europe. Iraq also serves as a bridge between Chinese shipping lanes in coastal countries like Israel, Turkey and several Gulf states.¹⁹ China has built a new Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) laboratory in Baghdad and has sent medical experts to the country to help contain the pandemic.²⁰ The joint fight against COVID-19 will likely enhance cooperation and strengthen their strategic partnership.

The COVID-19 challenge has also provided China with an opportunity to further strengthen its ties with one of the US' closest allies, Israel. Beijing has sent shipments of medical supplies²¹ and has fostered a partnership with Israel's SmartAID healthcare company to set up laboratories and boost testing capacities in West Bank and Gaza to around 3,000 tests per day.²² Israel is a strong and technologically the most advanced country in the entire region. It remains a potential partner for China in areas like research and development, infrastructure projects, and science and technology. However, its stronger alliance with Washington limits its ties with Beijing despite cooperation on COVID-19. The US has expressed concerns about possible security consequences of increased cooperation between Israel and China.²³ In the past, such concerns

had forced many Israeli companies to withdraw from dealing with Chinese firms.²⁴ China's inflammatory rhetoric on Israel's annexation of the Palestinian territories may become a source of tension in the future. Recently, the Chinese envoy to Israel stated that "all illegal acts" and "unilateral initiative aimed at legalizing settlement should be stopped immediately."²⁵ Though the Israeli Government did not issue an immediate response, it may not stay quiet in the long run.

In the wake of COVID-19, China is also collaborating with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. For example, China and Saudi Arabia have signed a deal worth more than \$264 million in which China agreed to provide nine million testing kits and build at least six major laboratories in Saudi Arabia to increase its capacity to test 50,000 people per day for coronavirus.²⁶ Moreover, China has expressed sincere gratitude to the UAE for protecting the health of its nationals during the outbreak.²⁷ The country hosts more Chinese nationals than any other country in the Gulf region. Beijing has also provided medical and humanitarian assistance to Abu Dhabi. It is planning to run clinical trials, without naming the vaccine, on the COVID-19 patients in the UAE in future.²⁸ Interestingly, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia are close allies of the US in the region.

In this time of crisis, when the US is engaged in dealing with several domestic issues, it seems to have little time for its allies and partners. President Trump's public attitude towards America's traditional allies in the region has not been entirely commensurate to their status. Meanwhile, China, with its deep pockets and alternative policy approaches, has been proactive in filling the space, challenging the American hegemony in world affairs. Beijing's non-interference policy is a bonus for the leaders in the region.

China needs allies and markets to expand its economy. The COVID-19 crisis has given it an opportunity to further engage the West Asian countries where basic health infrastructure has been seriously affected by the pandemic. Providing medical assistance especially to conflict-prone countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine is part of China's new soft diplomacy in the region, which is being heavily publicised by the Chinese state media's Arabic-language outlets active in the region.²⁹

China is also using the BRI ports and corridors to provide medical support to the countries in the region, for instance, the railway routes connecting Shanghai to Tehran and also Port Khalifa in Abu Dhabi. China has touted this as the "Health Silk Road".³⁰ It was in December 2015 when China's National Health Commission first issued the guidelines for this initiative. Under the "Health Silk Road", Beijing aims to improve health cooperation with the BRI countries. The objective is to increase the supply of Chinese drugs and other medical products across the globe. It also seeks to send health professionals to provide technical assistance and conduct training programmes in developing countries, and fund construction of hospitals and support capable pharmaceutical companies in building factories abroad.³¹ Countries like Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE could become much-valued pieces of this project.

In the Chinese perception, Israel is considered as the bridge to the US.³² Similarly, Turkey is the gateway to Europe and countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are pivot countries in China's global partnership network.

However, in West Asia, efforts to retain China's attention reveals deeper insecurities about maintaining a relationship that is still fragile but considered as significant in times of COVID-19. While countries in the region will continue to follow a multi-vector foreign policy to expand their revenue streams, they are least likely to view China as a power that can replace the US in the region. China's soft diplomacy in West Asia, particularly in times of pandemic, is more or less a way to improve its global image and recast itself as a responsible actor at relatively low cost,

rather than a sign of any deeper commitment towards the region.

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