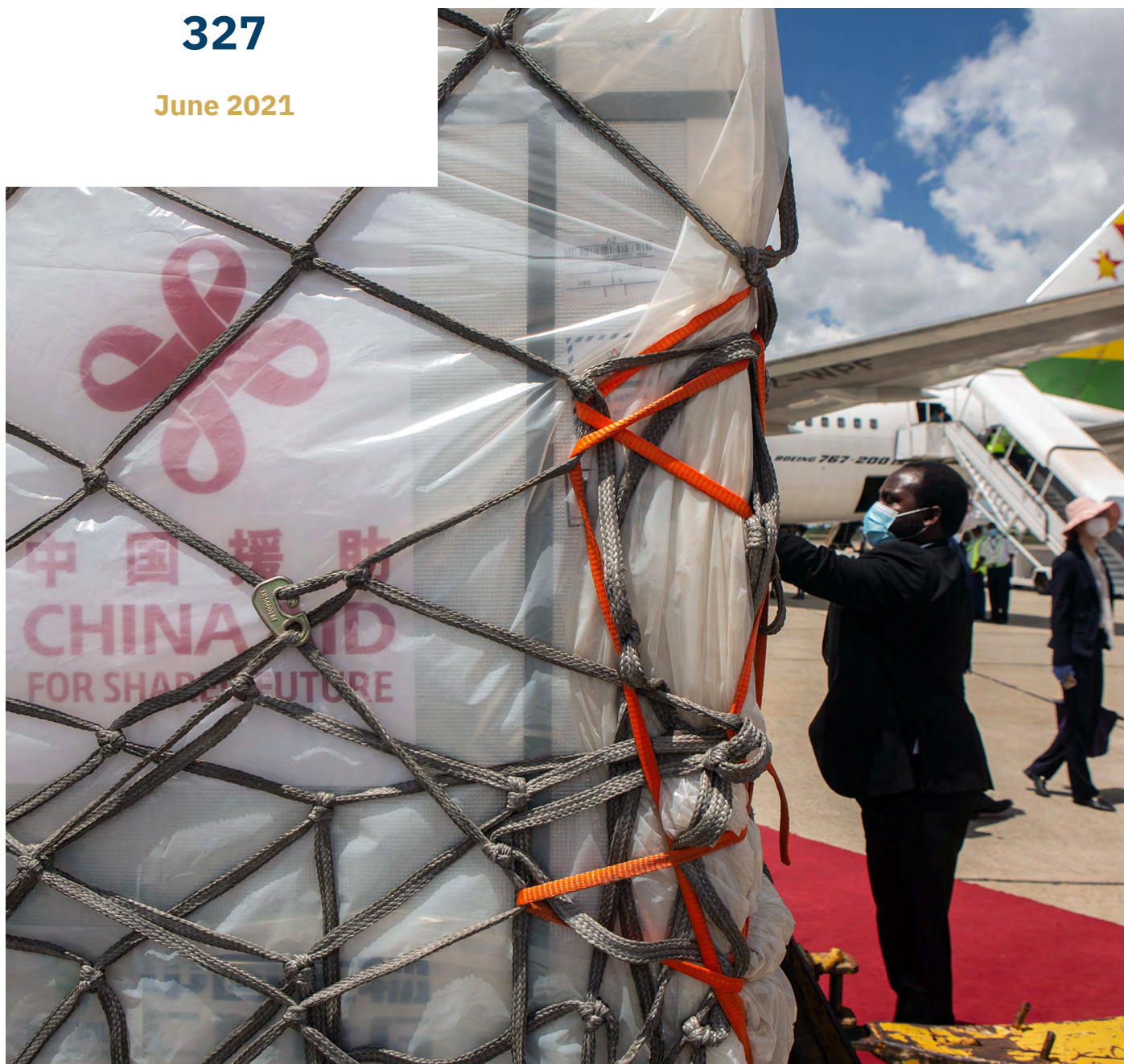# Vaccine Diplomacy and Beyond: New Trends in Chinese Image-Building in Africa

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African perspectives
Global insights

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Abstract

In the face of growing tensions between the US and China, Beijing's relationships with the Global South are taking on particular salience. Africa has long been a testing ground for Chinese public diplomacy tools. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven important in this regard. However, while China's so-called mask and vaccine diplomacy has drawn a lot of comment, many of these approaches reflect trends in Chinese public diplomacy that predate the current crisis. This paper maps and contextualises new developments in China's use of public diplomacy in Africa. Specifically, it focuses on the practice of crisis public diplomacy, as seen throughout the pandemic and particularly in response to the global outcry following the mass eviction of African migrants in the Chinese city of Guangzhou in April 2020. The paper shows that while Chinese diplomats have experimented with many innovative public diplomacy tools, the Guangzhou incident occasioned a retreat to more conventional methods.

Introduction

The year 2020 showed the importance of both perceptions and the ability to influence them. The COVID-19 pandemic created a strange commonality across the world as citizens from Johannesburg to Beijing negotiated a new way of life within the confines of their living spaces. People were left to rely on social media feeds, streaming radio and other media platforms for news and information, with little means to verify, or at least 'witness' in real life, what was being reported. They continued to observe state declarations, actions and decisions through their devices. At the same time, sharply fragmented views emerged as a by-product of physical and social distance, and an increase in sources of information (in contrast to the traditional centralised newsroom that helped filter the noise). Added to the mix has been the manner in which public opinion is shaped to fit political agendas. One instance was how China – where the first cases of the virus were reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on 31 December 2019 – handled the outbreak and its subsequent spread. A Pew survey[1] from July 2020 found that over 70% of American adults believed China had mishandled the situation; yet, at the same time, the WHO commended it for managing to combat the disease to a 'very low level'.[2] In retrospect, this disjuncture is indicative of how the pandemic came to be dominated by competing nationalistic framings even as perceptions of which particular nation is 'winning' tended to shift with each phase of the outbreak.

The pandemic has coincided with other dynamics, notably the rapid uptake of communication technologies. These intersections will impact how governments participate

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1   Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19", Pew Research Center, July 30, 2020.
2   Talha Burki, "China's Successful Control of COVID-19", *The Lancet: Newsdesk* 20, no. 11 (2020): 1240–1241.

in important conversations, although it is still too early to pinpoint in *what* way. What is clear is that the contours of public diplomacy have broadened. Nevertheless, it still mainly involves creating 'collective linkages between policy and people, domestic and international, through connecting stakeholders across political, economic and social dimensions'.[3]

China's foreign public engagement cannot be separated from global trends and developments, especially from its relationship with the US, which has sent ripples across the globe. At the same time, it is such tensions at a global scale that make China's relationship with Africa all the more interesting, as a respite from its other, emotively charged interactions. The continent is like an alternative space that is relatively welcoming of Chinese business and economic engagement. This enables it to reframe how it is perceived. Moreover, Africa is a testing ground for new Chinese approaches. One example is China's experimentation with its role as peacebuilder, as reflected in its engagement with South Sudan.[4] Africa may not be the most economically valuable region for China in the world, but it holds great political value. The cooperative nature of Africa–China political ties is demonstrative of how China wishes to be perceived in terms of its global rise.

At the same time, Chinese messaging in Africa is not limited to a continental audience. Chinese official communication on the continent also plays into global strategic messaging initiatives. This became especially clear during the COVID-19 crisis, when local diplomatic Twitter feeds became the staging ground for wrangles between the US and China. There were moments when was unclear whether the main target audience of the tweets was African or global. For this reason, we argue that examining Chinese diplomatic innovation in Africa is also valuable for China watchers who do not specifically focus on the continent.

In this paper we examine new trends in Chinese public diplomacy in Africa, and how they have impacted its global public diplomacy outreach. We show that despite the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it provided new platforms for public diplomacy, especially via the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccines. However, COVID-19 also triggered China's biggest public diplomacy challenge in Africa, in the form of the so-called Guangzhou incident. When numerous African migrants were expelled from their homes in the southern Chinese city, there was a significant backlash on the continent. In our analysis of this incident we show that while much of it played out on social media, traditional forms of diplomacy played a larger part in its mitigation.

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3   Jian (Jay) Wang, "How 2020 Changed Public Diplomacy", USC Center on Public Diplomacy, Blog, December 8, 2020

4   As an example of this aspect of the Africa–China relationship, see International Crisis Group, *China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Report 288 (Brussels: ICG, 2017).

The changing context of public diplomacy today

The COVID-19 pandemic and its after-effects are reshaping thinking on issues such as state image-building and foreign public engagement, both cornerstones of mainstream diplomatic life. However, even before these disruptions, shifts in the global landscape made it clear that international politics is inherently uncertain and what happens in one corner ripples into others. Take, for example, former president Donald Trump's 'America first' foreign policy from 2016–2021 and the 2016 Brexit referendum,[5] both of which advocated a 'safer' distance from neighbouring states and the global community. The question remains: how has the nature of public diplomacy evolved alongside such unpredictable events, especially in the last five years? We offer some important elements to consider.

The impact on contemporary public diplomacy cannot be discussed without considering the US–China dynamic. This – thanks to emotive government announcements, actions and retaliations (as well as a war of words between respective media)[6] over the last few years – has been on constant global display. The utility of public diplomacy is sometimes critiqued, as some policymakers believe that national interest is better achieved 'behind closed doors' and away from public scrutiny. At the same time, others see it as nonsensical to channel resources into education exchanges and cultural events (important public diplomacy instruments) when the real impacts on national image are hard to quantify. Be that as it may, the impact of public communication is very real. One case in point is how governments can influence public bias, especially when underlying tensions already exist. An example of this is Trump's referral to COVID-19 as 'the China virus' during his remarks at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2020, causing the phrase to trend on US Twitter and heightening concerns over racism towards the Asian American community.[7] While a politician may intend to communicate with their own constituency and support base, virtual communication is porous – every tweet and utterance spread faster than a virus to other audiences and circulated the world multiple times. Hence public communication aimed at domestic audiences can have the opposite effect on a nation's image as viewed by outside stakeholders.

Governments have traditionally adopted favourable narratives to promote their national image (for example, to stimulate tourism or investment). The challenge for diplomats today is to separate the different uses of public diplomacy. On the one hand, it can help build genuine understanding and relations with citizens across the globe. But it can also

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5   For more discussion on these examples, see Pawel Surowiec and Ilan Manor, "Introduction: Certainty of Uncertainty and Public Diplomacy", in *Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty, eds. Pawel Surowiec and Ilan Manor* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021).

6   Brad Glosserman, "US–China Media War on Truth and Trust", *The Japan Times*, March 23, 2020.

7   Marietta Vazquez, "Calling COVID-19 the 'Wuhan Virus' or 'China Virus' Is Inaccurate and Xenophobic", Yale School of Medicine, March 12, 2020.

perpetuate one-sided views – especially in a post-truth era.[8] This was demonstrated by the disparate perspectives on how China countered the COVID-19 breakout, including Chinese media criticism of the Trump administration's handling of the virus.[9] Since there is no yardstick for how public engagement impacts a nation's image, it also means the practice is subject to interpretation. It is at risk of becoming a political tool, where one nation can be depicted as 'popular' or 'unpopular' according to another nation's concept of likability or owing to interest-driven reasons. A state's self-promotion can be portrayed as admirable or manipulative. Of course, the strategic deployment of information is not unique to authoritarian regimes, nor is disinformation and outright propaganda exclusive to the Internet era. Rather, the Internet's speed, number of tools, and breadth of impact have raised these stakes.[10] When advising the incoming Biden administration, Gordon Duguid (a seasoned former US Foreign Service officer) said: '[F]oreign publics and democratic governments will not trust the United States if they think the administration lies to Americans.'[11] Hence the practice of public diplomacy is becoming subject to the size of the microphone and bandwidth, rather than relying on specialised skills, but even those governments with the biggest microphone could still face international fallout from domestic messaging.

Digital diplomacy: Opportunities and pitfalls

Beyond the US–China dynamic, the pandemic also made clear the impact of diminished physical contact. Virtual meeting applications from Zoom to Microsoft Teams have replaced costly state visits and summits owing to travel bans during the pandemic. Notably, the 75th UNGA, the epitome of a 'global village' tackling common problems, was held largely online with leaders giving pre-recorded messages to participants.[12] Likewise, in September 2020 the Chinese embassy in South Africa hosted its 71st National Day Reception virtually. It included a keynote address by Ambassador Chen Xiaodong and speeches by high-level South African dignitaries.

Technology has afforded interaction opportunities like no other time in history. A key example is the increase in diplomat social media handles, including several Chinese diplomats joining Twitter. Owing to their assertive postures, they have been referred to as 'Wolf Warriors', reminiscent of the patriotic blockbusters featuring cut-throat special agents. While the digital space becomes more complex and engaging, less (physical contact) is not always more. There is also a cost to retreating inwards and closing borders. The work of diplomacy and hence public diplomacy still requires meaningful relationships,

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8   That is, the preference for alternative and contradictory "facts" over objective reality.
9   "Editorial: With Epidemic Raging, US Is Becoming a Living Hell", *Global Times*, December 6, 2020.
10   See, for example, Melissa M Lee, "Subversive Statecraft: The Changing Face of Great-Power Conflict", *Foreign Affairs*, December 4, 2019; Thomas Paterson and Lauren Hanley, "Political Warfare in the Digital Age: Cyber Subversion, Information Operations and 'Deep Fakes'", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 4 (2020): 439–454.
11   He wrote an opinion piece summing up this view. See Gordon Duguid, "How Public Diplomacy Can Help Regain US Credibility", Washington International Diplomatic Academy, Diplomatic Diary, November 15, 2020.
12   Patrick Wintour, "Bye Bye Bilaterals: UN General Assembly to Embrace Zoom Diplomacy", *The Guardian*, September 19, 2020.

including the significance of handshakes, and that means stepping off-screen. In fact, most agreements of consequence are made on the sidelines of podium speeches. Likewise, universities have traditionally attracted foreign students who, as potential influencers back home, develop far more lasting and nuanced impressions of their host nations in person. This function has been seriously impacted by travel bans and new restrictions on foreign students, as imposed by the Trump administration, for example.

The pandemic may have limited government and foreign public interaction, but this does not make it any less important. 2020 revealed just how fragile the relationship between governments, media and citizens is. Rather than projecting influence outward, policymakers were instead tested by how effective they communicated back home to the very base levels, in order to ensure adherence to safety measures and avoid spikes in infections. Concurrently, the need to find long-term solutions (such as resuming cross-border trade and travel, and even collaborating in developing and distributing vaccines) means that states are unable to retreat within for too long. Instead, their plans and reputations are delicately interlaced with elements inside and outside of their borders. This underpins just how necessary relationship building remains.

However, the ability to create a trusting atmosphere is greatly impacted by political will and adequate funds dedicated to engaging citizens. A 2019[13] report by the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy stated that, while the US spent about $85 million more on public diplomacy in 2018 ($2.19 billion) than 1986 ($2.10 billion), the audience size has grown considerably – to more than 2.5 billion people. Moreover, with the increasingly saturated market of ideas the report found it counterintuitive that the levels of spending had not increased to reflect the current reality.

Finally, there is the notion of 'crisis public diplomacy', a concept studied by Ingrid d'Hooghe (a Senior Research Associate at the Clingendael Institute) in relation to China and selected domestic crisis situations, including its handling of the 2003 SARS epidemic:[14]

> [T]he government of a country in crisis is under pressure and often comes under heavy international scrutiny. It has little time to develop strategies to cope with both the crisis and its consequences for the country's reputation. Conducting public diplomacy in a crisis situation entails communicating simultaneously with multiple, sometimes hostile, audiences at home and abroad, 'in a rapidly changing, highly visible, and competitive communication environment'.

This statement remains true within the current context (with some updates, to be discussed below), not just for China but for other nations as well. In the eye of this storm, states are required to respond to the pressure COVID-19 has placed on their healthcare

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13   The 2020 figures had not yet been released at the time of writing. For the full report, see Vivian S Walker and Shawn Baxter, eds., *2019 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting* (Washington DC: US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2020).

14   Ingrid d'Hooghe, *China's Public Diplomacy* (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2014), 285.

systems and economies. At the same time, it is amid such pressure that emotive tensions between a state and foreign public appear to bubble to the surface (as witnessed in the Guangzhou incident).

We are interested in how this public diplomacy environment is affecting China's public engagement in Africa. Are the abovementioned factors affecting how it engages African audiences, and has its engagement in turn shifted? How has it modified its public communication since previous crisis events, particularly during the last five years?

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China in Africa: Pre-COVID diplomatic trends

China's public diplomacy in Africa during the pandemic continued key trends that were emerging before COVID-19, while also taking advantage of the specific circumstances of 2020 and 2021 to further its agenda. The latter point will be explored in more detail below. In this section we will outline some of the contemporary trends that formed the basis of later Chinese crisis public diplomacy on the continent. While some of these trends also shaped Chinese public diplomacy more widely, this section will focus on how they informed Beijing's African approach more specifically.

One of the significant changes in China's engagement with African publics over the last five years has been the loosening protocols of social engagement for Chinese ambassadors on the continent. Earlier, ambassadors tended to be quite risk-averse, restricting their press engagement to Chinese state media outlets like China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua, and to scripted and formal interactions with the public. Traditional media became a preferred instrument for China's image management after the Darfur crisis, which coincided with the Beijing Olympics in 2008. This started to change in two ways during the second half of the 2010s. In the first place, Chinese authorities overcame the contradiction between the utility of Western social media applications as a communication channel and the fact that these remain banned within China. Official Twitter accounts for Chinese embassies became a new tool to engage directly with publics, to shape the press narrative about China–Africa relations and to further some of Beijing's global narratives.[15]

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15   For examples of official diplomatic Twitter accounts, see Eric Olander, "Chinese Diplomats and Missions in Africa Are Opening Twitter Accounts. Here's a List of Who's Online", China–Africa Project, November 25, 2019.

In the second place, a more prominent presence on social media was accompanied by greater leeway for some ambassadors to take on a more personalised public role. Whereas Chinese ambassadors tended to be very reserved in public, some representatives seemed to have received official sanction to cultivate a more spontaneous public persona. Lin Songtian, China's ambassador to South Africa from 2017–2020, was the most prominent example. In comparison to the stiff interactions mentioned above, Lin encouraged free and unscripted interactions with South African journalists, hosted long discussions with local think tankers and researchers at the ambassadorial residence in Pretoria, and freely expressed his opinions and even some criticism of the South African government in paid columns in South African newspapers.

This 'humanisation' of Chinese diplomats coincided with the rise of technology as a space for China–Africa cooperation. The prominence of Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE as key providers of Internet and mobile phone networks on the continent, and their rapid investment in the technology sectors of several African countries, shaped information and communications technology as a space for China–Africa diplomacy. This was accompanied by the rapid success of Chinese providers of low-cost mobile phones like Transsion. At the same time, China's public diplomacy appeared to be benefitting more broadly from the role of individual personalities. A key example is tech billionaire Jack Ma, who emerged as a major figure in this evolution. His role is explored in more detail in the following section.

The overlap between Chinese tech and public diplomacy

Private Chinese media companies also emerged as key stakeholders in Chinese public diplomacy in Africa. Official communication is the explicit purview of the expansive state media apparatus in Africa (Xinhua, CGTN, People's Daily, Beijing Review and China Radio International all maintain some form of official presence on the continent). Yet this role is perhaps more effective for being hybridised with these private companies' commercial activity in the African market. The key example here is StarTimes, a satellite TV provider with significant market presence in East and West Africa. It established this wide presence partly by catering to lower price demographics than its main competitor, South Africa's Multichoice.[16] Subsequent to this success, StarTimes cooperated with Chinese state actors in the 10 000 Villages Project, aimed at extending satellite TV access to communities that would not usually be able to afford a StarTimes subscription. Funded by Chinese state banks, the 10 000 Villages Project was an explicit public diplomacy campaign, branded with the Chinese national flag and the logo of ChinaAid.[17]

The 10 000 Villages Project is a notable example of the role of private companies in Chinese public diplomacy. For the company, the expansion represents a significant increase in market share, into communities that otherwise would not have been able to afford

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16   Angela Lewis, "How a Pay TV Company Is Serving Up a Soft Power Win for China in Africa", *The Diplomat*, February 14, 2019.

17   Jeni Marsh, "How China Is Slowly Expanding Its Power in Africa, One TV Set at a Time", *CNN*, July 24, 2019.

satellite TV hardware. Even if these communities only keep subscribing to its most basic programming package, that still represents a significant new revenue stream. At the same time, the limited number of satellite channels offered in these inexpensive packages always contains some Chinese state TV channels. Beyond the clear public diplomacy dividend earned by being seen as providing satellite TV access to poor communities, the project also ensures the subsequent semi-permanent presence of Chinese state media in these communities' media diets. In addition, and as we have indicated elsewhere, this is another indication of how China's public engagement and commercial expansion in Africa are increasingly hard to differentiate, because economic engagement lends weight to its wider developmentalist image on the continent.[18]

More broadly, this emergence of technology as a space for China–Africa cooperation took place in the context of increased tensions between the US and China around the growing global role of technology firms, with particular attention falling on Huawei. This conflict took on particular resonance in Africa, with some African leaders publicly rejecting US pressure to sanction Huawei, in language that echoed talking points used by some Chinese diplomats. In making this point we do not mean to imply that these leaders were deliberately parroting Chinese talking points. Rather, we would argue that the tech issue provided an actual space of overlapping agendas, articulated via a shared set of vocabularies, as outlined by Nye's work on soft power.

The tradition of Chinese medical diplomacy

Finally, China's long history of medical diplomacy on the continent provided a crucial backdrop to 2020 and 2021's mask and vaccine diplomacy efforts. China has deployed medical workers to Africa, on two-year rotations, as far back as 1963 (the first to Algeria).[19] They provide primary healthcare and have become particularly respected in malaria mitigation, work bolstered by China's prominence in the development of new anti-malaria medication. It even constructed a hospital ship known as the Peace Ark (*Dashandao*), which has been providing medical aid and training to developing countries since 2007, especially to East African nations in 2010 and 2011.[20]

A key example of China's health outreach was during the 2014 Ebola crisis in West Africa, which the UN labelled as a threat to international peace and security. It was commended for its significant role on the ground, especially the involvement of the People's Liberation Army and Chinese government agencies, specialists and personnel. Besides personnel, it also pledged about $140 million in aid, disease prevention and the construction of medical

18   Yu-Shan Wu and Cobus van Staden, "Behind the Headlines: China's Media Engagement in South Africa", in *South Africa–China Relations*, eds. Chris Alden and Yu-Shan Wu (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 137–157.

19   Xiangcheng Wang, and Tao Sun, "China's Engagement in Global Health Governance: A Critical Analysis of China's Assistance to the Health Sector of Africa", *Journal of Global Health* 4, no. 1 (2014). See also Emma-Louise Anderson, "African Health Diplomacy: Obscuring Power and Leveraging Dependency Through Shadow Diplomacy", *International Relations* 32, no. 2 (2018): 194–217.

20   Claude Zandari, "China's Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Cases of Confucius Institutes and Chinese Naval Diplomacy", *Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 3 (2016): 438.

facilities.[21] The measures that China took to combat Ebola were also readily communicated. For example, the Chinese embassy in South Africa provided updates via emails (and likewise on its website) with articles such as 'China Stands with West African Countries Till We Win the Battle against Ebola' and '163 Chinese Medical Staff Arrived in Liberia'. These examples show how China made healthcare a space for diplomatic cooperation even before the pandemic, and helped to boost the COVID-specific outreach we detail below.

China–Africa public diplomacy during COVID-19: Heightened crisis, heightened response

2020's multiple crises presented the world with an unprecedented version of D'Hooghe's crisis public diplomacy. Her example of China's struggle with the SARS epidemic shows a country communicating with multiple hostile audiences while also dealing with a volatile crisis at home. The COVID-19 pandemic multiplied this scenario by plunging all the different audiences into simultaneous domestic crises, a situation that did nothing to make them less hostile. In fact, the opposite was true. As individual countries tallied the mounting costs of the pandemic, the impacts did not remain limited to these countries themselves but spilled over into their international relationships, especially with China.

This is because of a few factors. The contagion was first reported in Wuhan, and the subsequent narrative of Chinese local and central bureaucracies' mishandling its early reporting dragged China into the global conversation about responsibility for the crisis. This liability was then seized on by powers like the US and Australia that were already suspicious of Chinese power before the pandemic.

The second factor was a consequence of China's status as the world's workshop – a production centre for millions of products traded globally. This manufacturing capability soon contributed to keeping China in the spotlight, as it became the world's key source of PPE like masks and face shields, and of therapeutic equipment crucial to fighting the pandemic, like ventilators and thermometers. In addition, China also set the template for mitigation, with measures such as city-wide lockdowns applied domestically and then implemented with various levels of controversy in the rest of Asia and then worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had the effect of putting all countries into near-simultaneous and near-identical states of crisis. However, the specific nature of these crises has differed from country to country, exposing political realities in each. This, plus the fact that the specific circumstances of the pandemic has kept China at the centre of the global dialogue

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21   Ross Anthony, Harrie Esterhuyse and Meryl Burgess, "Shifting Security Challenges in the China–Africa Relationship" (Policy Insights 23, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, 2015).

about COVID-19, has meant that almost all of its international relationships were plunged into varying degrees and types of crisis at once. 2020 placed unprecedented pressures on Chinese public diplomacy, while also presenting similarly unprecedented opportunities for innovation in public diplomacy.

In our analysis of Chinese crisis public diplomacy, we acknowledge that this diplomacy was greatly informed by the growing tensions between China and the US, an issue that informs our analysis. However, we would also argue that it is important to examine this evolution of Chinese public diplomacy beyond Beijing's relationship with prominent antagonists like the US and Australia. This is because, partly in response to growing antagonism towards China at both the leadership and popular levels in these countries, China has poured diplomatic resources into boosting its relationships with the Global South through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This engagement took place in many forums scattered across the Global South, which gave China both a respite from its charged relationship with Western stakeholders and an alternative stage on which to pursue and reframe this conflict. We would argue that examining new trends in China's crisis public diplomacy would be greatly enriched through a Global South (in our case, African) lens.

> China has poured diplomatic resources into boosting its relationships with the Global South through the Belt and Road Initiative

Vaccine diplomacy

Africa has provided China with significant diplomatic opportunities in the form of PPE and vaccine diplomacy, the optics of which were maximised by the presence of Chinese state media in Africa. Likewise, it has had the opportunity to demonstrate the strength of official relations. Despite travel restrictions, the 31-year tradition of the Chinese foreign minister' kicking off their overseas visits with an Africa tour did not falter in 2021.

As the reality of the pandemic set in, it soon became clear that the continent faced shortfalls of crucial protective equipment, a crisis exacerbated by spiking demand throughout the developed world. China responded by staging highly mediated donations of protective equipment – a sentence that demands some unpacking. In the first place, 'China' is shorthand for a myriad Chinese actors, ranging from explicitly government-affiliated actors like officials and diplomats to state-owned enterprises, private companies and business associations. These actors might all have contributed to the donations according to their own agendas, but the assiduous reporting of these occasions by the Chinese state media, which maintains a relatively comprehensive presence in Africa, played a role in the appearance of a concerted effort representing China itself.

One of the key actors in this process was Ma. Ma was already a key figure in Chinese public diplomacy in Africa before the pandemic, leading a high-profile competition dedicated to finding emergent African technology entrepreneurs.[22] His reported friendship with Rwandan President Paul Kagame and his frequent visits to the continent positioned Ma as a prominent representative of China's emerging influence in Africa. His personal story of starting as a schoolteacher to become the founder of Alibaba, and his company's global influence, arguably made him a representative of China's own oft-repeated developmental narrative (a key factor in its public diplomacy in Africa). At the same time, his informal friendliness and ease humanised the Chinese state, which frequently strikes African commentators as distant or forbidding.

The donations of PPE took place under the name of the Jack Ma Foundation, Ma's philanthropic body, while the logistics made full use of Alibaba's strength as an international leader in e-commerce. The Jack Ma Foundation worked with Ethiopian Airlines, which drew attention early during the pandemic for breaking ranks with other African airlines by continuing its weekly flights between China and Addis Ababa for as long as possible. The collaboration between Alibaba's procurement muscle and Ethiopian Airlines' continued operations resulted in the highly circulated image of planeloads of PPE landing in Addis Ababa, and from there to numerous African capitals.[23]

This happened at a moment when countries around the world were scrambling to secure sufficient supplies of face masks, hand sanitiser and other crucial supplies, raising fears that African countries would be sidelined in the global market. The optics of the planes filled with equipment landing in African cities were a marked symbolic contrast to the response of other global powers. This was despite the fact that the actual difference between these countries' and China's respective financial commitments was less clear, not least because of the many different Chinese actors involved.[24]

Ma's influence as an avatar of Chinese public diplomacy took a rapid tumble later in 2020, when Chinese regulators cracked down on Ant, his latest business venture. Amid global discussion of the sudden cancellation of Ant's unprecedentedly large initial public offering, it was also noted that Ma had disappeared from public view after a speech in which he voiced criticism of Chinese financial regulators. After weeks of global speculation about his possible detainment or exile, Ma was spotted playing golf at a luxury resort in the Chinese province of Hainan in early February 2021.[25] However, at the time of writing he had not resumed his role as a representative of Chinese public diplomacy in Africa. Yet that has not stopped the involvement of Ma-adjacent actors in China's public diplomacy responses to

22   "$1 Million Awarded to African Entrepreneurs in Grand Finale of the Jack Ma Foundation Africa Netrepreneur Prize Initiative", *AfricaNews*, December 9, 2019.
23   For example, see Samuel Gebre, "China Expands Medical Aid to Africa with First Ethiopia Shipment", *Bloomberg*, March 22, 2020.
24   Paulo Esteves and Cobus van Staden, "US and Chinese Health Outreach to Africa and Latin America: A Comparison" (Policy Insights 98, SAIIA, Johannesburg, 2020).
25   "Jack Ma Spotted Playing Golf, Easing China Detention Fears", *Bloomberg News*, February 10, 2021.

the pandemic. In November 2020 it was announced that Ethiopian Airlines would cooperate with Cainiao, Alibaba's logistics arm, to facilitate the delivery of vaccines to Africa.[26]

As with PPE, China's vaccine diplomacy drew some of its strength from the behaviour of other global actors. Probably aware of African fears of being sidelined, President Xi Jinping repeatedly used the language of South–South solidarity in settings like the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation's virtual leaders meeting on 17 June 2020. In his address he said: 'We pledge that once the development and deployment of COVID-19 vaccine is completed in China, African countries will be among the first to benefit.'[27] Subsequently, Chinese officials repeated this commitment to make a future Chinese-made vaccine available as 'a global public good' – phrasing that avoided the question of what it would actually cost. Nevertheless, early 2021 saw the same kind of scramble for vaccines as for PPE the year before. Rich countries openly hoarded vaccine supplies. At the time of writing, some are speculating that full vaccination in Africa could take several years. Not surprisingly, the optics of consignments of Chinese-made vaccines arriving in Africa proved as powerful as the planeloads of PPE a year earlier.

> The optics of consignments of Chinese-made vaccines arriving in Africa proved as powerful as the planeloads of PPE a year earlier

However, China's public diplomacy has faced specific challenges in Africa despite these initiatives. One hiccup is the continual debate over the quality of Chinese goods on the continent. Most recently, the Chinese embassy in South Africa was left to defend rumours that the KN95 masks exported by China were substandard.[28] As we pointed out above, China's long history of medical volunteerism in Africa generally contributed to friendly relations with many African countries. This was not true for Nigeria. The news that Chinese medical personnel had been dispatched to Nigeria to aid the pandemic mitigation efforts led to a swift backlash from Nigerian medical professionals. They pointed out that at that stage, China was facing a much heavier infection rate than Nigeria, and that Nigeria had a highly trained medical corps active in many other countries. This nationalist backlash revealed the limits of China's medical diplomacy in the Global South, as well as the difficulty of applying general narratives of South–South solidarity and Chinese developmental leadership to local political complexities. China's state-owned nationalist

26   Ethiopian Airlines, "Cainiao Partners Ethiopian Airlines to Launch Cold Chain Air Freight for Temperature-Controlled Vaccine Transportation", Press Release, November 30, 2020.
27   "Full Text: Xi Jinping's Speech at Extraordinary China–Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19", CGTN, June 18, 2020.
28   "There Are Clear Requirements for Usage of KN95 Masks, Says Chinese Embassy", IOL, 22 December 22, 2020.

news outlet *Global Times* blamed the controversy on Western media influence, a theme frequently invoked by diplomats as well.[29]

The Guangzhou incident

This backlash preceded a much larger controversy. On 2 April 2020 reports of a Nigerian man who tried to escape from a COVID ward in a southern Chinese hospital and assaulted a nurse in the process drew significant press attention in China.[30] This scandal coincided with another report of a gathering of African expatriates in Guangzhou at a restaurant causing a local outbreak of the disease.[31] The resulting controversy put pressure on authorities in Guangzhou, which led to fears among landlords with African tenants that they would be implicated. Suddenly, hundreds of African residents were expelled from their apartments and residential hotel rooms. There were also reports of signs refusing service to black residents appearing outside restaurants and other businesses. Video footage of the evictions and some of these expatriates' being forced to shelter under bridges and in the open air spread rapidly on social media platforms.[32]

The resultant scandal had serious reverberations in Africa. The incidents were covered widely by African news outlets, drawing on feverish discussions on social media. With the medical team controversy still fresh, Nigeria was at the forefront of furious denunciations of China and calls for the repatriation of Nigerian citizens from China. Nigerian Speaker of the House of Representatives Femi Gbajabiamila summoned China's ambassador to Nigeria, Zhou Pingjian, to his office on 13 April 2020. Contrary to standard practice, the speaker insisted that the conversation be filmed. When it emerged that Zhou had not seen the viral videos of the expulsions in Guangzhou, he was made to watch and react to them in real time. Gbajabiamila posted the video of the interaction, which quickly went viral.[33] The incident was unprecedented in China–Africa relations. It was a clear indication of the challenges posed by social media to traditional Chinese diplomacy in Africa, which tends to favour high-level meetings behind closed doors.

Outrage about the Guangzhou incident spread rapidly through both civil society and Nigeria's political establishment. It coincided with growing anxieties about the economic impact of the pandemic, and a possible debt crisis brewing on the continent. The result was a complex anti-Chinese backlash. Nigerian Members of Parliament (MPs) called for a full audit of the immigration status of all Chinese citizens in Nigeria, as well as the legal status of Chinese-led companies. MPs also called for an audit of all Chinese loans to Nigeria (despite the fact that only about 3–4% of its total debt load is to China).

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29   "Opposition to China's Medical Support to Nigeria Part of Public Opinion War", *Global Times*, April 8, 2020.
30   See, for example, "Video of Nurse Allegedly Attacked by Foreign COVID-19 Patient Goes Viral", *Caixin*, April 2, 2020.
31   Guo Rui, "Coronavirus: Guangzhou Cases Prompt Shutdown in 'Little Africa' Trading Hub", *South China Morning Post*, April 7, 2020.
32   See, for example, "African Nationals 'Mistreated, Evicted' in China over Coronavirus", *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2020.
33   Eric Olander, "Nigeria's Speaker of the House Publishes Video Admonishing Chinese Ambassador Zhou Pingjian About the Situation in Guangzhou", China–Africa Project, April 13, 2020.

> Outrage about the Guangzhou incident coincided with growing anxieties about the economic impact of the pandemic, and a possible debt crisis brewing on the continent. The result was a complex anti-Chinese backlash

It should, however, be noted that while the outrage was widespread, it was confined to domestic political and civil society circles in several African countries. No head of state addressed the issue publicly. This stands in contrast to, for example, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's expressing support for the Black Lives Matter movement during a virtual gathering of the UN in September 2020.[34]

The Chinese government responded to the crisis on several fronts at once. In a statement on 12 April 2020, government spokesperson Zhao Lijian (frequently described as a key Wolf Warrior diplomat) issued a statement that set the tone for many subsequent official responses.[35] Much of the statement focused on the long history of China–Africa cooperation, China's efforts in containing the Ebola virus in Africa, and its donations of PPE to Africa. Zhao rejected the claims of pervasive anti-African racism in China, which featured prominently in African accounts of the crisis. He insisted that all foreigners are treated equally and that China has 'zero tolerance for discrimination'.

The statement did not include an apology either to the African community in southern China or to African countries in general. Instead, it focused on a series of practical measures implemented in the wake of the initial expulsions. These included setting up communication channels with foreign consulates-general, providing affordable housing for evicted migrants, and 'reject[ing] all racist and discriminatory remarks', although he did not specify from whom these remarks would come. The closest the statement came to an apology was the assurance that '[t]he foreign ministry will stay in close communication with the Guangdong authorities and continue responding to the African side's reasonable concerns and legitimate appeals'.

The statement was followed the next day by two examples of how Chinese diplomatic efforts in Africa tend to favour high-level diplomacy over popular engagement, even at a moment when the popular sphere of social media lies at the heart of the issue. In the first place, the matter was addressed during a phone call between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the chairperson of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat.[36]

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34   Associated Press, "'Black Lives Matter' Gets First Mention at UN's Virtual Gathering", *The New Indian Express*, September 22, 2020.

35   Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Remarks on Guangdong's Anti-Epidemic Measures Concerning African Citizens in China", April 12, 2020.

36   Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: China-Africa Friendship Is as Solid as a Rock and Will Not Be Affected by Momentary Event" (original in Chinese, e-translated), April 14, 2020.

In the second place, Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong (who subsequently became China's ambassador to South Africa) met with envoys from more than 20 African countries. According to a statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,[37] Chen followed roughly the same template as Zhao, emphasising the long relationship between China and Africa and insisting that the incidents arose from the urgent need to avoid imported cases of COVID-19, rather than from racism. The statement announced the lifting of some restrictions on African residents, and paraphrased unknown African representatives expressing thanks for the meeting and reiterating the long history of China–Africa cooperation. The African side reportedly pledged to 'work with the Chinese side to urge and guide African nationals to abide by Chinese laws and to observe the containment measures of China'. The statement concludes: 'No external force, with whatever motives or methods, can stop the strengthening of Africa–China friendship.'

This theme of external forces trying to weaken the China–Africa relationship emerged more clearly in *Global Times* reporting on the incidents. In several articles published that week, including one by a Kenyan author, (unspecified) Western media outlets were accused of exaggerating or outright fabricating the incidents.[38] One of the articles linked back to the *Global Times* article we quoted earlier in relation to Chinese medical teams sent to Nigeria as proof of purported Western involvement in disinformation about China in Africa, arguably revealing the development of unified messaging across different diplomatic crises.[39]

This unification of messaging was also visible across the Twitter feeds of Chinese embassies in Africa. The key messages coming from these accounts included denials of differential treatment of foreigners in China, as well as denials that Africans were treated differently than other foreigners. Instead, the incidents were blamed on local authorities' COVID-19 mitigation measures rather than on wider societal biases, on 'miscommunication' and language differences, and on Western media intervention. This messaging was almost identical to that coming out of individual interviews granted by Chinese ambassadors, like Zhou in Nigeria,[40] as well as group calls between Chinese diplomats and African journalists.[41] This kind of traditional media outreach occurred frequently in the wake of the scandal.

As with the deployment of African writers in *Global Times*, there were also attempts using embassy Twitter accounts to provide counter-examples featuring Africans expressing approval of their treatment by the Guangzhou authorities. However, here the specific nature of social media proved a complicating factor. As Chinese embassies posted these narratives, users in Africa and elsewhere responded with narratives of relatives sleeping in

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37   Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "MFA: Assistant Minister Chen Xiaodong Meets with African Diplomatic Envoys to China", April 13, 2020.

38   See, for example, Leng Sumei and Chen Qingqing, "'No Discrimination' Against Africans Amid Pandemic", *Global Times*, April 14, 2020; Joyce Chimbi, "Guangzhou's Hospitality Contradicts Allegations of Racism Against Africans", *Global Times*, April 17, 2020.

39   Leng Shumei and Chen Qingqing, "Equal Treatment of Foreigners Reiterated", *Global Times*, April 12, 2020. The subtitle of the article clarifies the theme: "Reported Ill Treatment of Africans a Western Trap to Stir Enmity: Experts".

40   Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, "Ambassador Zhou Pinjian's Exclusive Interview with *Punch*", May 7, 2020.

41   "Chinese Officials Hold Teleconference with African Journalists on Concerns in Guangzhou", *Kenyan Digest*, April 26, 2020.

the street in Guangzhou,[42] and countered positive video content with viral examples of mistreatment.[43]

These emotive interactions, with at times hints of racism (whether deliberate or as a result of misunderstandings) between Chinese and Africans remain the primary public diplomacy challenge for policymakers on both sides.[44] This risk is increased incalculably by the expansion of social media. As we have outlined in this paper, China has seized on the power of social media as a public diplomacy tool. However, this power also represents a significant liability. These benefits and dangers cannot be disentangled. They both lie at the heart of social media itself. Those that want to benefit from its power have to devise ways to mitigate potential backlashes. The Guangzhou incident and its fallout in Africa provide a potent case study of both, a dilemma that will only increase as China's growing relationship with Africa coincides with the explosion of Chinese consumer technology and Internet provision on the continent.

> China has seized on the power of social media as a public diplomacy tool. However, this power also represents a significant liability

Conclusion

China's public diplomacy has evolved over the years, alongside global changes in the practice. On a global level, government image-building has been affected by wider factors such as:

- the reverberating effects of public communications that can at times have unintended results (for example, the impact of Trump's tweets on the global image of the US);

- the impact of the post-truth era with its high levels of distrust of official communications and initiatives;

- the role of diminished social interaction on relationship building as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (which reinforces how virtual interaction cannot simply replace the value of human interaction); and

- the increased prominence of crisis public diplomacy.

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42   Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe (@ChineseZimbabwe), "On April 9, when asked about the alleged discrimination against Africans in Guangdong, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian reiterated China position against any form of discrimination", Twitter post, April 11, 2020.

43   Chinese Embassy in Nigeria (@china_emb_ng), "An African girl working in Guangzhou reporting the newest situation in Guangzhou during and after her quarantine", Twitter post, April 19, 2020.

44   For example, see Nkosikhona Duma, "South Africans in China Love Its Efficient COVID-19 Response, but Racism Remains", *Eyewitness News*, February 4, 2021.

Similarly, China's engagement with Africa has also changed along global trends. It has experimented with a far more personalised public engagement approach with individual personalities at the centre, reinforcing the importance of relationship building and adding a human face to high politics. Moreover, a strength of China's relations with the continent is that it is not prescriptive of the specific contours of interactions but rather works alongside shared synergies, especially in the economic sense. Building on a history of medical assistance, China's medical diplomacy in Africa also lends to its image in the current context.

But these interactions are not without challenges. Technology is affecting China's image in multiple ways. Chinese communications technology firms are providing access and affordability that run contrary to complaints of their practices in places like Europe. At the same time, mobile devices have equipped citizens to capture events on the ground that diplomats can neither deny nor ignore. This was demonstrated by the filmed conversation between Gbajabiamila and Zhou when the video footage of discrimination against black residents of Guangzhou was replayed.

In 2020 there were multiple image crises in terms of China's engagement with Africa. The question is how each crisis will shift its approach to the continent. Apart from proactive public engagement through Confucius Institutes or people-to-people exchanges, China's public diplomacy is increasingly required to respond to crisis situations. The challenge is to focus on building relations with African publics rather than simply pointing the finger back at other foreign players. As China's role as a development partner in Africa is expanding, it faces multiple new challenges to public diplomacy. COVID-19 was one such challenge, as was rising African concern about debt to China; concern that was actively encouraged by the Trump administration through narratives of Chinese predatory lending. In fact, a 2019/20 preliminary study by Afrobarometer found that while China's image remains positive in Africa, its popularity has declined somewhat, compared with another study four years earlier. Some analysts believe this could be attributed to the debt trap narrative and rumours of Chinese asset seizures.[45]

In this paper we identified trends in Chinese public diplomacy practice and how they have been adapted to deal with the multiple crises of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was a lot of evidence of Beijing's readiness to experiment with new forms of global engagement, like social media, it is also important to point out that this does not represent a complete overhaul of its public diplomacy. In fact, while much attention has been paid to these new tools, an examination of its crisis public diplomacy shows that traditional tools of diplomacy remain central to China's approach in Africa.

This is particularly true for the Guangzhou incident. While tweets by Wolf Warrior diplomats played a part, the main tools used to mitigate the crisis were decidedly old school: press releases, meetings with elites, official statements and sympathetic articles in state-owned

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45   Foulashade Soule and Edem E Selormey, "How Popular Is China in Africa? New Survey Sheds Light on What Ordinary People Think", *The Conversation*, November 17, 2020.

media outlets. These tools were a way to shape China's message in a controllable way, and to direct it to its core audience: African elites, rather than the African people at large. This approach also sends the message that despite new and changing circumstances, China's official support remains stable. This point was reinforced by the repeated use of the language of unchanging friendship between China and Africa; language that also characterised comments on the debt crisis issue, as well as earlier controversies. Regarding China's outreach to African publics, its crisis public diplomacy around the Guangzhou incident can be labelled somewhat of a failure. Despite the use of social media as a dissemination tool, Beijing's talking points that there is zero tolerance for racism in China did not shift the tenor of the online conversation. When Chinese entities and diplomats raised the issue on Twitter, they faced considerable resistance from African netizens. However, as frequently happens when concerns about relations with China are raised locally in Africa, it is not clear how much frustration was directed at China's handling of the situation, or whether citizens felt their own governments were not doing enough.

> Despite the use of social media as a dissemination tool, Beijing's talking points that there is zero tolerance for racism in China did not shift the tenor of the online conversation

All in all, the Guangzhou incident revealed that while Chinese diplomats are willing to try social media's capacity to foster dialogue with the larger public, crisis public diplomacy pushed them away from dialogue towards the monodirectional statements that characterised Chinese diplomacy in earlier decades. Actual dialogue only took place between these diplomats and African elites, far from the spotlight of social media. The only exception to this rule was the interaction between Gbajabiamila and Zhou, and that was only because the speaker filmed the encounter and circulated the footage.

2020's many challenges simultaneously exposed China's willingness to experiment (in many cases, highly successfully) with new modes of public diplomacy, as well as the limits of these experiments. It is striking that the highly emotive Guangzhou incident, when the deft use of social media could have furthered Chinese messaging on the continent, was exactly the moment when Chinese diplomats retreated to traditional messaging. This reinforces perceptions that for all of China's focus on people-to-people exchanges, particularly within the context of social distancing, its engagement with Africa tends to be elite-focused, with little concrete engagement with civil society or publics at large. This tendency bears continued scrutiny, especially as China rests more heavily on its relationships in the Global South in the face of concerted pressure from the Biden administration and its allies.

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Cover image

Zimbabwean officials inspects the shipment of the Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines at Harare International Airport on March 16, 2021 in Harare, Zimbabwe (Tafadzwa Ufumeli/Getty Images)