

Global Backlash Builds Against China Over Coronavirus

As calls for inquiries and reparations spread, Beijing has responded aggressively, mixing threats with aid and adding to a growing mistrust of China.



By **Steven Erlanger**

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BRUSSELS — Australia has called for an inquiry into the origin of the virus. Germany and Britain are hesitating anew about inviting in the Chinese tech giant Huawei. President Trump has [blamed](#) China for the contagion and is seeking to punish it. Some governments want to sue Beijing for damages and reparations.

Across the globe a backlash is building against China for its initial mishandling of the crisis that helped loose the coronavirus on the world, creating a deeply polarizing battle of narratives and setting back China's ambition to fill the leadership vacuum [left by the United States](#).

China, never receptive to outside criticism and wary of damage to its domestic control and long economic reach, has responded aggressively, combining medical aid to other countries with harsh nationalist rhetoric, and mixing demands for gratitude with economic threats.

The result has only added momentum to the blowback and the growing mistrust of China in Europe and Africa, undermining China's desired image as a generous global actor.







A group of Chinese doctors inspecting a makeshift hospital in Belgrade. China has been showering European countries with millions of masks, test kits and other aid, recasting itself as the hero in the battle against the coronavirus. Oliver Bunic/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Even before the virus, Beijing displayed a fierce approach to public relations, an aggressive style called “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, named after two ultrapatriotic Chinese films featuring the evil plots and fiery demise of American-led foreign mercenaries.

With clear encouragement from President Xi Jinping and the powerful Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, a younger generation of Chinese diplomats have been proving their loyalty with defiantly nationalist and sometimes threatening messages in the countries where they are based.

A video screen in Beijing in March showing President Xi Jinping of China with army officers and other officials. Gilles Sabrie for The New York Times

“You have a new brand of Chinese diplomats who seem to compete with each other to be more radical and eventually insulting to the country where they happen to be posted,” said François Godement, a senior adviser for Asia at the Paris-based Institut Montaigne. “They’ve gotten into fights with every northern European country with whom they should have an interest, and they’ve alienated every one of them.”

Since the virus, the tone has only toughened, a measure of just how serious a danger China’s leaders consider the virus to their standing at home, where it has fueled anger and destroyed economic growth, as well as abroad.

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In the past several weeks, at least seven Chinese ambassadors — to France, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and the African Union — have been summoned by their hosts to answer accusations ranging from spreading misinformation to the “racist mistreatment” of Africans in Guangzhou.

Chinese flags lining a street in Guangzhou, where Africans say they have been evicted and forced into quarantine. Alex Plavevski/EPA, via Shutterstock

Just last week, China threatened to withhold medical aid from the Netherlands for changing the name of its representative office in Taiwan to include the word Taipei. And before that, the Chinese Embassy in Berlin sparred publicly with the German newspaper Bild after the tabloid demanded \$160 billion in compensation from China for damages to Germany from the virus.

Mr. Trump said last week that his administration was conducting “serious investigations” into Beijing’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak.

He has pressed American intelligence agencies to find the source of the virus, suggesting [it might have emerged accidentally from a Wuhan weapons lab](#), although most intelligence agencies remain skeptical. And he has expressed interest in trying to sue Beijing for damages, with the United States seeking \$10 million for every American death.

Republicans in the United States have moved to support Mr. Trump's attacks on China. Missouri's attorney general, Eric Schmitt, filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking to hold Beijing responsible for the outbreak.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, called the suit "frivolous," adding that it had "no factual and legal basis" and "only invites ridicule."

Attorney General Eric Schmitt of Missouri has filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking to hold Beijing responsible for the coronavirus outbreak. Manuel Balce Ceneta/Associated Press

The suit seems to aim less at securing victory in court, which is unlikely, than at prodding Congress to pass legislation to make it easier for U.S. citizens to sue foreign states for damages.

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“From Beijing’s point of view, this contemporary call is a historic echo of the reparations paid after the Boxer Rebellion,” said Theresa Fallon, director of the Centre for Russia Europe Asia Studies, referring to the anti-imperialist, anti-Christian and ultranationalist uprising around 1899-1901 in China that ended in defeat, with huge reparations for eight nations over the next decades. “The party’s cultivation of the humiliation narrative makes it politically impossible for Xi to ever agree to pay any reparations.”

Instead, it has been imperative for Mr. Xi to turn the narrative around, steering it from a story of incompetence and failure — including the suppression of early warnings about the virus — into one of victory over the illness, a victory achieved through the unity of the party.

In the latest iteration of the new Chinese narrative, the enemy — the virus — did not even come from China, [but from the U.S. military](#), an unsubstantiated accusation made by China’s combative Foreign Ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijian.

Chinese diplomats are encouraged to be combative by Beijing, said Susan Shirk, a China scholar and director of the 21st Century China Center at the University of California, San Diego. The promotion of Mr. Zhao to spokesman and his statement about the U.S. Army “signals to everyone in China that this is the official line, so you get this megaphone effect,” she said, adding that it makes any negotiations more difficult.

But in the longer run, China is seeding mistrust and damaging its own interests, said Ms. Shirk, who is working on a book called “Overreach,” about how China’s domestic politics have derailed its ambitions for a peaceful rise as a global superpower.

“As China started getting control over the virus and started this health diplomacy, it could have been the opportunity for China to emphasize its compassionate side and rebuild trust and its reputation as a responsible global power,” she said. “But that diplomatic effort got hijacked by the Propaganda Department of the party, with a much more assertive effort to leverage their assistance to get praise for China as a country and a system and its performance in stopping the spread of the virus.”

In recent days, Chinese state media has run numerous inflammatory statements, saying that Australia, after announcing its desire for an inquiry into the virus, was “gum stuck to the bottom of China’s shoe.” Beijing warned that Australia risked long-term damage to its trading partnership with China, which takes a third of Australia’s exports.

“Maybe the ordinary people will say, ‘Why should we drink Australian wine? Eat Australian beef?’” China’s ambassador, Cheng Jingye, told The Australian Financial Review. Australia’s foreign minister, Marise Payne, dismissed China’s attempt as “economic coercion.”

The Sydney waterfront. Chinese state media recently assailed Australia, after it announced its desire for an inquiry into the virus. Matthew Abbott for The New York Times

Even in European countries like Germany, “the mistrust of China has accelerated so quickly with the virus that no ministry knows how to deal with it,” said Angela Stanzel, a China expert with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

In Germany, as in Britain, in addition to new questions about the advisability of using Huawei for new 5G systems, worries have also grown about dependency on China for vital materials and pharmaceuticals.

France, which traditionally has good relations with Beijing, has also been angered by critical statements by Chinese diplomats, including a charge that the French had deliberately left their older residents to die in nursing homes. That prompted a rebuke from France's foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, and anger from legislators, despite an early reciprocal exchange of medical aid like masks.

Recently, the German government complained that Chinese diplomats were soliciting letters of support and gratitude for Beijing's aid and efforts against the virus from government officials and the heads of major German companies.

The same has been true in Poland, said the U.S. ambassador to Warsaw, Georgette Mosbacher, in an interview, describing Chinese pressure on President Andrzej Duda to call Mr. Xi and thank him for aid, a call the [Chinese heralded](#) at home.

"Poland wasn't going to get this stuff unless the phone call was made, so they could use that phone call" for propaganda, Ms. Mosbacher said.

There is some unhappiness in China with the current diplomatic rhetoric. In [a recent essay](#), Zi Zhongyun, now 89, a longtime expert on America at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, sees parallels in the harsh nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric of the Wolf Warriors of today with the period around the Boxer Rebellion against Western influence in China.

Ms. Zi said such reactions risked getting out of hand.

"I can say without a doubt," she concluded, "that as long as Boxer-like activities are given the official stamp of approval as being 'patriotic,'" and as long as "generation after generation of our fellow Chinese are educated and inculcated with a Boxer-like mentality, it will be impossible for China to take its place among the modern civilized nations of the world."

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