

# Virus Diplomacy: Leadership and Reputational Security in the Era of COVID 19

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Received: 5 May 2021 | Accepted: 19 April 2022

## Abstract

It is the nature of pandemics that international relations, reputation, and health become intertwined. Speculation and paranoid conspiracy narratives spread daily through tweets, state-sponsored media and public statements. The hyper-networked world of social media has created a plethora of platforms on which this struggle has played out. The interplay of national images has become a third realm for governments to consider; a realm of reputation to set beside the primary physical and secondary economic concerns. This realm of reputation includes perceptions of public policies, citizen security and the industrial capacity to supply medical devices and other elements of life. This preliminary study will set out the parameters of the reputational battle as it seems in the midst of the virus; establish a framework for thinking about virus diplomacy and consider its emerging impact on the present and future of public diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Public Diplomacy; Political Communication; Leadership; Reputation; Security

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It is the nature of epidemics and pandemics that international relations, reputation, and health become intertwined. Looking back on 1665, English novelist Daniel Defoe has the narrator of his *Journal of the Plague Year* complain about the damage done to Britain's international image by exaggerated news of the plague's impact circulating among the country's customers in the Mediterranean.

But these extravagant reports were very prejudicial to our trade, as well as unjust and injurious in themselves, for it was a long time after the plague was quite over before our trade could recover itself in those parts of the world; and the Flemings and Dutch (but especially the last) made very great advantages of it, having all the market to themselves, and even buying our manufactures in several parts of England where the plague was now, and carrying them to Holland and Flanders, and from thence transporting them to Spain and to Italy as it they have been of their own making. (Defoe, 1722)

From the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in the final days of 2019, the path of the disease has been linked into perceptions of nation states. The pandemic produced examples of international actors seeking advantage; of reputations made by judicious policy, ruined by folly and jeopardized by rumor. Speculation and paranoid conspiracy narratives spread daily through tweets, state-sponsored media and public statements. The hyper-networked world of social media has created a plethora of platforms on which this struggle has played out. The interplay of national images has become a third realm for governments to consider; a realm of reputation to set beside the primary physical and secondary economic concerns. This realm of reputation includes perceptions of public policies, citizen security and the industrial capacity to supply medical devices and other elements of life. This essay will set out the parameters of the reputational battle as it seems in the midst of the virus; establish a framework for thinking about virus diplomacy and consider its emerging impact on the present and future of public diplomacy. But before considering the course of the struggle so far, it is important to understand its foundations and the nature of the governmental forces ranged on each side.

## **Theoretical Background**

Virus diplomacy is the attempt to focus on the impact of Covid 19 in public diplomacy and international politics environment. It represents the epitome of the new public diplomacy practice, by which international actors use scientific and non-military capacities to promote and validate their public policies for foreign publics (Manor, 2021; Manor & Pamment, 2022). The virus opened a new front in the struggle for international audiences, based on science and technology, a sort of "solution-focused public diplomacy" devoted to providing practical answers (aid and biomedical supplies, real reduction of infection rates, vaccines, bonds). What is new is the use of visible and tangible assets with effects in everyday life. The virus is connected to new fields of public diplomacy research like science, public and private partnerships or technical capabilities. Transport infrastructures of logistics companies are now

key influencers of diplomatic success, and legitimacy narratives (Price, 2015). It fits exactly with the idea of a battle of narratives identified by Ronfeldt, Arquilla and others who predicted, “because noopolitik is ultimately about whose story wins, narratives will have to be carefully crafted to suit the context” (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2020, p.13). Practically oriented public diplomacy takes up the cause of “global commons” (sustainable development, public health, social equality or even the scope of capitalism) as pivotal issues. The solutions provided by vaccines and medical aid focus the public diplomacy practice in expertise, trust, and goodwill, but not in common values or political order.

Our research question consists in considering how the current phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting public diplomacy. It is more of an open question that inquires into different public diplomacy categories and activities than a method of hypothesis/research or design/results measurement. It is still the early days to formulate a universal working hypothesis, whereby it is preferable to indicate to what extent the virus and health issues are affecting communication practices, the exertion of influence and mutual trust. As the pandemic has accelerated the reconfiguration of the world system, it will be possible to assess the effects of virus diplomacy even earlier. Rather, the intention here is to advance a theoretical approach that serves as a basis for describing the new global scenario from a theory-based perspective. This interpretative approach focuses on the “social meaning embedded within international politics” (Lamont, 2015, p. 15), which includes ideas, beliefs, and social practices (Linklater, 1992).

Finally, the “virus diplomacy” is a semantic umbrella that covers illness, health emergency, political response, and communication strategy. The virus is at the center of the discussion, not at the margins. It does not seek the creation of a new category, but rather the recognition of the impact of the virus in the exercise of public diplomacy. The natural rejection of scripted expression confirms the damage that can be generated by attributing the virus to any diplomatic or political leadership attitude.

### **Three Elements of Context**

The impact of the virus played out in the context of three major factors. The first element of context is the psychology of the leaders charged with responding to the virus. When the virus made its presumed jump from the animal realm to the human, its fortunes became profoundly linked to perceptions and especially the perceptions of leaders. For many leaders and the bureaucracies around them their cognitive biases contributed to their initial lack of preparedness. The optimism bias encouraged them to imagine that the epidemic might never happen, or would not come to them; the first occurrence bias assured them that if it hasn't happened in country X before, it won't happen now; the confirmation bias pushed them towards the evidence that fit their initial position. And in some places, explicit racial prejudice prompted some to dismiss the experience of the ‘other’ nations to first experience the virus and assume a superior capacity to respond on their own part—whether as a result of technology, hygiene or innate chauvinism. Within this was the ever-present worry of only

having so many cards to play before their own public and the fear of overreacting against a threat that proves transient. There is a level of success which leaves the incumbent unrewarded and accused of killing a paper tiger. Timely response to the Y2K computer glitch did not pave Al Gore's road to the White House. (Marshall, 2020; Clarke & Eddy, 2017). Political leaders are aware of the universal value of medical and scientific advances, but from a national perspective. As stated by Cooper (2019), such practice is nearly anti-diplomatic or, at least, based on impulses and not in previous foreign policy plans. Doing so, undiplomatic diplomacy may promote strong leadership and weak institutional diplomacy (Madden, Khakimova, & Steudeman, 2018).

A further problem lay in leadership style. Hyperleaders like Trump, López Obrador or Vucic, tend to refuse scientific advice, readily make undiplomatic statements, reject media outlets as mediators and oversimplify complex analysis. Manfredi, Amado and Waisbord analysed how "Information on the pandemic is transferred from official channels to their personal accounts, according to their own political agenda, thus constructing and reinforcing a populist leadership style" (2020, p.81). Their discourse is self-centered, essentially referencing themselves and their nation, which explains why social media outlets are central to their communication strategy. When social media likes and re-tweets are more important than the integrity of policy "Failures of listening" (Cull, 2019, p. 27) abound.

Hyperleaders embrace a "war time" frame for their responses. They feel comfortable with tragedy and slip easily into the language of common, national victory. They claim to need full powers and to be at the controls. They meet a crisis with warlike spirit and language. Trump compared the virus to Pearl Harbor or September 11<sup>th</sup>. Boris Johnson spoke of enlisting the British people. Xi Jinping is presented in his state-controlled media as "commander in chief in the decisive battle." Medical workers are on the 'front line' and the dead are martyrs. In Spain, the government speaks through the police and the military. In Brazil, Bolsonaro suggested that the Army offered the core solution to any problem connected to Covid 19:

Nossas Forças Armadas, sempre lembradas em tempos difíceis, estão à disposição p/ dar todo apoio possível aos Estados e Municípios do país na guerra contra o coronavírus, com logística, transporte de profissionais de saúde e materiais, postos de triagem, etc. JUNTOS VENCEREMOS! [Our Armed Forces, always remembered in difficult times, are available to give all possible support to the states and municipalities of the country in the war against the coronavirus, with logistics, transport of health professionals and materials, screening stations, etc. TOGETHER WE WILL WIN!]. (Bolsonaro, 2020)

The second element of context is the salience of issues of communication in the wider world. We live in a moment in which public opinion is a central power in global affairs. But the centrality of public opinion in foreign policy has ensured that it is divided as every actor and would-be actor on the international stage has sought to leverage it. On top of this, we are in a time of technological transition when publics and their governments are still in the

process of getting used to the horizontal, networked world of social media, and all the while managing parallel changes to the global economy as it emerges from the shocks of the previous decade. Part of this process has included a questioning of some of the voices of the previous international order. Nation states seem to have lost credibility externally even as budgets for external communication have diminished. At the same time many nations have sought stability by looking internally to strong male leaders claiming authority based on ideas of the past. Nationalism (united we as people), nativism (securing borders) and protectionism (artificial barriers to medical trade) are key points in their discourse. In this world, the media of international communication have been weaponized as a mechanism to build the reputation of one and undermine the reputation of the other and multilateral organizations. The narrative includes a set of elements, which includes polarization (factions, adversaries, rivals), conspiracies (anti-science discourse) and personal achievements (personal use of vaccines, feelings).

The unilateral process of building soft power has become a multifaceted struggle to establish and protect reputational security. (Cull, 2019, pp. 166-67). Reputation is constructed through effective decisions whereby executive authority displays its power. Then, the results are evaluated in order to create and consolidate a political legitimacy, for instance, the set of desirable regulations, or the design of public policy for tackling a problem. Bolsonaro's retweet is a good example: 'Two great woes in the world: Communism and the Corona Virus.' (Teodoro, 2020).

Reputation is the intangible asset, based on others' opinion, basis for political and social influence (Anholt, 2020). It is the result of past behavior and current facts, not a tool of strategic marketing. In terms of security, the reputation requires long-term effort and a clear political agenda. Thus, vaccines and medical aid are seen as fast-tracks to gain credibility, to control framing and communicate by facts. The ultimate objective is to resolve a public policy issue. The appropriateness of the type of response (mass vaccinations, border closures, video surveillance, monitoring of individual behaviour, school closures) is justified by the results. The political decisions precede the justification of the regulatory and normative framework. The international order, affected by access to a vaccine, requires a convergent narrative with the main stakeholders. In addition, reputational risk is linked to the legitimacy, attractiveness, and responsibility of international actors. The lower the reputation, the lower the leadership capacities.

The third dimension of context is the political moment in each of the major countries facing the virus and contending for international attention. The United States moved into 2020 in a state of great division with a president who courted controversy and ongoing tensions between the federal government and state or city. The year promised to be dominated by the runup to the presidential election in November 2020. Ongoing international issues included tensions with China over trade and a perceived collision of longer-term objectives. China, for its part, was undergoing a consolidation of central authority in the hands of a powerful president. The national agenda included long term initiatives in global economic and media engagement in the great 'Belt and Road' initiative. The government was sufficiently sensitive

to international opinion and eager for the admiration of the world to devote in excess of \$10 billion each year to its outreach to global opinion. (*Economist*, 2017). The crisis found Russia at a difficult moment: a pariah among the leading powers with a limited stake in the status quo and much to gain from playing a spoiling role as a result. The spoiling role was probably most evident in the Kremlin's approach to international media, branding its flagship service RT with the tagline 'question more' and pushing content crafted to challenge confidence in the dominant narrative. For the European Union, the crisis broke at a time of multiple challenges, the two most obvious being the external challenge of the migration crisis and the internal challenge of BREXIT: the departure of the UK. Germany and France were both perceived externally as strong and admirable but have ongoing domestic crises arising from issues in inequality. Italy's political vote offers radical changes in its relationship with the European project. The League, the Five Star Movement (M5S) or Brothers of Italy promote charismatic leadership instead of continuity in the core European values. Italy has showed its gratitude to Russia and China for the medical support with which they have provided it to great extent, reflected in social media campaigns operated by trolls and bots (#ForzaCinaeItalia). With this foundation, the European Union has gone through two discursive phases. The chaos reigning during the first weeks, including uncoordinated border closures, barriers to the export of the products of 'strategic industries', like the pharmaceutical industry, and the nationalist 'devil take the hindmost' attitude of its Member States gave the impression that its political project was tottering. Nevertheless, after the initial shock has passed, the European Commission has begun to construct a new narrative based on extraordinary financial measures.

For the UK, the country was still coming out of the internal divisions over BREXIT. Having just completed a general election, the new government was already pledged to an agenda that included building an image for 'Global Britain' in the world. Of the other players Japan was engaged in a slow climb back from economic crises and natural disasters, hoping that the Olympic Games scheduled for the summer would contribute to national prestige, while South Korea was enjoying an upswing of attention around the world. Korean technology is used to spread the proactive response based on technology, citizens' responsibility, and political stability (general elections included). Taiwan's strategy seems also remarkable—supplying medical devices to the world, the country tries to recover the full membership position at WHO and acquire a reputation as a trustable partner in Asian trade. Turkey distributed medical supplies to 55 countries, including the Western Balkans, and EU countries. After the Libyan and Syrian wars, Turkey needs to collaborate more strongly with the EU and the US.

For the principal world organ—the United Nations—and its health body—the World Health Organization—the crisis struck at a moment of ongoing decline. These were the contenders—the order of battle ranged against the virus, or as it often seemed, against one another as virus diplomacy unfolded.

## **The Four Core Strategies**

National actors met the reputational challenge of the virus with four basis responses: praising the self, criticizing the other, engaging through gifts, and cooperation. These also became tropes in media coverage of the crisis and one issue became reaction of countries to one another media, and the game of attempting to deduce which media statement had governmental weight behind it and which was simply noise.

### ***Strategy One: The Self as Success***

The primary strategy for external communication during the COVID-19 crisis for many countries was praising the self and pointing to successes in the treatment of the epidemic. The set of desirable regulations and political legitimacy is shaped in an age of nationalism: my health policies are more successful. China, which had the misfortune of being the point of emergence for the virus, set the tone early on with a string of stories designed at showing the competence of the central government in responding to the crisis. Associated narratives include stories highlighting collective or individual heroism of medical personnel and stories documenting the strength, resilience or creativity of the wider population. Beijing paid special attention to the rapid construction of a hospital in Wuhan in just ten days. The whole project was presented as an inspirational act and opened to domestic scrutiny through live streaming (Xinhua, 2020a). In the US equivalent, miracle projects included the conversion of the Javits Centre venue in New York City into a 4,000-bed hospital (Yuan, 2020). The success is connected to technical and scientific competences, as well as logistic/supply chain decisions.

Japan made the restoration of a global image for competence in the pandemic a particular goal. In mid-April, the Abe administration included \$22 million in its virus relief budget specifically to allow the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ‘dispel negative perceptions of Japan related to infectious diseases.’ The plan included use of artificial intelligence to ‘listen’ in real time to the treatment of Japan in the world’s key media outlets (Denyer, 2020). Washington DC became a particular battleground with embassies with existing public relations and congressional lobbying campaigns adding Covid 19 response stories to their output. Areas of particular concern included attempting to ensure that their country was not unfairly treated in travel restrictions. Countries identified as active by NBC News included Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Azerbaijan, which thought it helpful to publicize both its general competence in the virus crisis and ongoing collaboration with Israel, placing an article in the Jewish Voice (Lehren & de Luce, 2020).

Taiwan presented an interesting case. The island lives with the anomaly of presenting itself as independent while China claims sovereignty over it and has used its diplomatic muscle to reduce the number of countries recognizing Taiwan to a handful. With this background, Taiwan lost no time highlighting its apparent competence in dealing with the virus, keeping casualties to just a few hundred and efficiently using testing and contact tracing. Outreach mixed formal statements from government representatives with a global

social media campaign, and outreach to people of influence with connections to Taiwan. Taipei's narrative included the claim that it alerted the WHO to the problem as early as New Year's Eve 2019. The campaign was not solely positive—it included a complaint against Beijing's insistence on excluding Taiwan from World Health Organization events such as the emergency assembly on the virus, refusing even the compromise of observer status as 'Chinese Taipei' which had worked in the past, and a demand that this changes (Aspinwall & Rauhala, 2020; Van de Wees, 2016).

The release of statistics became an early issue of controversy with countries that seemed like outliers working hard to provide context. Belgium took early reputational damage as a result of a formula for counting casualties that included people who would not be acknowledged in other places (Schultz, 2020). On 11 May, *The Financial Times* suggested that Russia had dramatically undercounted its casualties and the figure could be 70% higher. They also noted that publishing 'fake news' about the virus had been made a crime so it was hard for local media to investigate the reality of the statistics (Foy & Burn-Murdoch, 2020). Some nations were obliged to revise their numbers in the midst of the crisis. On 17 April, the Chinese government revised its casualty count for Wuhan upwards by 50% (BBC, 2020a). On 29 April, the British government revised its numbers to include people who died in care homes rather than just hospitals, a revision which brought an immediate spike in numbers (BBC, 2020b).

There is an obvious problem with this 'self as success' strategy: what the quote attributed to Francis Bacon termed the 'hostages to fortune'. A claim made early can attract attention to a disaster in the making and become a dictionary definition of hubris. Publics have a way of perceiving these claims even if they were not made, as the British cultural historian Richard Howells has shown with his work on the Titanic, which he has shown was only called 'unsinkable' after it sank (Howells, 1999). In the time of the virus, some nations made incautious claims early on which they doubtless lived to regret. Japan is a particular case in point, persisting in predicting that the Olympics would be going ahead and that the virus was under control in the country when it was clearly not. The reputational bump was doubtless part of the origin of the mid-April 2020 propaganda initiative. The underuse of the Javits Centre and bureaucratic problems transferring patients into the facility became part of a wider narrative of mismanagement and poor coordination within the US response (Narishkin, Cameron, & Brandt, 2020). The facility closed on 1 May 2020.

Some countries faced a particular problem of a pre-existing assumption of competence in things technical/medical, so that a display of competence in the face of COVID-19 merely confirmed an existing story. Germany was assumed to have done well despite evidence to the contrary. Swedish government considered no additional management was needed, as the social norms would be enough to overcome herd immunity. The flip side of this is that countries with loveable but chaotic images like Italy were unscathed by any additional chaos on display during Covid 19. For the United States, the situation was more serious. As a wholesale provider of much of the world's popular culture, the US stood to be damaged by any dramatic divergence from expectation. Displays of competence are a sub-genre of



American popular culture. Consider the TV dramas that some critics have dubbed ‘competence porn’ in which doctors, astronauts, criminal investigators or even government officials are challenged, respond creatively, and fix a problem within an hour of screen time and still leave space for commercial breaks. One meme during the crisis referenced the classic TV series, *Star Trek*: ‘I just want to say Dr. McCoy would’ve developed a cure for the coronavirus and tested it on himself by now.’

The crisis demonstrated that external perceptions of a nation during a crisis can fragment. International audiences are open to seeing good people with bad leaders or admiring a particular city or region while still thinking poorly of the national example. In the case of China where the government made initial missteps in communicating news of the virus, the admirable behavior of ordinary people was a powerful counterweight. The flip side of this was the unexpectedly bad behavior of groups who international observers might have expected to behave better. Examples of this include the anti-lockdown protests in the US and bizarre acts of sabotage inspired by conspiracy theory such as one railroad engineer’s attempt to sink the hospital ship *Mercy* in LA harbor by crashing a train into it or the spate of attacks on 5G cell phone towers in the UK (BBC, 2020c). Hence, audiences seemed able to maintain an image of competent American professionals while still perceiving mismanagement on the part of American politicians and misbehavior on the part of American people.

### ***Strategy 2: The Other as Failure***

The contrary of the strategy of presenting the self as a success was pointing out the failures of other countries in responding to COVID-19. For the strong-man politicians typical of so many countries at the turn of the second decade of the 21st century, such a response seemed to be a reflex for the domestic political base whether or not it helped the reputation overseas. President Trump could not resist pointing to the high per-capita death toll in Belgium. His indelicacy provoked a flurry of Belgian explanations that explicitly flipped the script and pointed out the failure of the United States. One Belgian politician memorably called out Trump’s gambit in his own tweet as ‘the zero level of politics’ (Schultz, 2020).

From an early stage in the crisis government, statements around the virus were a source of diplomatic tension in the US-China relationship. On 3 February, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hua Chunying, condemned the US for imposing quarantine on travelers from China which ‘could only create and spread fear’ rather than offering aid (BBC, 2020d). Leading figures in the US, for their part, insisted on labeling the virus as the Chinese Virus or the Wuhan Virus in both domestic and diplomatic contexts. On 25 March, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was so insistent on calling the virus the “Wuhan Virus” that he allowed the issue to stand in the way of the signature of a joint communique on the crisis by the G7 leaders (Hudson & Mekhennet, 2020). Reports of a racist backlash against Chinese Americans prompted the administration to ease up on the geographical labeling rhetoric. Yet such spats paled next to the exchange of negative messaging around culpability for the virus. On 12 March the Chinese foreign ministry’s spokesman Zhao Lijian, a man with a reputation

for circulating controversial material, tweeted out a rumor that the US Army had introduced the COVID-19 virus into Wuhan in October 2019 during their participation in the World Military Games: ‘When did patient zero begin in the US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be the US Army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan,’ Zhao continued: ‘Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!’ (Zheng, 2020). While scientific consensus headed off any suggestion that the virus was manmade at an early stage of the crisis, the idea that it may have escaped due to human error or design proved harder to scotch. The Trump administration picked up as story current in the echo chamber of Fox News and prominent Republicans that the virus had escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, circulating documents reflecting early concerns over safety at the lab (Sardarizadeh & Robinson, 2020). Despite the intelligence establishment within the US pouring cold water on the suggestion, the President continued to blame China and imply he’d seen evidence to back up his suspicions (BBC, 2020e). With Mike Pompeo speaking in step with the president, Chinese government media turned the Secretary of State into an official figure of hate as an ‘enemy of humankind’ (Fifield, 2020). Similarly in Latin America, after the presidents of Brazil and Argentina discussed the origin of and the solutions to the virus crisis, Alberto Fernández quoted his colleague’s response as part of the problem in the region.

For some international actors the crisis provided an opportunity to circulate disinformation, deliberately crafted to undermine confidence in others. Such had been the core strategy of media associated with the Russian government for some time, and the virus merely provided fresh ammunition for the approach. Besides stories around the origin of the virus—including the claim that it was a US bio-weapon—Kremlin was already pushing stories designed to promote fears about vaccination (Kirk, 2019). The Sputnik vaccine is a tool to confirm the current power of Russian science. By combining data in a not truly scientific way, Russian propaganda identifies Western attitudes with arrogance and weakness. According to Ignat (2021), the lack of an articulate story and open data, may explain why European public opinion negatively perceived any attempt of Russia to build up a humanitarian aid discourse based on vaccines and medical supplies.

Disinformation uses globalist characters to be blamed as conspirators. It was a small step to demonize Bill Gates as a mastermind manipulating the crisis with advanced knowledge of the virus and plans to benefit. The elegance of such a story was its ability to draw energy from attempts to help. Russian outlets also fell into the habit of repeating Chinese and Iranian stories implicating the United States in a self-reinforcing cycle of distortion (Swan, 2020; Barnes, Rosenberg, & Wong, 2020). Putin’s statements have stressed the idea that Russia is making a net contribution to finding a resolution to the crisis and have also served to highlight the efficiency of the country’s public health system and medical research and its willingness to provide international aid. This approach has found room in the Chinese media, which support the distribution of Russian content criticising US foreign policy. On another note, Russia has contributed to spread disinformative narratives. Moreover, Russia, China and Iran use each other as sources—a process that legitimises the provenance of information for

audiences—thus creating an echo chamber with the same arguments. By the end of April the EU was actively denouncing both Russian and Chinese activity while the UK's *Guardian* spoke of a 'perfect storm' of coronavirus disinformation (Beaumont, Borger & Boffey, 2020).

The same dynamics are apparent in the developing world. In Madagascar the president Andry Rajoelina began promoting a tonic of his own devising that he claimed cured COVID-19. In April 2020 reports began to circulate around the wider Southern African region that Rajoelina had revealed being offered a massive bribe by the World Health Organization to add poison to his cure. The story was a falsehood crafted to spread doubt and confusion (Kasongo & Kulundu, 2020).

The proliferation of rumors and escalation of rhetorical hostility was unwise, more especially given that any solution to the viral crisis will necessarily come from a collective response. Wiser heads attempted to calm tempers. Cui Tiankai, the Chinese Ambassador to the US, for example has on more than one occasion dismissed stories of a US lab as the origin as 'crazy' and deliberately distanced himself from the foreign ministry spokesman (Zhou, 2020). As some actors descend into tit-for-tat allegations, it is worth recalling that being associated with disinformation, especially on a public interest heavy issue like health, carries a great reputational risk for the practitioner. It is an especially bad idea for external Russian media to stoke fears of vaccines around the world when domestic media has long rallied the Russian public at home behind vaccination.

Cross national criticism of virus responses has sometimes turned on the trade-off between the freedom of liberal democratic institutions and the value of social surveillance tools available in other systems. Some governments have used the virus to justify attacks on individual freedoms, to legalise repression, to minimise accountability, to control social life, and to hinder journalistic activity. A growing number of non-democratic leaders are holding sway over their countries by distorting information flows and focusing on health performance. The struggle against COVID-19 provided opportunities to muzzle independent journalists. Traditional media are weakened and rendered marginal to the social conversation. Journalists can be labeled as establishment or foreigners, campaigners. The virus has become part of the justification for restrictions in media freedom in Hungary, Egypt, and elsewhere (Keller-Alant, 2020).

### ***Strategy 3: Humanitarian Assistance as a Gift***

The third strategy revived one of the ancient building blocks of diplomacy and of human relationships in general: gifts (Liebersohn, 2011; Brummell, 2022). As a generation of anthropologists have shown, gifts are one of the most complex human institutions, used to mark or initiate a transition in a relationship; to acknowledge or even to establish obligation; to perform leadership or fealty (Mauss, 1954). The giver and receiver are enmeshed in a web of expectations and rules on both sides of the equation, each with their own hopes and fears for the eventual outcome of the interaction. Any diplomatic gift performs a practice of symbolism, ritual and ceremony (Faizullaev, 2013). From ancient times recipients have

understood (or been urged to understand) the dangers in accepting gifts and the potential for ulterior motives. The ultimate trick in western mythology—the Trojan Horse—was offered as a gift in an international relationship, and anxiety around gifts is embedded in the famous warning recounted by Virgil: ‘beware of Greeks bearing gifts.’ In the literature, the gift is material diplomacy, which can explain the type of relationship among actors, from hierarchical structure (luxury, spoils, coercion and colonial practice) to a more democratic acknowledgement (infrastructure, buildings, finance bonds). China deploys gift exchange as a core activity in the new soft power strategy (Ceulemans, 2021), including cute pandas (Hartig, 2013).

In pandemics, the gift equals capacities as different countries may offer specific responses, broadening the relations and redistributing power. The virus gives the small and middle countries the opportunity to contribute to global health in different manners. Gifts were one of the first strategies seen in the COVID-19 crisis as South Korea and Japan presented gifts of medical aid to virus-stricken China. Twin cities marked existing relationships with donations of money or supplies and some Japanese parliamentarians voted to donate a portion of their salary to China. Interesting features of the giving and receiving was the use of additional cultural signals. The Brookings Institution termed the spectacle ‘Mask Diplomacy’ and noted that it was becoming a salve in one of the most contentious relationships in the world. (Li & McElveen, 2020)

Chinese participants in twinning arrangements sent gifts of medical supplies to partner communities. For the US, this meant gifts from Anbai Province to Maryland (which had been a twin province/state since 1980) and from Liaoning People’s Provincial Congress to the Utah State assembly, which had been twinned since 2006 as the first Sino-US pairing in the sub-national legislature exchange. The Utah shipment included child-sized masks and the virtual acceptance event included children from the Chinese immersion school in Cascade, Utah.<sup>1)</sup> Jack Ma, China’s most famous entrepreneur, supported Chinese supplies through Alibaba’s logistics. His private chains shipped medical aid to 150 countries, including Sub Saharan Africa and all of Latin America. Ma’s donations were received at international airports by the local Chinese Ambassador. The friendly face of Chinese capitalism delivering quality products at low prices can be seen as entrepreneurial soft power (Hatton, 2020) and is significant at a time when some countries have been pushing back against the presence of vendors like Huawei.

On 23 March 2020, the EU’s chief of Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell admitted that the ‘politics of generosity’ seen during the virus had been followed by a ‘global battle of narratives.’ He also identified the Chinese donations with a ‘geo-political component including a struggle for influence’ in which ‘China is aggressively pushing the message that unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner’ (Lau, 2020).

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1) For coverage see the embassy web story, Maryland received donated medical supplies from Anhui, 24 April 2020, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/t1772977.htm> and Ceremony Held in Utah on Liaoning Province's Medical Supplies Donation, 24 April 2020. <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/t1772976.htm>

Taiwan deployed a parallel gift strategy, giving gifts to places with which the island had existing relationships. Taipei shipped gifts of masks to Japan, the US, Canada and the European Union (Horton, Li & Ting-Fang, 2020). The gift of medical supplies to the city of Prague was especially noteworthy. In 2019 the mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib, had become embroiled in a dispute with Beijing over the text in the Sister City agreement between his city and the Chinese capital requiring adherence to the one China policy. In October Prague pulled out of the agreement (Willoughby, 2019). By the end of the year the town hall was deliberately flying the flag of Tibet in defiance of mainland China's sensibilities. In a similar vein Prague concluded an alternate sister city agreement with Taipei. When the virus crisis broke out, Taipei sent 25 ventilators to Prague. The mayor not only praised Taiwan's generosity but noted its early warning of the crisis (Johnston, 2020).

Other examples of gifts which were well received included a loan of volunteer medical personnel by Albania to the stricken city of Bergamo in Lombardy, Italy. Thirty doctors and nurses in late March and 60 more nurses in mid-April. The Italian embassy in Tirana tweeted thanks for an 'act of solidarity and affection' and added the hashtag 'ForeverUnited.' The act was seen in social media as evidence that Albania was in step with EU values and ready for membership (Ruci, 2020).

Part of the good feeling generated by Albania's gift seems to have come from the asymmetry of power and wealth between Albania as one of Europe's poorest corners and Italy as one of its wealthiest. China's gifts had a different power dynamic and were read in a context of the country's well-known strategies of global cultural and economic engagement including the Confucius Institute network and the Belt and Road initiative. Audiences were on the lookout for a mixed motive or angle. It did not help that media reports and embassy claims routinely seem to have mixed commercial sales of materials with donations, which backfired further when some commercially purchased supplies proved to be defective (Dunst, 2020). On social media, Chinese propaganda in Italy is less sophisticated: 46% of the tweets including the hashtag #forzaCinaeItalia and 37% of those featuring #grazieCina has been generated by bots (Alkemy Lab, 2020).

The US had its own program of aid to friends and neighbors, though for domestic political reasons this was not heavily publicized at home. More than this, the Trump administration moved to limit the gift diplomacy of others. The State Department applied pressure on countries to end medical links with Cuba arguing that Cuban medical workers are exploited workers (Foreign Relations Committee, 2021). As the *Washington Post* reported in April, Latin America's experience of the virus was tougher in the absence of Cuban help and people knew exactly who was to blame' (Faiola & Brown, 2020). The Cuban government, for its part, continued its 'bata blanca diplomacy' and sent 22 medical brigades made up of 1,500 medical practitioners overseas to destinations including Qatar, South Africa, Italy and Spain. Brazil, Ecuador and Bolivia declined the offer based on ideological principles.

The ultimate display of the art gift diplomacy came from EU candidate country Serbia where President Alexander Vucic managed to maximize benefit by making a big fuss of gifts

from China and Russia, including symbolically kissing the Chinese flag. He stated China is a ‘brother and friend’, as well as he will guarantee the ‘centennial and strong-as-steel friendship’ (Simic, 2020). Vucic’s welcome for this aid and loud remarks about the lack of European duty drew forth an even more impressive donation from the EU (Walker, 2020). It was one more installment in a familiar game of the Serbian bride playing geopolitical suitors against each other despite being engaged to be married to one.

In summary, the narrative of the gift commenced with the recognition of leadership capability, which is achieved by influencing global events through donations, the fight against the pandemic, and economic recovery. Providing aid in the form of supplies, face masks and medical products is organised as a ceremony of consumption for the media, which distribute the images and photographs as part of the solution. This is a ritual planned by the aid providers and vaccine distributors, with significant participation by political representatives. It is a consensual event, which encourages the combined efforts of two separate political communities, although the benefactor is the one who “exerts power” (Katz & Dayan, 2018, p. 149).

#### ***Strategy 4: Partnership, Cooperation***

The world of COVID-19 was a world in which the sources of reputation were mixed. Some countries still pointed primarily to unilateral achievements. Others based their claims to being good countries in their contribution to a global common welfare, or at least routinely included that element in their self-presentation. Canada was a past master at presenting this kind of international image. For some analysts, partnership and contributions to the global good were the obvious corollary not only of the emergence of an interconnected world but also of the scale of the problems which the world faced. Back in 1998, then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke of ‘Problems without Passports’ and ‘challenges that transcend borders’ arguing: ‘No nation is immune; no nation can address such issues on its own; and no nation is exempt from risks without the benefits of international cooperation.’ (Berthelot 1998). He spoke with reference to environmental problems, but so many of the world’s biggest issues fit this category including migration, inequality, terrorism, disinformation, and pandemic. Once the pandemic was underway contributions to the collective became even more significant. The obvious forum for partnership was, of course, the existing structure of the World Health Organization and a number of countries responded to the crisis by both endorsing and sending extra funds to the WHO. Early contributors included Finland, which then further increased its funding to €5.5 million to help offset a cut announced by Donald Trump (Xinhua, 2020b). On 4 May the European Commission and a group of wealthy countries hosted the virtual Coronavirus Global Response International Pledging Conference and succeeded in eliciting the equivalent of \$8 billion for the collective fight against the virus. Big donors—besides the EU Commission—included Norway, Canada and Japan (Richter, 2020) Equally important was the rhetoric around this summit. The British Prime Minister, co-host and high-profile virus survivor, Boris Johnson, spoke powerfully of the need for cooperation:

To win this battle, we must work together to build an impregnable shield around all our people, and that can only be achieved by developing and mass producing a vaccine. The more we pull together and share our expertise, the faster our scientists will succeed. The race to discover the vaccine to defeat this virus is not a competition between countries, but the most urgent shared endeavour of our lifetimes. It's humanity against the virus - we are in this together, and together we will prevail. (Gov. UK, 2020)

Johnson's words were not only part of the spirit of the moment, they also reflected an on-going British strategy to present the country, despite its 'BREXIT' from the European Union, as 'Global Britain' with a commitment to multilateral action. Since 2018 attention to reputation was built into British foreign and defense policy under what was termed the 'fusion doctrine': an approach to security which incorporated issues of image, soft power and engagement prominently within top level priorities (Cabinet Office, 2018).

In the case of the EU, Spain and Italy led a solidarity agenda against conservative policies coming from Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Sweden. The recovery funds made available in the wake of the virus gave the EU an opportunity to renew the political union after Brexit.

There is plainly a reputational benefit to be found in being seen to be part of this kind of collaboration, more especially if the emphasis is on the collective benefit rather than the individual glory. On the other hand, there is reputational damage to be done when international actors refuse to collaborate or emphasize unilateral gain in such a moment. The nationalist response marks a 'downward spiral' in multilateral cooperation. As opposed to what occurred during the SARS and Ebola outbreaks, the major powers have yet to make any coordinated attempt to combat this global public health crisis or to distribute medical supplies. Reputation leadership is not who can cooperate, but whose medical aid deserves better public opinion support. A number of countries declined invitations to the Coronavirus Global Response International Pledging Conference, including Russia, Brazil, India and the United States. China took part only after much persuasion and then only via its ambassador to the EU while others were represented by their heads of government (Wintour, 2020; Booth, Johnson & Morello, 2020).

President Trump's hostility to collaborative platforms promises to be a reputational liability going forward, but even worse is the implication of his attempt in March to acquire exclusive access for the US to a potential vaccine being developed by the German company CureVac (Beaumont, Borger, & Boffey, 2020). In the midst of a pandemic the doctrine of 'America First' slipped from being a performance for his political base to an absolute foreign policy liability. Definitively, the four strategies show the diversity of economic, scientific and non-military responses that were lavished on reputation building. Health, then, becomes a key part of the strategic approach to public diplomacy (see table 1).

**Table 1.** Four Strategies in Virus Diplomacy

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <b>Praising the self</b>     | Rapid construction of hospital in Wuhan in live stream; Tokyo Olympics 2020; Swedish herd immunity decision.  |
| <b>Criticizing the other</b> | Chinese Wolf Warriors diplomats; Pompeo’s “Wuhan” or “Chinese” Virus label; Journalists labeled as campaigners or foreign agents; the boast of Russian vaccine. |
| <b>Engage &amp; Gifts</b>    | Taiwan shipping masks to Japan, US, Canada, and EU; Cuban Bata Blanca Diplomacy.  |
| <b>Cooperation</b>           | Global Response International Pledging Conference; Finish early contributions to WHO; EU New Generation Funds.  |

Source: Created by the authors

**Messages from Collateral Agendas**

Of course, the perceptual quirks that played havoc with government policymaking at the start of the crisis were no less present in the reactions of all observers. The communication space was full of messages serving a variety of agendas and shared according to a range of psychological states, as the netizens of the world processed their individual responses with their own current reaction from the familiar range of grief response: shock, denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. The crisis unfolded as a test case of the power of confirmation bias with all participants tending to be affirmed in their assumptions going into the story. Positions which surfaced regularly in social media included ecological rebound stories about the earth ‘healing’ during the respite provided by the shutdown; technological miracle stories about promising scientific breakthroughs; anti-vaccination and medical conspiracy stories and such familiar tropes as white supremacy and anti-Semitic stories worthy of the era of the Black Death.

It was also clear that commercial reputations could change quickly. The video conferencing software company Zoom, which was an essential resource in the crisis, soon sustained criticism for lax security and so-called Russian bugs. Disinformation and misinformation emerged as major issues with large disputes over issues like the availability of resources, compliance with local regulations and treatments. In the US President Trump himself was a frequent epicenter for such discussion: the tip of a misinformation iceberg, which included issues like injecting cleaning products or the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine long before he mentioned them. In the face of the problem of misinformation scholar Nina Jankowitz proposed ‘*informational distancing*’—netizens holding information at a distance and thinking carefully before they shared it—as a counter-measure to cope with what some called the info-demic (Jankowitz 2020). The emphasis on credibility stands likely to increase the importance of well-known legacy media brands such as the BBC whose information can be shared with confidence.

**Reputational Reckoning**

One of the key findings of research into international reputations is the extent to which they remain stable. Global publics seem well able to separate isolated moments of salience—



like hosting a successful mega event—from underlying indicators of relevance and virtue. Historically there have always been crisis points which are so significant that reputations are significantly altered. These seem to be moments of reputational reckoning, when an accumulated change becomes visible rather than an instant response to a problem. France, however, had a centuries old reputation as Europe's preeminent military power and was assumed to be much stronger than it actually was, but the crisis made its internal divisions and weaknesses suddenly evident, culminating in the catastrophic failure of France during the German invasion of 1940. Looking back on that period it is clear that reputations mattered. Those who were already marginalized—like Europe's Jews—suffered most; those without particular reputations suffered early—like Czechoslovakia, surrendered as a pawn in the maneuverings to ensure peace—but those whose reputations were out of step with reality—like the French—were doomed too.

The big beneficiaries of a reputational reckoning arising from the virus crisis are likely to be the countries who can demonstrably positive or even inspirational action against the virus with a pre-existing narrative of national accomplishment: likely candidates for a modest reassessment included South Korea and New Zealand. There are also opportunities for redemption for countries living under reputational clouds to associate with more positive images. Greece and Iceland both responded effectively. Iceland has the advantage of being included within the positive regional image of Nordic competence and social cohesion. Vietnam is also well placed to be reassessed, though some of its success in dealing with the virus can be attributed to the double-edged sword of being an authoritarian country. By the same token, there are great risks for hard-hit countries like Spain, for whom tourism is a major industry.

The pandemic provided an opportunity for some places and individuals to shine and contribute to national narratives. Just as there were examples of bad practices which reflected negatively—like the outbreak within South Korea's Daegu Shincheonji church—so there have been stand out cases of success. Where national leaders misstepped, some regional leaders raised the bar. Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York (prior to his sex scandal) and Governor Yuriko Koike of Tokyo are interesting examples of regional leaders who used communication well. Several commentators noted that countries led by women fared better in the crisis (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020; Taub, 2020; Henley & Roy, 2020). A variety of memes circulated on social media praising the leadership of Germany's Angela Merkel and New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern and sometimes including Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen or Finland's Sanna Marin (Schnall, 2020). Writing in *The Atlantic* Helen Lewis suggested that it wasn't necessarily the case that women were better but there was little doubt that 'strong men' were worse (Lewis, 2020). Some technical experts achieved an international profile. Washington's Dr. Fauci earned admiration for clarity and willingness to say inconvenient things. There is—at time of writing—a massive vacancy for the state or society which actually delivers a cure or vaccine, though a number of locations eyed the spot and showcased their biotech industries. These points of strength can potentially play into the wider movement in national reputation, boosting a rise, cushioning a fall or paying rent on an existing positive reputation. Positive

stories can even connect, boosting a whole category of individuals—as in the women’s leadership meme—as the world moves beyond the crisis.

Two swallows do not make a summer, and isolated successes are unlikely to offset negative trends exposed in a number of major actors including Russia, China, Brazil and India. The United States also stands liable to reputational damage. While merely being the biggest casualty of a pandemic might, on its own, prompt global sympathy (there is an established correlation between suffering and ‘soft power’), the crisis directed attention to underlying failings of the American way of life, more deeply rooted than just the eccentricities of one politician. The COVID-19 crisis in America is a frontal assault on the weakest elements of life in the United States, sidestepping the advantages of the United States in military or wealth or even cultural soft power. Coping effectively with a pandemic requires a functioning healthcare system yet a generation of politicians have tried and failed to address the problem of public healthcare in the US; it requires cooperation between federal and local authority, yet there is unprecedented friction between those elements of American government; it requires clear information and a common voice but the US has many mutually hostile voices vying to drown each other out; finally responding to a pandemic requires a public willing to suspend individual preference or convenience for the welfare of the whole. The virus has exposed the enduring divisions within American society. It has disproportionately impacted people of color, even drawing attention to the poverty of Native American communities. It has impacted the elderly, who in the modern American tradition are more likely to be concentrated in care homes that are distributed with family members. It has highlighted injustice in the prison and migration systems. It has stoked a strain in American politics which resists the very concept of central authority and insists on liberty even at the expense of the common welfare, a doctrine which flies in the face of the intentions of the Founding Fathers who were very wary of the threat of Yellow Fever in their own time and certainly expected citizens to comply with health ordinances, even if they fought tooth and nail along partisan lines over issues of cause and cure. (Apel, 2016; Pernick, 1972) The United States may be comfortable with these attitudes and problems, but the world is not.

## **Conclusion**

Writing in the midst of the epidemic is like watching a race in which runners are obscured from view for part of each lap. The positions will only be clear when they return to sight, which is to say when social science can sample public sentiment in a wide variety of locations. Yet it is already possible to see the bones of a significant story. COVID-19 accelerated certain trends that may stay here for longer than expected. Deinstitutionalizing diplomacy and jeopardizing professional advice (medical & journalist) create a new ethos for global political communication. Declining trust in international organizations, growing nativism and bots complicate political structures of diplomacy. Without consensus, the transparency and democratic ethos of public diplomacy have been gradually replaced by propaganda-related communication practices. The situation will challenge how public diplomacy

is studied and understood (Zaharna, 2021; Pamment, 2021).

The virus—like any crisis—repays careful framing on the part of the international actor: stressing the elements which they may wish to foreground, like heroism or resilience or collaboration, yet in the longer term the absolute statistics of death will surely dominate. Narratives can split with individuals, regions and leaders associated with them achieving admiration and national leaders being disparaged. Chinese netizens were for example as admiring of Dr. Fauci as they were scornful of Trump and Pompeo. The transparency of the digital world means that as never before the reactions of ordinary citizens are visible externally, even as the nature of a pandemic means that they are relevant. As never before, both the reputation of a country and its health rest on the willingness of people to play their part in overcoming the crisis at home, and support for building cooperative solutions internationally. In some places this task also requires their support for a change in direction of national leadership.

In summary, in response to the research question, we consider that virus diplomacy is a broad umbrella that brings two novelties to the discipline. First, it identifies a delimited field of action. Virus diplomacy is the attempt to focus on the impact of COVID-19 in public diplomacy and international politics environment. Context is important. Virus diplomacy comes when the political style rewards hyper-leadership, when technologies have settled in ordinary life and diplomatic decisions are relayed in real time, and when the political moment is tense (globalization, polarization, nationalism). The second novelty is the multiplication of case studies on the new salience in public diplomacy. It includes scientific and non-military capacities on a global scale, including biomedical advances, and vaccines, but also economic decisions (supply chain, infrastructures, logistics). Health success promotes and validates national public policies for foreign publics: the response to the virus provides a model to admire.

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