

How Will COVID-19 Affect Relations between Europe and China?

Diverging perspectives on Beijing's response to the pandemic



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How would you assess the Chinese government's handling of the corona crisis so far?

The coronavirus pandemic represents a test for all countries. China was caught off-guard. The Chinese government took measures that would have been unthinkable prior to the pandemic, and thus were deemed controversial. However, almost five months after the lockdown of Wuhan, the first city hit by the pandemic, many of these measures have proven effective. The suspension of economic activities in order to save lives, the building of makeshift hospitals, the nationwide redistribution of doctors and experts to the areas most affected – all of these were subsequently mirrored by European countries.

China was far too slow in its initial response. An earlier, measured response to the outbreak could have considerably slowed the spread of the virus. Although the Chinese government knew of the outbreak by the end of December, it only acted in late January. These measures seem to be working quite successfully. However, this success has come with a high price tag. The costs to the economy as well as the effects on the psyche of the Chinese people has been immense.

In your view, was the Chinese government sufficiently transparent, or could more transparency have helped to mitigate or even have prevented the situation from escalating into a pandemic?

China knows that a modern country runs on reliable data. Never before have citizens been able to check in real-time the numbers of fatalities or people infected. Most Chinese citizens trust these numbers. Of course, more transparency will always be helpful. However, if we have learned anything from this pandemic, it is the fact that even the slightest negligence will lead to a full-fledged crisis.

I do not think that the handling was in any way transparent. From the data available, it appears that the first informal tests conducted by Chinese laboratories in late December were suppressed. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Beijing censored early reports of the outbreak on social media. It took two months until the local authorities in Wuhan informed the WHO of the outbreak. It also seems that both local authorities and the national government deliberately reported significantly lower case numbers to the WHO. One study concluded that, had the Chinese authorities introduced counter-measures just a week earlier, 95 per cent of China's infections could have been prevented.

More transparency on the part of the Chinese government would have contributed towards mitigating or avoiding the current corona pandemic.

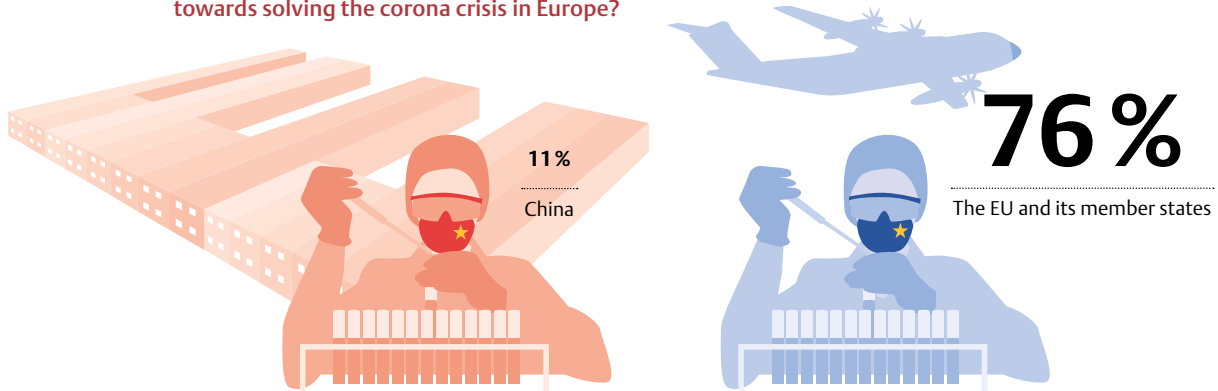


In the context of the pandemic, there has been significant media attention on Taiwan's continued exclusion from the World Health Organization. From your point of view, could the international community have benefitted from Taiwan being (re-)admitted to the WHO as an observer?

The World Health Organization is an international organization comprising sovereign states as its members. Politicizing Taiwan's observer status in the WHO will serve no good, but only distract from the global effort against the coronavirus. As per the arrangement between the Chinese government and the WHO, the region of Taiwan should have no difficulties in accessing information and expertise made available by the WHO.

It remains our policy that it is the People's Republic which represents China. My personal view is that when it comes to the health of billions of people, anyone who can help in this fight should be allowed to join.

In your view, which of these actors is contributing more towards solving the corona crisis in Europe?



2020: don't know 10%, no answer 3%

From your point of view, how have China's efforts to help solve the current pandemic been received in Europe so far?

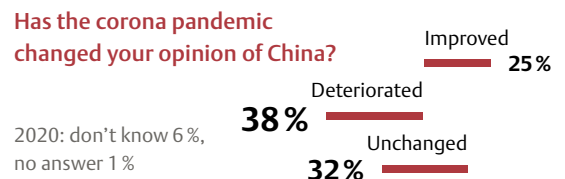
As the virus knows no boundary, China understands that it will never be safe itself until other states are safe. China's help generally has been welcomed by Europeans, especially in those countries which were hit the hardest, such as Italy and Spain. Some argue that China has sought to gain influence in Europe by using what EU High Representative Josep Borrell referred to as 'politics of generosity'. In the long run, however, I believe that China will still be remembered as a friend who was there in a time of need.

The current measures taken by China are certainly helping to stop this pandemic. However, there is too little reliable information from within China. I think it is positive that China is proactively supporting countries which have been hit by the Corona crisis, just the way we helped China earlier this year. But I am irritated by the way in which this assistance, such as the deliveries of masks and PPEs to Italy and Spain, has been accompanied by propagandistic tunes. Also, some of the equipment delivered has been of bad quality. Notwithstanding, I think that China's help overall has been welcomed and perceived positively.

In your view, how will the pandemic affect perceptions of China's role in the world?

Being the first country to fall victim to this pandemic, China was inevitably cast in the spotlight. Ever since 1979, when Beijing enacted its policy of reform and opening-up, the world has come to view China as an economic power. In spite of the pandemic, this image of China as an economic powerhouse will not change. Arguably, its domestic policy and its role in global governance will be followed even more closely.

Neither China nor the US are cutting a good figure at the moment, but it is far too early to predict the repercussions of COVID-19 on international relations. My hope is that Europe will emerge from the crisis stronger than before.



2020: don't know 6%, no answer 1%

The European Commission in March 2019 labeled China as both a “strategic partner” and “systemic rival”. How sustainable is this approach, and do you see relations tilting one way or another?

Since 2016, the West has viewed China through a more competitive lens. However, unlike the United States, in many ways Europe still approaches China as a partner, and does not want to contain China.

The pandemic has opened new opportunities for China and Europe to cooperate. Meanwhile, the reshaping of global supply chains and the diverging governance narratives are likely to render the relationship even more intriguing.

A lot depends on policy choices made by the Chinese government. At the forthcoming EU-China summit, we will see whether the EU and China are able to go beyond rhetoric and to jointly tackle the significant challenges they are facing. My hope is that we will come to an agreement on questions such as foreign investment, climate change and the future of multilateralism. The current crisis has demonstrated just how dependent on global supply chains nearly every industrial sector has become. The European Union therefore should aim to grow more independent from global supply chains in a number of vital areas.

Arguably the corona pandemic has caused Sino-US relations to further deteriorate. How might this dynamic affect Europe?

It was the trilateral cooperation between China, Europe, and the United States that saw the world through the economic crises of the 2010s. This time, such cooperation has either been absent or fallen short of what is necessary. To be sure, intensifying confrontation between Washington and Beijing is not in the interest of Europe, which would prefer to avoid choosing sides between a “Western ally” and a “strategic partner”. Against this background, the scramble over 5G to some extent has forced the Europeans to make their own decisions. To be able to do so, it will be imperative for Europeans to do their homework – autonomy and competitiveness. Looking ahead, Europe’s role may come to resemble that of a broker between the US and China.

Tensions between China and the US and all they entail – the undermining of multilateralism, the return of tariffs and closed markets – are not in the EU’s interest. The EU wants to promote our liberal values, such as freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights. To strengthen multilateralism, we should look beyond the US and China and to partners such as Canada, India, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Europe is not squeezed between the US and China, but has partners to promote a better and fairer international environment.

Should Germany return the production of critical infrastructure and essential goods back to Germany, even at the risk of higher costs?

