



Инициатива Китая «Один пояс — Один путь» и пандемия коронавируса

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Аннотация: Коронавирус (и заболевание, которое он вызывает, COVID-19), как оказалось, переживает кризис. В том смысле, что он начался в центральной части Китая и распространился на запад, в Индо-Тихоокеанский регион, к Европе и, в тоже время, на восток, в Северную Америку. Его влияние ощущалось наиболее интенсивно в нескольких возникших горячих точках, таких как Испания и Италия. Через несколько месяцев эта проблема стала глобальным пандемическим и экономическим кризисом. Он распространяется на все континенты. Для Китая, где коронавирус начался как национальная эпидемия, проблемы носили двойкий характер: во-первых, вирус нарушил производственные процессы в Китае, поскольку работники заразились быстро и легко распространяющимся вирусом, во-вторых, нарушил цепочку поставок в результате чего, внутренние и экспортные товары и услуги быстро сократились.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, Китай, Европа, Северная Америка

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China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative and the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract: The coronavirus (and the disease it causes, COVID-19) has proven to be a rolling crisis. Rolling in the sense that it began in central China and spread westward to the Indo-Pacific

region toward Europe and at the same time eastward into North America. Its impacts have been felt most intensely, so far, in several emerging hotspots along the way, such as Spain and Italy. In a matter of a few months it became a truly global pandemic and economic crisis. It continues to spread to all inhabited continents.

For China, where the coronavirus started as a national epidemic, the problems were two-fold: first the virus disrupted China's manufacturing processes as workers became infected with a fast and easy-spreading coronavirus and, secondly, disrupted the supply chain as demand for its domestic and export goods and services rapidly decreased.

Keywords: COVID-19, China, Europe, North America

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INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus is an unknown virus never before encountered and, as a result, medical experts worldwide are learning about it in real time until enough data has been collected to be able to create a vaccine. Being novel, the infectious disease experts in all countries (both in industrialized and emerging economies), were unaware of and unprepared for how dangerous this virus could be. When it came to understanding the characteristics and behavior of and response to the virus, global governments, including China, soon realized they had to be on a steep learning curve to not only try to mitigate the rapid increase of infection, but also understand the virus itself.

While a growing number of cases of the virus was detected in December 2019, Ma wrote that «Interviews with whistle-blowers from the medical community suggest Chinese doctors only realized they were dealing with a new disease in late December» [1]. The epicenter was identified as Wuhan, one of China's major manufacturing hubs (Hubei Province). Coronavirus has proven to be highly conta-

gious and spreads easily and quickly. Because it was novel, and so easily spread, no on-the-shelf or ready-to-use vaccine exists. An intensive search for a potential vaccine has already begun, but the likelihood of success vaccine is still roughly a year or so away from completion.

While the number of coronavirus infections in various countries in Europe and in the US are rising exponentially into Spring 2020, COVID-19 cases are expected to increase dramatically in sub-Saharan Africa, South, Central and Southeast Asia. While several parts of the world are struggling to contain the spreading of COVID-19, China has apparently made significant progress toward containment. In mid-March the Chinese government reported that the virus tide in China had begun to ebb, as new cases were apparently declining for the first time since the outbreak. Only the next several months will tell how successful national efforts at controlling the community spreading of COVID-19 have been. However, governments are under pressure to get their

economies back on track again and getting workers' lives back to normal. As containment of the virus appears to be working, there is a risk of that governments will remove restrictions such as stay-in-place quarantines. American epidemiologist, Anthony Fauci has, in essence, warned political leaders in the US that the disease not the politicians will determine when COVID-19 has been successfully dealt with.

Korea and Hong Kong have been relatively successful in their effort to cope early with the first wave of coronavirus cases in their countries. Taiwan is another success story from Asia. Yip noted that «With only 67 cases as of March 16 and 1 death, Taiwan's use of social awareness, appropriate action of infected individuals and big data analysis has given the country an upper hand in controlling the spread of the virus and has been able to achieve better results than China, but without the draconian measures of martial law and forced quarantine» [2]. As China attempted to bury the information that Chinese Dr. Li discovered, Taiwan used that information as an early warning about a possible pandemic.

Chinese leaders have been criticized for their lack of transparency during the onset of the domestic virus outbreak [3]. The South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) noted that the US, for example, now in the midst of its own coronavirus epidemic, questions the official Chinese numbers of its virus cases and deaths as U.S. reported numbers well surpassed those of China. Creating a name for the virus has been used politically as a weapon by those wanting to blame China for this pandemic. For example, the virus has been pejoratively labeled as the Chinese Communist Party virus (CCP virus), or the China and the Wuhan virus (by President Trump). A Chinese official then suggested that the virus was started in China by a US military operation with the intention to cripple the Chinese economy. a US Congressman, similarly, suggested *his* conspiracy

theory that the pandemic was the result of an inadvertent release of the virus by a Chinese biological warfare research institute in Wuhan.

Both conspiracy theories have been discredited and refuted. In fact, blaming the coronavirus release is one way that a government can weaponize the situation by creating an imaginary external rival which deflects and distract the public eye away from domestic problems: for the US that "rival" is China [4]. Zimmer reported that the most recent study on the origin of the coronavirus outbreak in the New York (east coast) area identified Europe as the source, not China. He wrote, «New research indicates that the coronavirus began to circulate in the New York area by mid-February, weeks before the first confirmed case, and that travelers brought in the virus mainly from Europe, not Asia» [5].

These concerns — a politically inspired «blame game» — are best addressed once the pandemic has ended. They should not detract from the apparent positive outcome of China's swift draconian quarantine and lockdown measures in Wuhan, in Hubei Province and then throughout the country. Such unprecedented actions are proving to have gained control over community spread of the virus within its borders. If sustained, it provides hope to other nations that effective ways do exist to mitigate the community spread of the virus, e.g. very early testing, 'contact tracing' and lengthy quarantines or lockdowns.

SELECTED IMPACTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

China's economy, its population's well-being and its global reputation as a rising superpower was each affected by the initial outbreak and its corresponding responses to the coronavirus over only a few months. A key aspect over the past several years of its rising superpower status has been its Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI). Facts as well as speculation have now surfaced about the virus's effect on the China-sponsored infrastructure projects to foster connectivity, enhancing effective and efficient trade. Former Australian Prime Minister Rudd suggested that «[T]he coronavirus represents the single biggest challenge for Xi Jinping since he became general secretary of the CCP in 2012» [6].

The following paragraphs provide some examples of the impacts of the coronavirus on One Belt One Road (OBOR)/BRI while the global pandemic is still in progress. They are taken from popular news sources. The comments are clustered into the following categories:

1. OBOR/BRI-related impacts of coronavirus within China;
2. Pandemic-related impacts on BRI partner countries;
3. Actions of BRI partners toward China during the pandemic;
4. General impacts (domestic and international) on China's BRI;
5. International speculation about the future of BRI as a result of the pandemic.

BRI-RELATED IMPACTS OF CORONAVIRUS INSIDE CHINA

Compounding the economic and political consequences of the US-inspired trade war with China on the Chinese economy, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus set off a chain of events that further worsened China's economic situation as it entered 2020. Confronted with the challenge of mitigating the impacts of a new type of highly infectious coronavirus, there was no quick way to identify those infected and no vaccine had yet been created. With cases rising rapidly in its national epidemic, the government took draconian measures to lock down the country at the end of January, which happened to coincide with the onset of the Chinese Lunar New Year hol-

iday. During an interview, a Wuhan respiratory disease doctor was asked «What would have happened if Wuhan had not closed?». He responded: «The closing took place on the eve of the Chinese New Year holiday. This period represents the largest migration on the planet. It is a Chinese tradition to come home to visit relatives. Our population would have moved in large numbers, more than any other country. For us, this measure was essential» [7].

The Chinese population had already begun to visit their families in other parts of the country. As a result, workers who had traveled home were unable to get back to factories where they were employed because of the quarantine. Without their workforce, factories and businesses were forced to close. Domestic and global supply chains were disrupted not only by the slowdown or shutdown of factories, but also by travel bans to producers (China) and consumer countries including BRI partners — many of which rely heavily on material, management and labor support from China.

Some observers suggested that internal pressure was mounting about China's spending abroad (such as for the BRI) instead of at home. For example, one response to the pandemic was that China's banks were ordered to support activities and workers in OBOR countries concerned about importing the virus from foreign visitors. According to one source, even the Chinese Communist Party, was also concerned that Xi's BRI financial commitments abroad (centered on OBOR partners) were overextending China's financial capabilities [6].

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC-RELATED IMPACTS ON BRI PARTNER COUNTRIES

Many Chinese laborers, engineers and project managers who had returned to China during the Chinese New Year were denied visas to reenter the various BRI countries in which they had been working, as a result of various

travel restrictions. Restrictions were levied by China and BRI countries. BRI governments feared that travelers arriving from China might carry the virus into their countries. Chinese workers that had stayed in the BRI country of their employment during the Chinese holiday were quarantined. Also, supply chain disruptions of varying degrees impacted machinery and construction material deliveries, hindering work on OBOR infrastructure projects. Zhai and Tostevin, for example, reported that, as of mid-February, «Many factories in China remain closed; those that are open cannot reach full capacity... Since many BRI projects tend to source equipment and machinery from manufacturers based in China, the disruptions in industrial production and supply chains will cause further delays» [8].

Commenting on a report focused on COVID-19 impact on the BRI in Africa, a news release by Baker McKenzie noted that «the ripple effects of COVID-19 are affecting the nature, pace and scope of China's BRI activity in Africa, mostly for the short term» [9]. The release included a succinct statement by the company's manager in South Africa: «Any largescale outbreak of COVID-19 in Africa will put pressure on already strained public health systems». The new release concluded with the following: «The project delays are expected to be mostly short term; and future initiatives will now have a heightened focus on sustainability — improving not only their long-term outlook, but also the sustained health of the environment and most importantly, Africa's people» [9].

Some writers suggested that the virus-related delays in progress on the BRI infrastructure and trade projects had provided time for both parties, China and project partners, to renew, review or reconsider their loans agreements or their commitments to their cooperative BRI infrastructure construction projects. Shepard reported that before the coronavirus epidemic

emerged, China as well as some of its country partners were already rethinking various aspects of BRI: there could be a greater focus on the greening of OBOR [10]; China could make its loans less aggressive; it could focus on fewer projects [11].

ACTIONS OF BRI PARTNERS TOWARD CHINA DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, various BRI countries took action to block the entry of any travelers coming from China, including returning BRI Chinese workers, engineers and managers. Those coming back from China as permitted workers into a BRI country were required to be tested and quarantined for several weeks. Chinese workers already in a BRI country were also tested and quarantined. However, BRI country responses varied: Pakistan, for example, a flagship project of the BRI, asked Chinese workers associated with CPEC projects in Pakistan to delay their return from China. Thus, the pandemic brought to a temporary (e.g. short term) halt some on-going BRI works [12]. For its response, Kazakhstan suspended issuing visas to visitors from China and closed the borders of its free trade zone [12]. Indonesia banned flights from China. Restrictions ratcheted upward, as various OBOR governments took the pandemic's impacts more seriously and restricted visas for returning workers from China to work on their infrastructure and other construction projects.

GENERAL IMPACTS ON CHINA'S BRI

There are wide-ranging views, spanning from supportive to critical, about various aspects of the novel coronavirus's outbreak and China's lack of transparency about it as well as its handling of global spread to other countries. Several articles related to the virus's adverse impacts on OBOR/BRI. The Nikkei Asian Review suggested, «the epidemic will not

only affect international freight trains that run between Wuhan and Duisberg, Germany but will also negatively impact the infrastructure drive» [13].

Fazl-e-Haider's article was entitled «Coronavirus brings halt to China's Trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative» [14]. Ahmed suggested the «coronavirus... created a global health emergency, dented the global economy and can hamper China's ambitious BRI» [13]. He wrote that «Wuhan's position as a strategic hub has backfired and worked as a negative factor». He also suggested that «No propaganda could damage or hamper China's ambitious BRI as the coronavirus outbreak has done in a month hampering the mega trade and infrastructure plan» [13].

On the positive side, Lancaster et al. observed that «the Chinese government is clearly trying to bolster its own global governance role by establishing itself as a country-COVID-19 leader in word and deed... China is even beginning to provide material aid to BRI countries afflicted by the pandemic» [3]. The World Economic Forum-Beijing identified some ways that Chinese companies were providing help at home and abroad to those affected by the virus, such as «donating supplies to affected areas and "working to keep the supply chains open"» [15]. Rudd strongly suggested that President Xi's China will continue its «effort to become a technological Superpower with 5G dominance, semiconductors, supercomputing and artificial intelligence» [6]. He also wrote that China sees BRI «as a Chinese international institution, as China wants to rebuild the world international order in which it holds key positions» [6].

There are also neutral views as reported by the media, e.g. existing projects delayed and timelines for their completion revised. New projects or aspects of them that are under negotiation are likely to be reconsidered.

SPECULATION ABOUT OBOR'S POST-CORONAVIRUS FUTURE

Speculative comments about the sustainability of the OBOR's post-coronavirus future, had a more positive tone. Chinese government sources suggested there were no lengthy delays in OBOR projects. Reports noted that the BRI is not only a symbol of President Xi's regime, but it is also a symbol of China as a great power. So, «Beijing is not likely to abandon BRI anytime soon» [16]. Shepard speculated that «foreign firms will not look for alternative supply chains because of coronavirus» [10]. More so now that new Chinese cases are declining, quarantines starting to be lifted, and factories are re-opening or getting back to full-time operation. Shepard also noted that Xi wants to get OBOR projects going again to show life has returned to normal.

The reinstating of the OBOR/BRI initiative at its full operational capacity is a question that only time will answer. As China begins to lift its quarantine measures, some BRI countries (as well as other countries not affiliated with OBOR/BRI) are speculating that allowing the Chinese economy to restart is too soon. He noted in her article that «the pandemic is still wreaking havoc on the rest of the world, raising fears of a potential second wave of infections as people return from overseas and bring the virus with them. Add to that the risk of another outbreak, if the virus hasn't been totally eradicated in local communities» [17]. Fear that a resurgence of the COVID-19 virus not only in local economies, but nationwide has created a barrier to distancing and self-solitary confinement that China will have to overcome in order to regain its full economic operational strength.

President Xi asked the Prime Minister of Italy at the height of the pandemic about developing a Health Silk Road [18]. This call for a health silk road has found support in Europe [19]. OBOREurope [20] also stated

that «the BRI can ... act as a global platform to study new threats to health and find solutions by strengthening cooperation between Chinese and foreign labs». At the least, «health has been added under sustainability for BRI project workers and partner country inhabitants» [11].

There have been many critiques of OBOR/ BRI ever since it was launched in September 2013, mostly from countries that are China's regional or global political rivals (e.g. the United States under President Trump, India, Japan, Korea). While they might have cheered China's initial economic downturn — because of the impacts of Trump's trade war and now as a result of the coronavirus pandemic — the pandemic may prove to be having the opposite effect. Rogin reported that while President Trump is using this virus as a reason to decouple the US and Chinese economies, China is viewing this pandemic as a way to further cooperation and interconnectedness. He wrote «China intends to seek out more foreign direct investment, seize market share in critical industries and try to stop the West from confronting its bad behavior» [21].

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The definition of crisis in the Chinese language is made up of two characters: one is danger and the other is opportunity. It should not be surprising, then, to find articles in which the writer(s) use both negative (e.g. danger) and positive (e.g. opportunity) aspects of the coronavirus pandemic in the same thought. China has been criticized for its initial secrecy resulting from a general lack of transparency that delayed the raising of awareness about the novel coronavirus. The Chinese doctor who warned the people and government to the dangerous virus was heavily criticized for causing panic and put under house arrest. He later died from COVID-19 but was later praised as a national hero.

However, once the Chinese government realized that the coronavirus was truly a national epidemic, it instituted strict quarantine measures first in Wuhan, then across the entire country. The coronavirus apparently peaked four months later in March and restrictions began to be lifted in various places.

Although China was criticized for its lack of openness about an emerging pandemic, it is increasingly being praised for its quarantine measures within its borders. Today, by providing health-related guidance and medical materials, its help is being praised by developing countries beginning to suffer from the coronavirus. This turnaround is being acknowledged on an increasing basis through the media as exemplified in the title of the article «China and Coronavirus: From home-made disaster to global mega-opportunity» [22] and its subtitle, «Despite an initially horrendous response, China now utilizes its Coronavirus campaign to build global soft power».

Wu and Wong provided similar examples [23]:

- «The notion of 'health silk road' could cover up Beijing's mistakes in handling early stages of coronavirus outbreak».
- «In health, China has consolidated its leading role among belt and road partner nations as the coronavirus outbreak has spread».
- «COVID-19 is a golden opportunity for China to demonstrate leadership and responsibility».
- «The underlying contradiction, however, is that belt and road is a symbol of Chinese-led efforts at promoting the benefits of connectivity, while the virus has exposed the risks and weaknesses of connectivity on a global scale».
- «Its ability to meet the demands of countries - especially those with less developed public health systems - could also give China an opportunity to draw a veil over its mistakes in the initial stages of the virus outbreak».

CONCLUSION (WHAT IS NEXT FOR OBOR?)

As the pandemic continues to «roll» around the globe, speculation will continue to grow about what the post-coronavirus world might look like, not only within China and scores of OBOR countries, but around the globe. The global economy will need time to recover from the cost to national economies as a result of the extreme measures of shutdowns imposed by governments to combat the pandemic. It appears that support for «globalization» is under threat, because of pre-existing poverty resulting in disproportionate impacts of the virus within and among industrial and developing economies. A recent article suggested that OBOR provides a pathway, through connectivity and trade, for disease spreading, citing pandemics that occurred in

past centuries [24], The New Silk Roads, cited in Shepard [10].

In his article with a sub-section labeled «stealing the soft power mantle from the U.S.», Kurlantzick offered the following perspective: «Ultimately, Beijing seems ready to use the outbreak to more broadly signal that China’s model of governance is effective, particularly in a crisis, and especially when compared to that of most democracies» [22]. On the other hand, the Council of Foreign Relations correctly warned its readers that «It is too soon to say precisely how the pandemic will change the broad contours of Chinese foreign policy, but it has already highlighted some of the frailties of the Belt and Road Initiative Xi’s signature foreign policy agenda to build traditional and digital infrastructure around the world» [3].

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