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How Covid-19 could help China consolidate its influence in Africa

China is seizing on the global disruption created by Covid-19 to fill the leadership vacuum — with a particular focus on Africa

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China is seizing on the global disruption created by Covid-19 to go for broke in asserting leadership and positioning itself as the most consequential external actor on the African continent. Right now, it is meeting little effective resistance from Europe or the United States. Whether or not China's attempt to use this crisis to its advantage fully succeeds will depend on how the Chinese manage the internal contradictions inherent in its approach.

China has long sought to portray itself as a friendly, non-judgmental alternative to partners like Europe and the United States, appealingly free from the baggage of colonialism and Cold War machinations on the continent. In promoting the 'Chinese model' of development fuelled by state capitalism and authoritarian governance, China has enjoyed a great deal of success. It is Africa's indispensable infrastructure partner, has deeply penetrated African markets, and accrued significant influence over African governments with its generous financing packages.

Now, in the midst of the pandemic, China's challenges to the West are more direct than ever before. Its diplomats are using social media not just to publicise and laud Chinese cooperation and generosity, but also to suggest that other major powers are either overstating their own assistance, failing to support important initiatives, or even are to blame for the emergence of the virus in the first place. By amplifying its 'mask diplomacy,' heralding the work of Jack Ma and his foundation, and using its embassies to coordinate assistance from Chinese businesses, China is able to send a unified message about its altruism, making even modest contributions loom large in the popular consciousness.

Favouring the 'Chinese model'

Meanwhile, more traditional health partners like Europe and the United States, who have poured billions into strengthening health systems and fighting infectious disease in Africa for years, can't seem to find a comparably effective messaging strategy. European and American dysfunction and neglect are ceding the field to China. While the EU and the US are providing hundreds of millions of dollars in new assistance to help Africa fight Covid-19, their efforts are diffuse, do not match the scale of the problem and are all too easily disguised as business-as-usual.

Nonetheless, there are factors working against China, these include broad issues of credibility, specific questions around debt reduction and the high likelihood of unforced errors.

At the same time, as Beijing assures Africans that it has effectively doused the flames of its own outbreak and touts its success and capacity, the airwaves are full of images of overwhelmed Western hospitals and eerily vacant cities, striking a blow to Western stature while buttressing arguments in favour of the 'Chinese model.' Governments coping with the apex of their infection rate are understandably focused inward as they try to turn the tide; and the disarray that has replaced any trans-Atlantic consensus in recent years has led to missed opportunities, such as the failure of the G7 to deliver a joint statement in late March because of US intransigence.

Perhaps the most blatant example of self-defeating messaging emerged recently when Donald Trump and Republicans in the US Congress launched an attack on the World Health Organization (WHO) in a transparent attempt to deflect blame for the United States' disastrously shambolic response to Covid-19. African leaders were quick to aggressively push back, and particularly to defend Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Ethiopian doctor whose widely respected performance at the head of the WHO is a source of pride for many Africans. A domestic political strategy of dubious value will have harmful consequences for the US on the continent, as bullying and threats are unlikely to win the hearts and minds of Africans.

Africa's economies are feeling the pinch

Nonetheless, there are factors working against China, these include broad issues of credibility, specific questions around debt reduction and the high likelihood of unforced errors. In some African states, populations are predisposed to doubt the quality of Chinese products based on past

experiences, and if faulty Chinese PPE find their way to Africa as they have to Europe, these doubts will be reinforced.

In addition, the notion that China's approach to eradicating Covid-19 is superior to others could fall apart quickly in the event that a second wave of infection emerges within its borders. Finally, Africans are as interested in issues of transparency as the rest of the world, and the legitimate questions around China's transparency and accuracy in reporting the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan last year will continue to be asked on the continent as they will around the world.

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China's path forward becomes even more perilous when one turns to the economic consequences of the virus for Africa, where policymakers are operating with very little fiscal space. Covid-19 is projected to cut GDP growth by three to eight per cent and with massive losses of jobs and remittances, Africans are already feeling the pinch. The International Monetary Fund has taken steps to provide six months of debt service relief to several African countries, and has indicated that it hopes to take further steps to ease the strain. Most observers believe that some form of debt forgiveness will be part of that way forward.

China will persist

How China will proceed remains to be seen. On one hand, it continues to position itself as an alternative to Western-dominated institutions; South Africa is looking to the Shanghai-based New Development Bank for assistance in order to avoid the conditions associated with the traditional international financial institutions. But Africa's USD 145bn debt to China will be the real issue. Ghana's Finance Minister has called on China to forgive African debt; similar appeals will follow. While the Chinese may not expect actual repayment of their loans, they will be reluctant to give up the leverage those loans provide over African governments. It may prove hard to meet the urgent demands of the moment with anything more than obfuscation, although the lack of transparency around many Chinese financing deals may keep the issue muddled for most observers.

Finally, even China's tightly controlled messaging strategy can go awry when its authors ignore or misunderstand local sensitivities. Many Nigerians found China's recent offer to send a team of doctors to the

West African giant insulting; they take pride in the excellence of their own medical community. Neither Donald Trump nor the French doctors who suggested that Africa would be the perfect testing ground for a vaccine have a monopoly on racist, tone-deaf remarks. China's overall image, too, can suffer when individual messengers are clumsy, patronising or racist, as has happened numerous times in the past. When reports surfaced of Africans being denied service at restaurants and hotels in Guangzhou, the outcry in Africa was widespread, encompassing outraged complaints from both officials and influential cultural and media figures.

Despite these risks, the Chinese will persist. They see an opportunity to consolidate the influence they seek, not simply to gain access to resources as is so often suggested, but to ensure favourable votes in multilateral fora and tip the global scales toward their preferences on everything from technology standards to political narratives. China's calculation is clear: while others are weakened and internally distracted, it can fill the global leadership vacuum without incurring serious costs. At this point, it seems China can be thwarted only by itself.



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