

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 7 April 2020

The Fight Against COVID-19: China’s Shifting Narrative and Southeast Asia

*Lye Liang Fook**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Beijing’s shifting narrative on the COVID-19 fight over the last few months has been directed as much at the audience outside China as at its domestic audience.
- When China was in the thick of fighting the coronavirus, the narrative was focused on showing widespread external support, including from ASEAN Member States, for what China was doing internally.
- Initially, Chinese authorities appeared to accept that the coronavirus originated from Wuhan. However, after managing to contain the coronavirus spread internally, and the United States attributed the virus threat to China, it began to raise questions and even engaged in a war of words with America on this issue.
- ASEAN Member States again featured when China started to extend aid to other countries to fight the coronavirus. Its assistance to these countries has been portrayed as a reciprocation by China of help that it had earlier received.
- More importantly, China wants to be seen as a helpful and reliable partner working with others to confront a global threat. In doing so, it seeks to repair the damage caused by its initial belated response.

** Lye Liang Fook is Coordinator of the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme as well as Coordinator of the Vietnam Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

INTRODUCTION

China's initially slow response¹ to the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan soon gave way to quick and draconian measures especially after Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a public directive on 20 January 2020 calling for "resolute efforts" to curb the coronavirus spread.² Less than two months later, in March 2020, the long-awaited visit of President Xi to Wuhan took place, an indication that the measures introduced had borne fruit.³

China's narrative on the coronavirus fight evolved with the progress in curbing the disease. In the initial stages, the official line focused on containing the coronavirus spread within China and the source was deemed to have started from a specific location, i.e. the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan. At a later stage, when China had brought the situation under control, and when cases outside China began to rise, Beijing started to cast doubts on the origins of the coronavirus.

Southeast Asia as a whole was portrayed by Beijing to be standing with China in its internal fight against the coronavirus. When China began to extend aid to other countries to fight the global spread of the coronavirus, Southeast Asia was again featured as an important part of this effort. This paper examines the changing narratives in China's fight against the coronavirus in relation to the external audience and the role of Southeast Asia in this process.

CHINA'S SHIFTING NARRATIVES VIS-A-VIS THE EXTERNAL AUDIENCE

a) Narratives in the Early Stage (January to mid-February 2020)

China was initially focused on containing the coronavirus spread within the country. On 20 January 2020, President Xi Jinping called for "resolute efforts" by the Chinese Communist Party and the government to curb the epidemic.⁴ After Xi's public exhortation, measures to fight the coronavirus were ramped up.⁵ Wuhan City went into lockdown on 23 January. Two days later, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, on 25 January, Xi convened a Political Bureau Standing Committee meeting on the situation. At the same meeting, he announced the forming of a central group headed by Premier Li Keqiang to fight the coronavirus under his direction.⁶ It was also after 20 January that China's National Health Committee began to provide daily updates on the number of confirmed and suspected coronavirus cases across the country.⁷

At that time, the narrative from China was guarded and, to some extent, defensive in nature, especially regarding criticisms that the relevant authorities had been slow to respond to the coronavirus. The quasi-official *Global Times* mentioned on 20 January that there were "some people" who suspected that the government did not provide relevant information in a "timely manner". It went on to explain that since the epidemic situation in China remained unclear and that China had not entered into a state of mobilisation at that time,⁸ the government had released information with the aim of ensuring "stability and accuracy", instead of "making predictions that could result in panic".⁹ There was tacit admission that the government had not been forthcoming with its information release.¹⁰

At the official level, however, Chinese authorities denied that they had withheld information and underreported on the coronavirus situation. At a State Council Information Office press

conference on 22 January, a foreign correspondent asked for the reason behind the spike in the number of reported cases and whether the government had withheld information. Avoiding a direct response, Xu Shuqiang (Director, Emergency Management Office, National Health Commission) said the government attached much importance to information disclosure.¹¹ Separately, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said that China had informed the World Health Organisation, relevant countries and other organisations of the outbreak in a "timely manner" and maintained "close communication" with them.¹²

China highlighted how other countries had positively appraised its quick and vigorous response to the disease.¹³ This suggested widespread foreign support for its anti-coronavirus measures. Indirectly, it indicated some degree of insecurity that China should need foreign endorsement for what it was doing internally.

Another aspect of China's early response was that it acknowledged that the coronavirus originated from Wuhan. The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, which sold and culled wildlife, was shuttered and cleaned up. Zhong Nanshan, a leading figure in China's fight against the 2003 SARS and who has been actively involved in the current coronavirus fight, said on China's Central Television on 20 January that a large number of cases could be traced to two particular locations in Wuhan involved in the wildlife trade. He confidently said that the virus had originally spread from wildlife to humans but had progressed to the stage of human-to-human transmission.¹⁴

China was also quick to deny that the coronavirus had leaked from a biological facility at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. A senior official from the biological facility reportedly slammed such a conspiracy theory.¹⁵ Separately, Geng Shuang, China's foreign ministry spokesperson, highlighted a statement from leading foreign medical experts carried by *Lancet*, an authoritative medical journal, which strongly condemned conspiracy theories and affirmed the overwhelming conclusion by medical experts that the coronavirus originated from wildlife.¹⁶ From the above, it would appear that China had accepted that the coronavirus had originated from Wuhan.

b) Narratives at a Later Stage (from mid-February 2020 onwards)

Beginning in the later part of February 2020 (when the number of new confirmed cases in China saw a significant drop while those in other countries such as in South Korea, Italy and Iran rose), the narrative shifted. It picked up momentum and on certain occasions became more strident following President Xi's long-awaited visit to Wuhan on 10 March 2020.

A fresh angle was that China's implementation of tough but effective measures within its own borders helped slow down the coronavirus spread outside China. China further asserted that its close communication and its sharing of information with the World Health Organisation and other countries and regions, had helped them to better respond to the global pandemic. China was now saying that its efforts had "bought precious time for the world".¹⁷

Another assertion now made was that China is a reliable and helpful partner to other countries fighting the coronavirus. This is a variation on China's vision of a shared future where countries, apart from engaging in mutually beneficial initiatives, need to band together to face common threats. So far, China has extended various forms of assistance including medical teams, test kits, medical equipment and supplies to numerous affected countries in Europe,

Asia, Africa, and the Americas.¹⁸ In addition to material and personnel aid, China has also held video conferencing sessions to share its coronavirus experiences and findings.¹⁹

China now started to question and even strongly refute the view that the coronavirus originated in China. It began with Zhong Nanshan saying at a press conference that although the coronavirus first appeared in China, this did not mean that it originated from China. He said it was not clear where the coronavirus came from and that the coronavirus was not necessarily hosted by the pangolin (that was traded at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market).²⁰ Other sources soon mounted a more concerted campaign pushing this view, suggesting high-level endorsement of the effort:

- On 29 February, a *Global Times* article acknowledged that the epidemic “first broke out” in China, but asserted that there was so far “no conclusion” by the scientific community on “where the virus came from”.²¹
- On 4 March, Zhao Lijian, China’s newly-minted foreign ministry spokesperson,²² reiterated at a regular press conference that “no conclusion has been reached on the origin of the virus, as relevant tracing work is still underway”.²³
- On 8 March, Lin Songtian, the Chinese Ambassador to South Africa, said on twitter that “although the epidemic first broke out in China, it did not necessarily mean that the virus is originated from China, let alone ‘made in China’”.²⁴
- On 12 March, Zhao Lijian was more strident on twitter when he suggested that “patient zero” began in the United States. He even surmised that it “might be the US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan”. He called on America to be “transparent”, to “make public your data” and asserted that the “US owe us an explanation”.²⁵

The pushback by China is probably motivated by a number of factors including Beijing’s own success in curbing the coronavirus, its reaction to US efforts to reiterate that the coronavirus started in China, as well as what it regards as US attempts to divert attention away from America’s own lacklustre response to the coronavirus spread. In particular, China was riled by US President Donald Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and US congressmen referring to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus”²⁶ or the “Wuhan virus”,²⁷ and insisted that the neutral WHO terminology of COVID-19 be used. It has accused the United States of engaging in a blame game targeting China.²⁸

ROLE OF ASEAN OR ASEAN MEMBER STATES

In this shifting narrative, Beijing’s orientation has been global in nature and in particular, it has paid much attention to the words and actions of the United States. This is not at all surprising as the United States remains the most important strategic player in China’s eyes. Within this context, ASEAN and individual ASEAN Member States (AMS) do not feature prominently, although certain aspects need to be highlighted.

Throughout China’s fight against the coronavirus, and especially in the initial stage, ASEAN and its members were important in the Chinese narrative in two key ways. First, Beijing

stressed that these countries were fully behind China's anti-coronavirus effort. Chinese official media cited remarks by leaders of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore expressing support for and solidarity with China.²⁹ A Xinhua article carried Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's remarks calling on countries to work together and to keep anti-Chinese sentiments in check. In particular, it mentioned PM Lee as saying that:

“the virus may have started in Wuhan but it doesn't respect nationality or race. It doesn't check your passport before it goes into your body and anybody can be infected”.³⁰

Among the AMS, the country given the most coverage was Cambodia, especially after Prime Minister Hun Sen became the first foreign leader to visit China, which he did on 5 February, after the coronavirus began spreading. President Xi described the visit as a show of solidarity and a reflection of the all-weather relationship between the two countries.³¹ Cambodia further refrained from imposing travel and flight restrictions on China and from evacuating its nationals from China. Hun Sen was even prepared to visit Cambodian students in Wuhan during his visit to Beijing.

Second, China highlighted its commitment to work with ASEAN as well as ASEAN's support for China in fighting the coronavirus. Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his ASEAN counterparts at the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the coronavirus in Vientiane on 20 February. Chinese official accounts said the meeting started with a video on the “Chinese people's unity in the fight against the epidemic” and the “expression of sympathy and support from leaders of the 10 ASEAN countries”. They further mentioned that after the meeting, Wang Yi and his ASEAN counterparts joined hands in the traditional ASEAN-style handshake to “cheer for Wuhan and China”.³²

Beijing further advocated closer coordination and cooperation between China and ASEAN to fight the coronavirus. At the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Wang Yi proposed that China and ASEAN enhance coordination among their health, quarantine, transportation and border control agencies. He further suggested setting up China-ASEAN Reserve Centres for stockpiling provisions for epidemic control. He seemed receptive to a suggestion by some of his ASEAN counterparts for a Special China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting at an appropriate time to elevate the level of cooperation.³³ This appeared aimed at pre-empting criticisms that the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers Meeting was not pitched at as high a level as in 2003 when leaders from ASEAN and China met almost immediately to discuss a joint response to SARS.

On China's aid provision, the AMS were portrayed as key recipients of Chinese assistance although the bulk of it seemed to have gone to Europe as the latter has become the epicentre of the outbreak (see table in **Annex**). Nevertheless, the Philippines and Cambodia were among the first AMS to receive China's aid. In early February 2020, when China was still trying to contain the coronavirus spread, it donated 200,000 masks and offered to share medical information and findings on the coronavirus with the Philippines.³⁴ In March 2020, China provided Cambodia an unspecified amount of detection reagent, hazmat suits, surgical masks, and other related materials.³⁵

China's first offer of assistance to the Philippines and Cambodia is partly due to these two countries being strategically more closely aligned with China. Another important reason is that these two AMS were among the first in rendering assistance to China. On 26 January, the Philippines had donated 3.16 million masks (not a small number) to China,³⁶ while Cambodia donated 5,000 masks on 5 February, largely from families whose children had benefitted from free medical treatment from China.³⁷ Beyond this offer, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen had lent his personal imprimatur to China's coronavirus fight by visiting Beijing in February. Cambodia and China even held their fourth joint exercise, known as "Dragon Gold 2020", in Kampot province in March 2020.³⁸

China has progressively extended assistance to other AMS which have also earlier provided aid to China:

- Malaysia³⁹ received the first batch of medical supplies, including 5,000 face masks and 10,000 surgical masks, which were delivered to Sungai Buloh Hospital, a hospital designated for coronavirus patients, in March 2020.⁴⁰ An additional 100,000 face masks were donated by the China-Asia Economic Development Association.⁴¹
- In Thailand,⁴² Thai medical experts have reportedly been in contact with Zhong Nanshan on the clinical treatment of coronavirus patients and test kits have been sent.⁴³ Face masks, protective suits and face shields have also been donated.
- Indonesia⁴⁴ has received 800,000 test kits, tens of thousands of medical gloves and 17 tonnes of other epidemic prevention supplies.⁴⁵
- Myanmar,⁴⁶ Laos,⁴⁷ and Brunei⁴⁸ have also received various forms of assistance from China. [Note: All AMS provided some form of assistance to China, including Vietnam⁴⁹ and Singapore.⁵⁰ But Vietnam and Singapore have apparently not received any material assistance from China as they are in a position to fight the coronavirus on their own].

At one point, however, China took issue with some AMS for imposing travel restrictions on travellers from China. This was evident from Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's remarks at the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers Meeting when he called on AMS to "resume normal people-to-people exchanges and practical cooperation at an early date, in line with respective national conditions".⁵¹

However, China's pressure on AMS was considerably milder than its outright criticisms of the United States which it accused of being the "first to evacuate personnel from its consulate in Wuhan" and the "first to impose a travel ban on Chinese travellers".⁵² Subsequently, as the coronavirus spread to other parts of the world, and with China grappling with the new threat of imported cases, China has soft-pedalled on this issue. China has acknowledged that the restrictive measures by other countries were aimed at protecting the health and security of their respective citizens, and at safeguarding regional and global public health security.⁵³ On its part, it has also practically stopped all entry by foreigners and significantly reduced foreign flights into the country.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

China's narrative on the coronavirus fight evolved in line with internal progress at tackling the coronavirus. In general, there has been a discernible shift from a cautious and defensive posture to one where it takes umbrage with the suggestion that the coronavirus originated from China. In this shift, it singled out the United States. ASEAN and AMS did not feature in this aspect.

ASEAN and AMS mattered most in terms of China's effort to portray them as standing hand-in-hand with Beijing in the coronavirus fight, a thrust particularly evident in the early stage. Subsequently, when China turned the corner in its coronavirus fight and began to extend aid to other countries, the AMS came into focus as part of China's contribution to global efforts to fight the coronavirus.

More Chinese assistance to the AMS in the near future is in line with Beijing's narrative that it attaches great importance to ties with not only AMS but also with ASEAN as a whole.⁵⁵ This message is likely to be reinforced in 2020, a year during which China celebrates milestones in its relations with Myanmar, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore.⁵⁶ The first step was taken when President Xi visited Myanmar on his first overseas trip in 2020. Although China's interaction with AMS may have been momentarily disrupted by the coronavirus, Beijing is already laying the groundwork for ties to pick up, through its coronavirus assistance to AMS.

Annex

China's Provision of Coronavirus Assistance to Other Countries
(ASEAN Member States Recipients Highlighted in Bold)

Date	Recipient	Details	Source
3 Feb	Philippines	200,000 surgical masks, sharing of medical information and findings	Philippine News Agency
20 Feb	ASEAN and China	A Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on coronavirus convened in Vientiane; a video conference, involving medical experts from ASEAN and China, was also held to share experience and findings	China's foreign ministry
25 Feb	Iran	250,000 masks	Xinhua
27 Feb	South Korea	25,000 medical masks to Daegu	Xinhua
29 Feb	Iran	Chinese medical team	Wall Street Journal
1 Mar	Japan	5,000 sets of protective clothing; 100,000 masks	China Daily
3 Mar	Japan	1,000,000 masks (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation)	The Mainichi
5 Mar	Zimbabwe	Upgrade Zimbabwe's main isolation centre for coronavirus isolation and treatment centre (pledge)	Xinhua
7 Mar	Iraq	Medical team; test kits; other medical devices and equipment	China Daily
8 Mar	WHO	US\$20 million donation	China.org
11 Mar	Myanmar	Medical supplies (including surgical masks and hand sanitiser)	Elevenmyanmar
12 Mar	Italy	Chinese medical team; 30 tonnes of medical equipment and supplies (including monitors, ventilators, defibrillators, masks and laryngoscopes)	China Daily
13 Mar	Central and Eastern Europe (under 17+1 framework)	Video conference on tackling coronavirus with 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe plus China	Xinhua
14 Mar	Iran	Medical team; anti-epidemic supplies	Xinhua
16 Mar	African countries	100,000 medical masks; 20,000 test kits; and 1,000 protective suits and face shields to each of the 54 nations on the African continent (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation - pledge)	Jack Ma's Twitter
16 Mar	Philippines	2,000 test kits	CNN
16 Mar	United States	First shipment of 1 million masks and 500,000 coronavirus test kits arrives in America (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation)	South China Morning Post
17 Mar	Cambodia	Medical supplies (including detection reagent, hazmat suits, surgical masks and other related materials – unspecified number)	Khmer Times
17 Mar	Myanmar	2,016 test kits	Myanmar Times
17 Mar	Spain	500,000 masks (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation)	Xinhua Video
18 Mar	Laos	Test kits (unspecified number)	Xinhua

18 Mar	African countries and the African Union	Video conference on tackling coronavirus with 24 African countries and the African Union Centre for Disease Control and Prevention	Ecn.cn
18 Mar	Iran	30 tonnes of medical and healthcare items	Islamic Republic News Agency
18 Mar	Italy	Second Chinese medical team arrives	CCTV
18 Mar	France	1 million masks and gloves	CGTN
18 Mar	Cyprus	Medical supplies (pledge)	in-cyprus
18 Mar	European Union	2 million surgical masks; 200,000 N95 masks; and 50,000 test kits to European Commission (pledge)	Financial Times
19 Mar	Thailand	Medical supplies including test kits, face masks, equipment and protective suits. The Chinese government also offered to coordinate Chinese companies to export medicine for treatment of coronavirus in Thailand (pledge)	Khao Sod
19 Mar	Spain and Italy	1.8 million masks (Chinese embassy in Madrid)	Financial Times
19 Mar	Zimbabwe	Provide funding for refurbishment and upgrading of Zimbabwe's main coronavirus isolation and treatment centre; Chinese medical team in Zimbabwe to train local health personnel	Xinhua
19 Mar	Malaysia	5,000 masks and 10,000 face shields	Xinhua
19 Mar	Sri Lanka	US\$500 million loan	Daily Mirror
20 Mar	Eurasia and South Asia	Video conference on tackling coronavirus with 18 countries in Eurasia and South Asia	China foreign ministry
20 Mar	Sri Lanka	100,000 masks and 20,000 test kits (pledge)	Colombo Page
21 Mar	Malawi	Test kits and medical supplies (pledge)	Malawi24
21 Mar	Serbia	Chinese medical team	Xinhua
21 Mar	Philippines	100,000 test kits; 100,000 surgical masks; 10,000 N95 masks and 10,000 personal protective equipment	Philippine News Agency
21 Mar	Asia	1.8 million masks; 210,000 test kits; 36,000 protective suits; and ventilators and thermometers for 10 countries, i.e. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia , Laos , the Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar , Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation - pledge)	Jack Ma's Twitter
22 Mar	Brunei	Medical equipment and supplies (Zhejiang Hengyi Group)	China.org
22 Mar	Latin America	2 million masks; 400,000 test kits and 104 ventilators to 24 Latin America countries including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Peru (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation - pledge)	Jack Ma's Twitter
23 Mar	Indonesia	800,000 test kits; tens of thousands of medical gloves and other 17 tonnes of epidemic prevention supplies	China.org
23 Mar	Cambodia	Chinese medical team	The Star
23 Mar	African Union	12,000 test kits	RFI
23 Mar	Armenia	Medical overalls and artificial respiration devices totalling US\$110,000 (pledge)	ArmenPress
23 Mar	Ukraine	500,000 masks; 250,000 rapid test kits; 80,000 respirators; 10,000 hazmat suits and PCR test kits (unspecified amount)	Office of President of Ukraine

24 Mar	Hungary	3 million face masks; 100,000 test kits and 86 ventilators	Hungary Today
24 Mar	Japan	30,000 face masks (from Chinese city of Cixi in Zhejiang province to Takizawa, Iwate Prefecture)	The Mainichi
25 Mar	Brunei	In a tele-conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Brunei's Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof thanked China for offering "support and assistance" to Brunei	China foreign ministry
25 Mar	Italy	Third Chinese medical team sent	Xinhua
25 Mar	Pakistan	500,000 surgical masks and 50,000 test kits (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation)	Tribune
26 Mar	Malaysia	Video conference on tackling coronavirus; possibility of sending medical team	New Straits Times
26 Mar	Malaysia	20,000 masks and video conference on tackling coronavirus (from Fujian province to Sarawak under friendship agreement)	The Star
26 Mar	Myanmar	200,000 surgical masks; 5,000 N95 masks; and 5,000 protective clothing	Xinhua
26 Mar	Thailand	First batch of face masks, protective suits and face shields (by Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation)	Alizila
26 Mar	Russia	1 million masks and 200,000 coronavirus test kits (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation)	The Moscow Times
27 Mar	Canada	30,000 medical masks; 10,000 protective clothing; 10,000 goggles and 50,000 pairs of gloves (Bank of China)	Chinese Embassy in Ottawa Twitter
28 Mar	Philippines	500,000 masks (Bank of China)	Manila Bulletin
28 Mar	Malaysia	500,000 surgical masks; 100,000 N95 face masks; 100,000 test kits; 50,000 personal protective equipment; and 200 ventilators	Malay Mail
28 Mar	Pakistan	Chinese medical team; 100,000 medical masks; 10,000 N95 masks; 10,000 test kits; 5,000 protective clothing; 5 ventilators; 11 defibrillator monitors; and some 62,000 sets of drugs	CGTN
28 Mar	United Kingdom	Chinese medical team and medical supplies	China.org
29 Mar	Malaysia	166,000 face masks to Sabah	Borneo Post
29 Mar	Cambodia	1 million face masks (pledge by Hodo Group); first batch of 200,000 face masks has started shipping	Xinhua
29 Mar	Asia	1.7 million masks; 165,000 test kits; protective clothing and medical equipment such as ventilators and forehead thermometers for seven countries, i.e. Azerbaijan, Bhutan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation - pledge)	Arab News
29 Mar	Laos	Chinese medical team and medical supplies (Xinhua highlighted that the medical team arrived less than five days after Laos confirmed its first two confirmed coronavirus cases on 24 Mar)	Xinhua
29 Mar	Lithuania	20,000 masks and 120,000 pairs of gloves (Huawei and other Lithuanian companies)	South China Morning Post

29 Mar	Ukraine	1.8 million medical face masks; 300,000 filtering facepiece (FFP) masks; and 35,000 protective suits	UNIAN
30 Mar	Thailand	Test kits (unspecified number donated by the China Shenzhen Mammoth Foundation)	Chinese Embassy in Bangkok
30 Mar	Europe	300,000 protective gowns; 300,000 face shields; and 800 ventilators (Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation – pledge)	Jack Ma’s Twitter

Source: Various public sources; compiled by author and Mr Joel Chong (Research Associate, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute)

Note: This list is not meant to be exhaustive but to provide a sense of the assistance China has extended so far (as of 30 March 2020)

¹ According to an account by Ai Fen (Director of the Department of Emergency, Wuhan Central Hospital) she attended to a patient with COVID-19 symptoms on 16 December 2019. See “Fa shaozi de ren (the one who distributed the whistle)”, *Matters.news*, 10 March 2020, at <https://matters.news/@2020Era/%E5%8F%91%E5%93%A8%E5%AD%90%E7%9A%84%E4%BA%BA-bafyreihrpvzudkmtakoxvquhhw75ajqvhn4oxb4pges3od5rqusa436ba>.

² “Xi orders resolute efforts to curb virus spread”, *Xinhuanet*, 20 January 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/20/c_138721535.htm. Xi’s call came days before the Lunar New Year where traditionally there was mass movement of Chinese within the country returning to their hometowns.

³ “Xinhua Headlines—Xi Focus: ‘Turning the tide’ – Xi leads anti-virus war toward victory”, *Xinhuanet*, 11 March 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/11/c_138863771.htm.

⁴ “Xi Jinping dui xinxing guanzhuang bingdu ganran de feiyan yiqing zuochu zhongyao zhishi (Xi Jinping issues important instructions on the pneumonia outbreak due to new coronavirus infection), Chinese government website, 20 January 2020, at http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-01/20/content_5471057.htm.

⁵ Although there were indications that the authorities were aware of coronavirus cases that occurred in Wuhan weeks earlier. One of the most well-known episodes was the Wuhan Central Hospital doctor Li Wenliang who had shared information about the coronavirus in a private WeChat group with about 150 individuals as early as 30 December 2019. However, Li was forced to sign an admonishment letter on 3 January 2020 for spreading rumours that severely disrupted social order. Li himself later succumbed to the coronavirus and died on 7 January 2020.

⁶ “Qinzi bushu zhahui, miji zhishi pishi...Xi Jinping de zhanyi shijian (personally deploy and command, closely direct and instruct...Xi Jinping’s time in combating the epidemic), *CCP news*, 6 February 2020, at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0206/c164113-31573729.html>.

⁷ “Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi 2020 nian yiyue ershier ri xinwen fabu hui wenzi shilu (Full text of State Council Information Office 22 January 2020 press conference), *Xuanchuansi*, 22 January 2020, at <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/ptpxw/202001/61add0d230e047eaab777d062920d8a8.shtml>.

⁸ The mobilisation only started after President Xi Jinping’s public call on 20 January 2020.

⁹ “Vigilance needed on Wuhan pneumonia”, *Global Times*, 20 January 2020.

¹⁰ The lack of release of timely information was evident in another article titled “Timely disclosure key to contain virus”, *Global Times*, 21 January 2020.

¹¹ Full text of State Council Information Office 22 January 2020 press conference, *Xuanchuansi*, 22 January 2020.

¹² “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference”, China’s foreign ministry, 20 January 2020.

¹³ “World leaders positively evaluate, support China’s fight against virus outbreak”, *People’s Daily*, 31 January 2020 and “World Leaders Commend and Support China’s Efforts Against the Coronavirus Outbreak”, China’s foreign ministry, 5 February 2020.

¹⁴ “Zhong Nanshan: Xinxing guanzhuang bingdu feiyan ‘kending ren chuanren’” (Zhong Nanshan: new coronavirus pneumonia ‘definitely transmitted from person to person’), *Caixin*, 20 January 2020, at <http://www.caixin.com/2020-01-20/101506465.html>.

¹⁵ “Wuhan Virology Lab Deputy Director Again Slams Coronavirus Conspiracies”, *Caixin*, 7 February 2020, at <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-07/wuhan-virology-lab-deputy-director-again-slams-coronavirus-conspiracies-101512828.html>.

¹⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference”, China’s foreign ministry, 20 February 2020. See also “Statement in support of the scientists, public health professionals, and medical professionals of China combatting COVID-19”, *The Lancet*, 19 February 2020, at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30418-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30418-9/fulltext).

¹⁷ President Xi Jinping said that China’s extraordinary response has “bought precious time for other countries to fight the virus and made a significant contribution to the world”. See “President Xi Speaks to UN Secretary General on the Phone”, China’s foreign ministry, 13 March 2020.

¹⁸ “Its Coronavirus Cases Dwindling, China Turns Focus Outward”, *The New York Times*, 18 March 2020.

¹⁹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference”, China’s foreign ministry, 19 March 2020.

²⁰ It is not clear whether Zhong Nanshan made his remarks on his own accord or was prompted to do so by the Chinese authorities. Either way, he did not offer any scientific basis for his remarks. See “Zhong Nanshan cheng xinguan feiyan bu yiding fayuan zai Zhongguo yiqing si yuedi kekong wangyou reyi” (Zhong Nanshan said the coronavirus may not necessarily have originated from China, it can be controlled by end April, hot discussion among netizens), *rfi*, 27 February 2020.

²¹ “Blaming China for own virus control failure detestable”, *Global Times*, 20 February 2020.

²² Zhao Lijian made his debut as China’s 31st foreign ministry spokesperson on 24 February 2020.

²³ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference”, China’s foreign ministry, 4 March 2020.

²⁴ Chinese Ambassador Lin Songtian’s twitter account, 8 March 2020.

²⁵ Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s twitter account, 20 March 2020. Zhao was responding to remarks by Robert Redfield (Director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), who testified before the House Foreign Affairs Sub-committee hearing on the United States and international response to COVID-19 on 27 February 2020. In his remarks, Robert Redfield said that some COVID-19 deaths in America could have been diagnosed as victims of influenza. See “Interview: Some flu-related deaths in U.S. may have connections with COVID-19, says expert”, *Xinhuanet*, 13 March 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/13/c_138874738.htm.

²⁶ US President Donald Trump used the term “Chinese virus” in two of his tweets on 18 March 2020. See also “Trump again defends use of the term ‘China virus’”, *CNN*, 19 March 2020.

²⁷ “Is it racist to call coronavirus the ‘Wuhan Virus’? GOP congressman’s self-quarantine tweet sparks a debate”, *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2020; “Coronavirus: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo switches disease name to ‘Wuhan virus’ as it spreads in the US”, *SCMP*, 7 March 2020; “In new low, Pompeo passes buck to Beijing”, *Global Times*, 8 March 2020; “Washington’s blame game hides US prevention failure”, *Global Times*, 13 March 2020; and, “China’s senior diplomat Yang Jiechi voices strong objections to Washington over coronavirus accusations”, *CGTN*, 17 March 2020.

²⁸ The war of words between China and the United States seemed to have been dialled down after Cui Tiankai, the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, said in an interview on AXIOS that the source of the coronavirus was best left to the medical experts to determine and it was not for non-experts to speculate. Thereafter, US President Trump refrained from using the “Chinese virus”

reference. See “Top Chinese official disowns U.S. military lab coronavirus conspiracy”, AXIOS, 22 March 2020.

²⁹ “World leaders positively evaluate, support China’s fight against virus outbreak”, *People’s Daily*, 31 January 2020; “World leaders voice support for coronavirus-hit Wuhan”, CGTN, 4 February 2020; “World Leaders Commend and Support China’s Efforts Against the Coronavirus Outbreak”, China’s foreign ministry, 5 February 2020; “World Leaders Express Appreciation and Support for China’s Efforts to Counter the Outbreak”, China’s foreign ministry, 8 February 2020; “World leaders show support for China’s fight against novel coronavirus epidemic”, Xinhuanet, 11 February 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/11/c_138774422.htm; “Nations support fight against virus”, China Daily, 17 February 2020; and, “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets with Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai”, China’s foreign ministry, 19 February 2020.

³⁰ “Xinhua Headlines: ‘You are not alone’ – countries worldwide offer support, aid to China’s fight against coronavirus”, Xinhuanet, 17 February 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/17/c_138792313.htm. The coverage of Singapore came before Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and President Halimah Yaacob wrote separate letters to Chinese President Xi Jinping on 24 February 2020 to reaffirm Singapore’s support for China in the fight against the coronavirus.

³¹ “‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’: Chinese President Xi Jinping hails Cambodia’s support”, CGTN, 5 February 2020.

³² “Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Opened in a Special Way”; and, “China, ASEAN pledge joint efforts to combat coronavirus outbreak”, Xinhuanet, 20 February 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/20/c_138802892.htm.

³³ “Wang Yi: Foreign Ministers of China and ASEAN Agreed to Work Closely and Support Each Other to Jointly Overcome Difficulties with Strong Confidence”, China’s foreign ministry, 20 February 2020.

³⁴ At that time, there were two reported coronavirus cases in the Philippines. See “China donates 200K surgical masks to PH”, *Philippine News Agency*, 3 February 2020. A second tranche of aid including another 100,000 test kits (on top of 2,000 sent earlier), 100,000 surgical masks, 10,000 N95 masks, and 10,000 sets of personal protective equipment were made in March 2020. See “China to donate 100,000 more Covid-19 test kits to Philippines”, *The Star*, 18 March 2020.

³⁵ “COVID-19: China medical supplies for Cambodia arrive”, *Khmer Times*, 18 March 2020.

³⁶ Updates on Coronavirus outbreak (Jan 22 - March 9), *Global Times*, 22 January 2020 (updated 10 March 2020). See also “Should we thank China for face mask donation when Filipinos donated first?”, *interaksyon*, 6 February 2020, at <https://www.interaksyon.com/politics-issues/2020/02/06/161505/donations-face-mask-philippines-china-novel-coronavirus/>.

³⁷ “In show of gratitude, Cambodian families send masks to Chinese doctors to combat coronavirus”, Xinhuanet, 5 February 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/05/c_138757805.htm.

³⁸ “Cambodia, China launch joint military exercise on anti-terrorism, humanitarian rescue”, Xinhuanet, 16 March 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/16/c_138882578.htm.

³⁹ Malaysia had earlier assisted China in its coronavirus fight including donating 18 million pieces of medical gloves to China. See “Malaysia lends a helping hand to China”, *The Star*, 1 February 2020.

⁴⁰ “Chinese embassy, companies donate medical supplies to Malaysian hospitals against COVID-19”, Xinhuanet, 19 March 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/19/c_138895248.htm.

⁴¹ “100k face masks arriving from China on March 20”, *The Star*, 20 March 2020. The Malaysian government has separately purchased 10 million face masks from China. See “Transport minister: Importation of 10 million face masks from China because local producers can’t keep up”, *malaymail*, 22 March 2020.

⁴² A Thai company reportedly donated 1 million gloves through the Shanghai charity foundation to the Shanghai government medical and related institutions with links to 15 hospitals to assist them in fighting the coronavirus outbreak in China. See “Sri Trang Group donates 2 million gloves to assist efforts in fighting the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak”, *Bangkok Post*, 26 February 2020. See also “C.P. Group Donates Baht 222 Million to Support China’s Efforts in Combating the Coronavirus”, C.P. Group, 27 January 2020.

⁴³ “China pledges to send anti-coronavirus supplies to Thailand”, Khaosodenglish, 19 March 2020 and “Chinese Charity Organizations Assist Thailand in Its Fight Against COVID-19”, Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, 31 March 2020.

⁴⁴ In early February 2020, Indonesian Coordinating Minister Airlangga Hartarto said that China had placed a large order for three months’ worth of mask production from Indonesia. See “Got masks? China orders three months’ supply of Indonesian face masks amid coronavirus outbreak”, *The Jakarta Post*, 4 February 2020.

⁴⁵ “Coronavirus: Alibaba, Jack Ma donate masks, test kits to Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand”, SCMP, 20 March 2020.

⁴⁶ On 11 February 2020, two Myanmar companies donated 36,000 masks to the Chinese government. See “Myanmar companies donate disposable masks to China”, Xinhuanet, 11 February 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2020-02/11/c_138774722.htm.

⁴⁷ In late January to early February 2020, Laotians and Chinese expatriate communities in Laos donated a total of 592,000 masks, 160,000 gloves, 25,000 caps and 1,000 protective goggles to China. Separately, in the same month of February 2020, over 300 Laotian companies donated more than US\$500,000 to support China’s coronavirus fight. See “Lao and Chinese communities in Laos offer aid relief to Wuhan”, *The Star*, 11 February 2020 and “Virus fight receives support across Asia”, *China Daily*, 14 February 2020.

⁴⁸ Brunei was reported to have donated at least 150,000 masks to China. See “Wenlai juanseng shoupi 5 wan zhi fanghu kouzhao di Gui zhu Guangxi zhan ‘yi’” (Brunei donates first batch of 50,000 masks to Guangxi to fight the coronavirus), China News, 5 February 2020.

⁴⁹ “Vietnam flies \$500,000 in medical aid to China amid novel coronavirus epidemic”, *tuoi tre news*, 10 February 2020.

⁵⁰ Beginning from early February 2020, Singapore responded to China’s early request for personal protective equipment, medical supplies and equipment (including 3 polymerase chain reaction machines that can screen individuals for coronavirus), as well as diagnostic test kits (20,000 test kits were sent). The government also contributed to an effort by the Singapore Red Cross to raise funds for humanitarian assistance to affected communities in China. Over S\$6 million was raised. See “Letters from Singapore Leaders on the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak in China”, Singapore’s foreign ministry, 24 February 2020 and “Singapore to send test kits, machines that screen for coronavirus to China, says Heng Swee Keat”, *Straits Times*, 7 February 2020.

⁵¹ “Wang Yi: Foreign Ministers of China and ASEAN Agreed to Work Closely and Support Each Other to Jointly Overcome Difficulties with Strong Confidence”, China’s foreign ministry, 20 February 2020. One of the countries China apparently had in mind was Singapore. When Wang Yi met Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan a day earlier in Vientiane, Wang Yi expressed China’s wish that as progress is made internally to fight the coronavirus, “Singapore will take positive measures to resume normal people-to-people exchanges between the two countries at an early date”. See “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets with Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan”, China’s foreign ministry, 20 February 2020.

⁵² “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Daily Briefing Online”, China’s foreign ministry, 3 February 2020.

⁵³ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference”, China’s foreign ministry, 26 February, 2020.

⁵⁴ “China bars foreigners from entering”, *Straits Times*, 27 March 2020.

⁵⁵ “China’s coronavirus aid to Cambodia will boost regional relations”, *Global Times*, 24 March 2020.

⁵⁶ In 2020, China is celebrating 70th anniversary of relations with Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar; 45th anniversary of relations with Thailand and the Philippines; and, 30th anniversary of relations with Singapore.

To read earlier issues of ISEAS Perspective please click here:
<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective>

Preceding three issues of ISEAS Perspective:

2020/25 “Malaysia 2020: The Impasse of Two-Coalition Politics” by Kai Ostwald
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_25.pdf

2020/24 “Strategic Divergences: Australia and Maritime Southeast Asia” by Malcolm Cook
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_24.pdf

2020/23 “Thailand’s ‘Complex Engagement’ Approach in Foreign Policy: A Balancing Act” by Supalak Ganjanakhundee
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_23.pdf

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
---	---	--