

## **Mask Diplomacy – China-Africa Relations in the Light of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

István Engelberth\* and Judit Sági\*\*

*Budapest Business School – University of Applied Sciences, Hungary*

### **Abstract**

The coronavirus pandemic that emerged in 2019 had a profound impact on the world economy, trade, and international relations. The long-term effects of the pandemic are not yet known, but the countries of the world – including the global powers – have tried to adapt according to their own interests, and find the right answers to the challenges so that the pandemic might not decrease their international power. The study seeks to answer the question of how China, as a growing world power, has sought to address the pandemic disease in its policy relations with African countries. Economic and political relations between the Black Continent and the Asian superpower have been developing spectacularly since the 1990s. This system of relationships has its own peculiarities, which have already been addressed in several studies. What characterized the relationship between the two parties during the pandemic in the first months of 2020? What new challenges have threatened the relationship and what were the answers to these? What role do these issues play in the global competition that China and the United States are facing? The study is seeking to examine the events that

happened internationally, since the outbreak of the pandemic until the first half of 2020. The sources of literature therefore mostly cover the news from the international press. These events are then to be interpreted in the context of China's previous policy towards the African continent. China's interest in Africa did not change during the pandemic; it has pursued the maintenance and strengthening of established relations and alliances. The main tool for this has been aiding poor countries, and thereby display an image of a responsible global power. In this, China could rely on the diplomatic relations it had built during the previous decades. However, the Asian superpower was forced to react to unexpected challenges, which it managed with success. The African allies have helped China to continue with its plans to transform the US-dominated world order towards its own interests.

**Keywords:** *China, Africa, COVID-19, international relations*

## 1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic that emerged in 2019 came as a surprise to humanity and had a profound impact on the world economy, trade, and international relations. The long-term effects of the pandemic are not yet known, but the countries of the world – including the global powers – have tried to adapt according to their own interests, and find answers to the challenges so that the pandemic might not decrease their international power. The pandemic is thus a compulsion, but also an opportunity for countries to strengthen their position in the global arena by taking advantage of the instability of the international environment. (Brzezinski, 1997)

In addition to the competition of global powers, the epidemic has also become a struggle for political arrangements. The question arose as to whether centralized (authoritarian) or democratically functioning

states were more successful in the fight against the pandemic. This approach has become important when considering China's communist/socialist regime. China's global role, and thus its influence in Africa, can undoubtedly be strengthened if the "catching-up states" see the East – China and its political system – as the one to follow instead of the West. In global competition, a country's epidemiological measures are important not only for the supply of the population of that state, but also because the international perception of this, if positive, is a resource that can be converted into power and influence. (Walt, 2020)

It is worth mentioning the application of soft power, which is an increasingly important system of advocacy in international relations. The soft power definition was first used by Joseph Nye in another context than China. It complements the definition of "hard power" in the struggle for power. While hard power is coercion and force, "soft power" is connected to attraction. Softer tools are suitable for convincing countries and societies that they will benefit if they fall into the sphere of influence of the global power (Nye, 2004).

In our study, we consider Chinese mask diplomacy during the pandemic as part of its soft power. The term itself first appeared in the international press. Mask diplomacy includes the humanitarian assistance provided by China to several countries during 2020, including African states. The assessment of Chinese support is controversial, and it has been since before the outbreak. According to some authors, this support has evidently had a positive effect on bilateral trade (Liu and Tang, 2017). According to Guillon and Mathonnat (2017), Chinese health aid took into account the economic situation of a given state but was not related to the health care needs of African countries. No strong evidence was found that decisions relating to the distribution of Chinese health aid favoured countries that were exclusively rich in natural resources or had important trade relations with China. However, as it

was reported by Dreher and Fuchs (2015) and Dreher *et al.* (2018), and confirmed in the results of Guillon and Mathonnat (2017), health assistance is used as a part of China's foreign policy, whose priority area is that the supported country recognizes the one-China principle. Naim (2007) and Lin *et al.* (2016) suggest China's aid practices aim to achieve its own political and economic goals the most, i.e. to gain access to the resources needed for its development on the continent and provide export markets for its products. Moreover, it uses the aid policy in international institutions and relations in order to increase its global superpower. Dreher *et al.* (2018) argue that China uses official development assistance to advance its foreign policy goals, such as forming coalitions within international organizations.

In addition to the perception of the aid policy, the assessment of the growing economic and trade relations between the two parties is not uniform. The literature on this can be divided into two broad categories. Some scholars say Chinese relations help to accelerate Africa's development. This is especially true for infrastructure developments. In recent decades, the barrier to the continent's development has been seen by many as the underdeveloped infrastructure. Others, on the other hand, argue that relations have a negligible or rather negative impact on economic growth and competitiveness in African countries, and rather Chinese economic interests dominate relations, the main purpose of which is access to critical resources (Adisu *et al.*, 2010; Busse *et al.*, 2016; Foster *et al.*, 2009; Kolstad and Wiig, 2011). According to Yun Sun (2014), the Asian power is actually re-colonizing (second colonization) the black continent.

This study seeks to answer the question of how China, as a growing world power, has sought to address the pandemic disease in its policy relations with African countries. What characterized the relationship between the two parties during the pandemic in the first months of 2020?

To what extent do these fit in with China's previous policy relations with the African continent? What new challenges have threatened the relationship and what were the responses to these challenges? We also aimed to place these issues in the context of the global competition that China and the United States are facing.

We examine how during the pandemic Beijing tried to build an image of a responsible great power and what unique features appeared in the so-called Chinese soft power and mask diplomacy. Since the dominant power of Sino-African relations is the Asian superpower, the study also focuses primarily on Chinese actions. In the first part, we outline the most important characteristics of the relations, the nature of trade and the economic relations before the pandemic. In the second part, we examine what characterized these relations during the first half of 2020, to what extent they have been a continuation of the cooperation during the previous period, and how the pandemic affected them. We also investigate how China has mobilized its African supporters for the long-term goal in order to transform the US-centred international institutional system in its favour.

Based on literature, the following hypotheses are proposed in this topic:

- H.1. China has continued the traditions and used the tools it has developed in its policy towards Africa in recent decades.*
- H.2. China has tried to adapt to the changed situation, but still keeping in mind its goal of changing the international institutional system to its own needs.*
- H.3. The pandemic does not cause a break, a significant change in long-term Sino-African relations.*

The sources of the study are mainly news items published in the international press, in international forums - often in the Chinese and the African media. We intended to compare these with the criteria which have been published in several studies and have characterized China's political relationship with the African continent in recent years. The authors have already addressed the Sino-African relationship in previous studies (Engelberth and Sági, 2017; Sági and Engelberth, 2018). A useful basis for the study is Yun Sun's *Africa in China's foreign policy* (2014) for promoting China's interests in Africa, and Willemien Viljoen's "The China-Africa trade relationship" (2019) study in negotiating trade relation. China's aid policy concerning Africa before the pandemic situation is analysed in detail by Guillon and Mathonnat (2017; 2020).

## **2. Soft Power, Responsible Superpower and Mask Diplomacy**

The oldest continuous civilization on Earth can no longer afford the millennial "tradition" of turning only inward. At the same time, greatness also comes with responsibility, a responsibility for the development (survival) of human civilization. As such "ideas" can be found from the Roman Empire to the political (imperial) ideologies of the United States. With this policy, China not only emphasizes its responsibility for the world, but also legitimizes the system itself domestically. Therefore, it is more applicable to use an intermestic approach which allows China's policy preferences to influence its domestic actors as well.

Nowadays, the world has become much more globalized than the previous decades or centuries, which must be considered by Beijing decision-makers as well. With its Open-Door Policy, China has become a global player since 1978 at an increasing pace, and therefore, events in

Africa can only be interpreted accurately in the context of the world economy and world politics. Ultimately, the spread of the virus is itself a “product” of globalization.

China’s increasing integration into the world economy and its growing economic power results in more and more advantages in relation to the global world economy. Africa is an increasingly important territory for its global presence. Many approaches suggest that the Asian superpower is actually re-colonizing the black continent (second colonization) (Sun, 2014: 5-8). However, this would be a too simple approach. Relations have several characteristics that distinguish today’s Chinese politics from the former European conquest. Chinese policy also seeks to build on these characteristics.

The Chinese worldview is largely based on Confucian ideals that time is infinite and continuous. That is why the Chinese strategy is considering a 50-100 year horizon. The other important principle is order or stability. These are goals in themselves, not just tools to achieve the goal. It also follows that in the Chinese worldview, collective goals often override the rights and interests of the individual. This can be partly explained by the fact that in international relations the individual does not choose between political systems, but is willing to do business with “anyone”.<sup>1</sup> Applying the approach above: cooperation with dictators can also help the flourishing of people. Party due to this, Beijing politics are often seen as pragmatic and unprincipled. as criticized by Western thinkers. In our view, the Chinese ideology described above obscures the true face of dictatorship and serves only its own interests of power.

China can also rely on the fact that it used to be as undeveloped as African countries. Therefore, according to the Chinese narrative, it is better able to understand the problems of the continent than the Westerners, especially as the former colonists caused so much suffering.

They cared solely about the exploitation of resources, instead of the eradication of poverty and backwardness. China is also trying to position itself as a model that shows that it is historically possible to break out of the vicious circle of poverty in a very short time. Chinese politics in Africa operates along the lines of belongingness, resulting in solidarity, (previously) similar development, common destiny, and interests. China will never go on a colonial path as some countries have done (in the past). Neither will it allow colonization to reappear in Africa, said the Chinese Foreign Minister said before his trip to Africa in May 2020. (*SCMP*<sup>2</sup>, 5th May 2014)

During the first months of 2020, Chinese soft power was associated with the term ‘mask diplomacy’ in the international discourse. China has sought to present itself as a responsible and helpful proactive superpower and to help with medical equipment almost everywhere in the world, including Africa. In this regard, mask diplomacy could build on the achievements that China has made on the black continent in recent decades. China tried to adapt flexibly to changes and unexpected events during the pandemic. Examples of the former are the international criticisms of the Chinese treatment of the virus or atrocities against Africans in China. We have seen adaptation in proactive Chinese actions – in contrast to the more reactive policy of the US. Other examples were the so-called health care Silk Road plan, or the intensification of the Chinese (central) communication in the online space (“Twitter diplomacy”). In the course of these activities, an image emerged that the Asian politics went beyond Africa, the continent being one of the arenas of the global game aimed at transforming the global world order. In sum, in reinforcing the image of a “responsible superpower”, the pandemic has not only created a threat but also a favourable opportunity.

The idea of China as a responsible superpower preceded the pandemic. At the same time, the situation provided an opportunity to

reinforce this message about itself through the tools of mask diplomacy. This was preceded by the “peaceful development” policy announced in 2003, which states that China is a responsible power that avoids conflicts at the international level and focuses on internal prosperity and development. It is open to the outside world, using primarily soft power methods and not interfering in the affairs of other states. Then in 2005 the doctrine was supplemented by an updated theory of the “harmonious world order” dating back to the Csou-era (11th and 3rd centuries BC), which meant a multipolar world order, which is free of conflict, cooperation and a suitable environment provided for the development of all the nations around the world (Boros, 2017). The Chinese leadership thus interprets the Chou-era’s view of a harmonious society in accordance with its own political-power interests. China has been spending billions of yuan on soft power for years, and aims to become a “socialist cultural superpower,” as marked by a 2011 Central Commission resolution. In 2013, Xi Jinping, China’s leader (president and party secretary), used the expression “Chinese dream,” which has also become a symbolic expression for today’s Chinese soft power (*The Economist*, 24th May 2019).

China has provided significant assistance to countries around the world in curbing the disease. A variety of medical equipment, such as masks, played a key role in this. China combined traditional, gift-based relationship building with the situational advantage that the pandemic first appeared there, so it got through the crisis first. Thus, it gained experience and knowledge about the disease. On the other hand, it had huge capacities to produce the necessary equipment. Thus, China intended to act as a kind of saviour of humanity in the fight against the pandemic. This provided an excellent opportunity for Beijing to strengthen its image as a responsible superpower.

During the first months of the pandemic, as part of the soft power and the mask diplomacy, a new form of Chinese political communication has been reinforced: the so-called Twitter diplomacy (“Twit-plomacy”). Social networking sites have also played a role in the rapid spread of information criticizing the pandemic situation in China, and this has been the case in Africa too. Although only about 43% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa has a mobile phone and about 23% has mobile internet, the region is the fastest-growing mobile phone market in the continent.<sup>3</sup> In order to strengthen the role of social platforms, the political machinery of the Asian country also tried to adapt even before the pandemic. In addition to the usually positive and optimistic messages from the Chinese – most often – state media, diplomats opened more and more Twitter accounts as far back as 2019. In October 2019, the Beijing Foreign Ministry also opened a Twitter account<sup>4</sup> (CGTN, 15th January 2020). This is notable since Twitter is banned in China. But African leaders did not want to be left out of the process either and many politicians – e.g. the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Ethiopian prime minister – became a constant “actor” in social media.

### **3. The Geostrategic Role of the Sino-African Relations**

Nowadays China sees an ally in the African countries which are helping its steps to transform the US-centred global order towards its needs. Besides, African states, which make up a quarter of the world’s countries, are strengthening the international legitimacy and recognition of the People’s Republic of China. In the past, this had two key elements. In 1971, in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, the People’s Republic of China took over the position of Taiwan in the Assembly, including the Security Council. Beijing received 26

votes from African countries out of the 76 votes. After the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, much of the developed world “considered” introducing sanctions against China. There was a chance that the Asian state, which at the time was not as substantial a player as it is today - would be isolated. In this situation China was saved partly by African states which refused to follow the “West”. In gratitude, every year the Chinese foreign minister’s first foreign trip is to Africa. In January 2020, the foreign minister visited five countries: Egypt, Eritrea, Djibouti, Burundi, and Zimbabwe (*SCMP*, 4th January 2020). At the very least, according to the announcements, the threatening pandemic and its possible consequences were not discussed at that time.

China’s global presence is strengthened by the fact that, with the support of African states, Beijing has gained strong positions in several international institutions. In 2020, four of the 15 UN specialized agencies had Chinese leaders.<sup>5</sup> There is no other Member State that has so many senior positions in the organization’s specialized institutions. (*SCMP*, 14th March 2020, Chandler *et al.*, 2017) Until 2017, the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) was also of Chinese descent. At this time, the former Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who is a doctor as well, was elected to the post with the support of the Beijing diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> (Margaret Chan was widely criticized for her handling of the 1997 H5N1 avian influenza outbreak and the 2003 SARS outbreak in Hong Kong (especially in the case of the latter, for taking for granted misleading information shared by the Mainland China authority – the same reason for which Tedros Adhanom was later criticized), though that was when she was Hong Kong’s Director of Health, before she became the DG of WHO.)

It is important to address a geopolitical aspect of China’s policy towards Africa. The location of the country is one of the most unfavourable among the global powers. The rapid economic growth of

the 1980s required raw materials, including crude oil, an essential source of energy for modernization. (China has become a net importer of oil since 1993.) Major oil regions have become the areas of influential rival superpowers. In the Middle East and Latin America, the dominant role was played by the USA, the Siberian fields by the territory of the neighbouring rival – the Soviet Union and then Russia. In addition, the country is in a rather isolated position in terms of geographical location and political stance.) To the north and west, it is bordered by deserts and mountains, to the east and south by the ocean and the seas. The country lives in the “embrace” of rival superpowers, with India on the west, Russia on the north, and the economic and political presence of the US on the east and south. But the relationship with Japan or the Islamic world is not without its problems either. Economic development has required a “zone of influence,” and in the face of the geopolitical and ideological isolation the African expansion could have meant a window of opportunity.

#### **4. Economic Relations before the Pandemic**

During the cold war, China’s interest in Africa was mainly driven by ideology, and restricted in the field of economy to bilateral trading and the Chinese aid for the countries of the region. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chinese actions which were concentrated to Africa, were mainly ad-hoc (Vörös, 2015: 35); and it was only from the 1980s they started to be part of a well-designed strategy. The later process was intensified by the foundation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOFAC) in 2000. This cooperation got a new dynamism, as investments, the infrastructural and financial cooperation, as well as tourism started to develop fast, alongside the intensification of commerce. Initially, the continent’s raw materials, and later the market

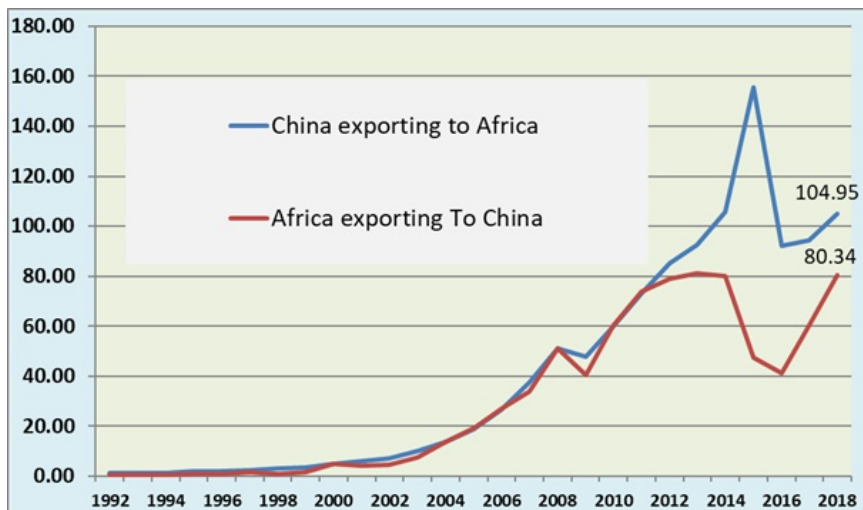
of mass-produced products, so called “crappy products”, initiated China’s presence in the black continent. Nowadays, Africa is the continent with the most rapidly growing population – and with youngest population as well – which provides cheap inputs for labour market and for investments. During the past decades, the increased purchasing power of the middle classes have made the continent more attractive for the modern Chinese products.

In the 1950s the bilateral trading was worth only 12 million, but it increased to 166 million by 1990. However, China’s share was around 1% of African foreign trade; and increased to only 3% (with US\$10 billion) in 2000. After the millennium, spectacular growth began. In 2008, bilateral trading volume exceeded US\$100 billion, which made China the biggest partner of the continent, overtaking the USA. Trading volume exceeded US\$200 billion in 2015, US\$185 billion in 2018, and over US\$209 billion in 2019 (*SCMP*, 18th January 2020). In contrast, Africa owns only 5% of China’s 4-5000 billion global trading volume. In the previous years, trading did not develop in the same way. In 2014, China’s minister of foreign affairs set the aim of reaching US\$ 400 billion by 2020 (*SCMP*, 5th May 2020).<sup>7</sup> From the data we can assume that Africa is not an important trading partner for China per se, but the continent’s development prospects are what provide further opportunities for the future.

The slowdown of the Chinese economy and the world economy has led to a decrease in China’s export volume by 3.8% to US\$95.5 billion even before the pandemic emerged. During this period, imports increased by 7.9% to US\$113.2 billion. As a result, in 2019 the net volume of bilateral trading increased by only 2.2%, compared to the 20% increase in the previous year. One of the main reasons was the low price of raw materials, especially petroleum, which is the main import for China from the black continent. Its share is usually around 30-32%,

which significantly supports the diversification of energy imports of the Asian state (Biedermann and Kiss, 2017).

**Figure 1** China-Africa Trade (in billion US\$), 1992-2018



Source: Own editing, John Hopkins University (China Africa Research Initiative).

The structure of trading is mainly unilateral and reminds us of the colonial times. Africa has mostly transported raw materials and energy resources to China, in exchange for manufacturing products and services which have become more modern and higher quality over the years. From the point of view of Africa, the trade balance has shown a deficit, except for the years when raw material prices (e.g. petroleum) were high worldwide, like throughout the 15 years after 2000. The structure of the trade and the Asian surplus provide a strong argument for those who

accuse China of the re-colonization of Africa, by taking advantage of the region with cheap exports. (*SCMP*, 18th January 2020)

Nowadays the well-known Chinese companies are also present in the countries of the black continent. It is more and more important for them to produce their products at lower labour costs than in China. They often finance the construction of industrial territories and free trade areas, where they can produce inventories on a large scale from shoes to electronic goods, which otherwise were imported from China. These products are then usually forwarded to European and American retailers. This makes it easier for China to be present in the world economy, because if a boycott or a retributive duty were to be introduced, it would not affect the African manufacturing sites. In the African continent there are more than 10,000 companies which are Chinese-owned. On a yearly basis approximately 12% of the African production, amounting to US\$500 million, is made by Chinese companies.<sup>8</sup>

## **5. The Effects of the Pandemic on Chinese-African Connections**

It posed a great danger for Africa that the central focus of the pandemic in the initial months of 2020 was China and from March it was the European Union, its main trading partners. In 2019, China's proportion was 11% of African exports and 16% of African imports. Europe's share of exports was 33% and 32% of imports (UNECA, 2020). Both areas were in recession because of the pandemic. The EU's GDP decreased by 3.5% in the first three months (Eurostat, 2020), and Chinese GDP decreased by 6.8%. The data of the Customs Duty of Beijing shows that from January to April the trading volume between China and Africa decreased by 16.8% compared to the previous year. Chinese exports to Africa decreased by 9.3% while imports decreased by 24.4%. (*Xinhuanet*, 15th May 2020)

Many international institutions warned about the serious dangers awaiting Africa. The UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) reported in 2020 (April) that the economy would decline after a 25-year-long increase. This recession could be 1.8% or in the worst case 2.6%. Many important sectors were hit worse. The collapse of world market prices deeply affected the export of petroleum, which amounted to 40% of African exports and 7.4% of GDP in 2019. The price of metals also decreased by one-fifth, and the price of African food decreased significantly. Metals contribute 12% to the exports of the continent and foods 11%. Many sectors collapsed, like the textile and fresh flower industry. Tourism – which amounts to around 40% of GDP – completely stopped, as did the supporting air transportation. Africa was deeply affected by a decreasing number of tourists, in contrast with 2020 when there was an increase of 50% (Tarrósy, 2020). According to the report of UNECA, the health and social sector would have needed aid of about US\$100 billion. Another US\$100 billion dollars would have been necessary to avoid economic-financial collapse, in the field of debt finance, operation of the private sector and commercial finance. (UNECA, 2020.)

There is a fresh “allegation” against China’s African politics, which is about the provision of enormous amounts of loans. According to the John Hopkins University (China Africa Research Initiative), between 2000 and 2018 almost US\$150 billion was lent to 49 African countries and to their government-owned companies.<sup>9</sup> (Brautigam, 15th April 2020)<sup>10</sup> According to the World Bank, Beijing held approximately 17% of African debts in 2018, which made China one of the biggest creditors in the world. This opened up a new path with the “diplomacy of debt trap” (Czirják, 2020), or in other words “loan book diplomacy” (Parker and Chefitz, 2018). As critics say, China disbursed developmental loans

in very large amounts for developing states, so that later these countries could be unable to pay them back. In exchange for the shortage in loan repayments, China is asking for concession rights or other favourable terms which provide them economic advantages. In this way China is gaining not only economic influence in the African states, but also political influence. The principle of the argument was the increase of the debts in recent years, whereas the credit to GDP ratio exceeded 50%. (The World Bank recommends a maximum 40% ratio for the low-income countries)

In the spring of 2020 Beijing hesitated in joining the initiative of debt relief for the African countries. The Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed asked the creditors to unleash the interests of part of the nominal value of the loans for low-income states. He also asked for a 10-year redemption period for paying back the remaining amounts of loans, alongside with lower rates of interest. For that the African Union agreed. The African countries asked for immediate financial support as well. The World Bank and the IMF asked the creditors to focus on easing the debts. The G20 in April agreed to postpone for the developing countries the repayment of the bilateral loans regarding the pandemic. China signed the agreement, but tried to withdraw later. They said that those loans which were provided by the Export-Import Bank of the Chinese state were not part of the agreement. One of the reasons was that China basically contracted on bilateral agreements which were part of a bigger economic and trading pact. China gave discounts in these bilateral agreements, as it had done in the years before the pandemic. (*SCMP*, 3rd April 2020) These Chinese steps drove the opinion that China is not willing to adapt to the initiatives of international institutions if it does not serve its interests.

## 6. The Authority of China Is in Danger

When COVID-19 broke out it seemed that China could be the loser of the crisis. On one hand, economically, because this was the area where the first restrictions were introduced. On the other hand, China's emerging global power seemed to lose its international reputation, because of the fact that the virus had started there. Many sources indicated that China is responsible for the emergence of the pandemic. The Chinese restrictions raised questions from politicians and professionals, such as: How trustworthy is the Asian country as an international player? Is China really capable of a leading role in the world? Is China capable of acting as a responsible great power amongst the world countries?

This research aim is not to present the events of the pandemic in China. What is closely related to the subject are the events that happened to the African inhabitants. After successfully(?) handling the pandemic in Wuhan and in its provinces, the authorities introduced strict restrictions in the city of Kanton because they were afraid of the second phase. This seaside city is the most important centre for the African diaspora in China. Around 4,500 African people in the city were put into the fore of the events, but according to some sources this number could be higher, around 15,000, if we take into account illegal immigrants. Eleven Nigerians were diagnosed with the disease, and for that reason strict restrictions were introduced for the Africans, and they were hit by many retaliations in other cities as well. The affected people had been put into quarantine, banned from shopping in supermarkets, and forced to leave their homes (i.e., move out of their apartment, leave their hotel rooms). News appeared quickly in the media about these atrocities, mainly through the internet. They spread worldwide and reached the black continent as well. The tension was indicated by the fact that many African politicians – e.g., in Nigeria – tried to forge political capital in

the social media by instigating anti-China sentiment. As a result of the outrage, accusations of racism were brought to the authorities, but also to Chinese society as a whole. The bilateral relations have been put to the test by this situation. The Chinese movements of the past decades to be recognized by the African habitats were forced by danger. The ambassadors of the countries of the continent and the African Union officially protested in Beijing because of the events. In Nigeria and Ghana, whose citizens were most affected, the Chinese ambassador was ordered to provide an explanation, an unprecedented event.

There were several novelties in this situation. On the one hand, the debates in Sino-African relations have so far been formulated behind closed doors, but now they have been quickly introduced to the public.<sup>11</sup> The Beijing diplomacy apologized – this had not happened with Europe or the US before – and indicated that it would remedy the problems. They emphasized the importance of maintaining fruitful relations with African states. The phrase that the Chinese foreign spokesman used when referring to the protests was as a “reasonable concern”, which reveals a lot (*Politico*, 16th April 2020). Another novelty of the events, although not without precedent, was the increased contribution of social media to shaping the image of China.

Relations with Nigeria have become particularly tense. This has been well illustrated by the fact that the parliament decided in April to examine the legality of Chinese citizens and their businesses based in a West African country. At the end of May, Nigeria evacuated 268 of its citizens from China. Typically, this event was posted on Twitter by the country’s minister of the foreign affairs. (Anadolu Agency, 31st May 2020) It is important to highlight the situation in Nigeria because the country is the largest economy on the continent. Its biggest import partner is China, but it exports mostly to India. Nigerian politics is particularly sensitive to external intervention (Neszmélyi, 2018) and has

acted boldly against Beijing. Similarly, there have been no reports of serious conflicts between China and other African partners.

Losing authority was a threat to China not only in Africa but globally too. Right after the virus appeared in North-America, the US leadership noticed the opportunity of opening a new front line – e.g. a customs war, 5G conflict and the interlinkages between the Chinese companies and the government. The main point was that China is responsible for the pandemic. Moreover, one of the US president's economic advisers had already spoken in mid-May about China paying compensation for the damage it had caused. President Donald Trump, for example, called SARS-CoV-2 the “Chinese virus”. The pandemic became part of the fight for the global leading power between China and the United States, and one of the important fronts of the “fight” was the Black Continent. Beijing rightly thought that if they want to win this “war” they also have to win on the side-lines first.

While China has often received criticism from the states of the modern world, when the pandemic started to evolve, the African leaders did not make such statements. In fact, when the virus started in Wuhan more than 50 African leaders expressed sympathy and support for the Asian country. Many South-African companies even donated cash and various resources to fight the virus. (*Mail & Guardian*, 29th May 2020)

As an international institution the World Health Organization became a scene of the conflict. The organization has an African leader, and he has a significant authority in the continent. The WHO has been criticized, perhaps rightly, for being lenient with the Chinese authorities' international obligations regarding the reporting of data and information. According to Western, mainly North American, criticism in January and February 2020, the organization engaged in communications that were in Beijing's interests and was wary of dissecting responsibility. They often preferred to praise the country's anti-epidemic efforts. The President of

the United States also withdrew U.S. support from the WHO and even suspended the country's membership in May 2020. His reasons included that Beijing actually persuaded the WHO to focus on the positive features of Chinese measures and ignore the negative ones. In doing so, it significantly helped the Beijing government's propaganda campaign, which hid the mistakes made during the outbreak, as well as its human, social and economic costs. (Feldwisch-Drentrup, 2020). China responded quickly: added US\$2 billion to WHO's financial support on the grounds that "the Asian country wants to strengthen the organization's activities in emerging countries". In doing so, China could strengthen the approach and show that even as the US was turning away from poor countries, like the ones in Africa; China was a responsible, proactive helpful power. (Reuters, 18th May 2020) It was even announced that African countries would be the first to receive the Chinese vaccine, for free.

In Chinese communications, a new plan appeared called as the "Health Silk Road" initiative, which was designed to strengthened the image of China as the responsible power. This, and the name itself, was not born during the pandemic. China and the WHO, in the presence of the president of China, Xi Jinping and the Chinese director of the WHO, Margaret Chan (between 2006 and 2017) signed a declaration in 2017 to work together to extend the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative to health care. With this, the WHO became the first UN organization to join the initiative. (*China Daily*, 19th January 2017) In August 2017, the newly appointed leader of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, spoke at a conference about the initiative: "If we are to secure the health of the billions of people represented here, we must seize the opportunities the Belt and Road Initiative provides." (*Axios*, 5th April 2020) OBOR has been seen as a synonym for Chinese expansion. But with this, OBOR could have been supplemented with a fundamentally

humanitarian, aid-oriented content. The long-term thinking of Chinese politics and how they try to fit the “moment” (pandemic and its consequences) flexibly into long-term goals is evident in this.

In the spring of 2020, the UN Security Council, whose presidency was held by China in March, also became a “battleground”. That is why the representative of China decided what to put on the organization’s agenda. The extent of the pandemic was the largest in the Asian state during this period, and it spread to other regions of the world. (Europe slowly became the epicentre.) Many members of the international organization have suggested that the Security Council should address the issue, as the pandemic poses global threats, including security. However, Beijing diplomacy – intending to reduce Chinese responsibility – has steadily delayed discussions on the issue. At the meeting of the Security Council on the 27th of March 2020, China vetoed an agenda proposal to this effect, and was supported by Russia and by its largest African trading partner, South Africa as well. (*Republic World*, 27th March 2020) The majority of the Council then overcame China’s resistance and, mainly under German pressure, held its first virtual meeting about the pandemic on the 9th of April.

The extraordinary, China-Africa summit virtual meeting in June 2020 was particularly instructive, where, besides the Chinese President, 13 African States were attending, including the president of South Africa as the President of the African Union. The meeting, which was about the economic and health consequences of the virus, strengthened the Sino-African alliance. This was indicated in particular by the fact that the joint declaration – on an issue far from the pandemic – drafted that they support China’s efforts in Hongkong to protect its security policy interests. At the same time, China expressed its intention to share the virus vaccine with the developing world in the future. (The EU made a similar statement, but the US did not.) The statement – according to

China's interests – stated that the disease should not be used for political purposes. In the text, it was also mentioned that the virus was natural and not specifically Chinese origin. Thus, on numerous points, the summit sent an indirect message to the US and advocated China on a number of points of contention. (ECDMP, 22th June 2020)

## **7. Mask Diplomacy in Africa**

The “formation” of the virus in Wuhan, and then the Chinese “events” that have often been criticized globally, have intensified the increased use and “refinement” of the soft power-diplomacy tools. In early 2020, China had to start, in addition to the communication offensive from previous years, a counter-offensive. The latter was intended to properly interpret the question of the Chinese “responsibility”. The unfolding so-called mask diplomacy can also be seen as having to fit steps due to a sudden “struggle” (pandemic) into the original strategy: strengthening global positions and getting out of the situation as a winner. Nor should we ignore the fact that the Chinese leadership, by withholding information, during the first months of 2020 caused the virus to spread.

The first coronavirus case in Africa was recorded on the 14th February 2020 in Egypt. In Black Africa, an infected person was registered for the first time in Nigeria on the 27th of February. In the countries, the restrictive measures already learnt from other parts of the world, were taken relatively quickly. On the other hand, because of the hundreds of millions of poor people, the predicament appeared much tougher: Does the coronavirus or the impoverishment due to the coercive measures (food shortage, the spread of other diseases, etc.) cause more problems in society? Due to the latter, it has become extremely urgent to help these countries. The situation of the continent was also aggravated by the fact that, in the modern world's mentality, Africa was (is) still the

home of the problems of poverty, diseases, hunger, wars, and corruption. As an expert said: “When it comes to African healthcare the world is captivated by endless panic and helplessness.”<sup>12</sup> China has sought to prove – as it has done in the past as well – that it sees the continent differently.

The Chinese media, through the increasing number of TV broadcasts in Africa, has sought to broadcast that the Asian state is successful in pandemic management and provides a kind of model for the world, including poor states. China has traditionally positioned itself as an experienced partner to follow. But the information offensive was not just about that, of course. A conscious, well-thought-out image-building began and continued during the pandemic. One of the aims of this is to set an example for Asia. On the other hand, it was intended to overshadow the Chinese shortcomings in connection with the emergence and treatment of the virus. The informational “warfare” – the spread of the Chinese narrative of the “story” – became one of the “legs” of the Chinese actions, the other “leg” is the efforts to concretely help the troubled states. (Peragovics, 2020)

The efforts were supported by the fact that the Asian state had the most experience and knowledge about the disease, and also by the fact that China had globally the most production capacities for the necessary tools (*Deutsche Welle*, 25th March 2020). The help – as it was common in previous years as well – came to Africa in the form of financial support and humanitarian aid. Already during the Ebola pandemic in 2014-2015, West African countries received major support.

The grants were made primarily in kind and not in cash. This was significant because the global market for medical equipment and protective devices quickly became “overwhelmed” in the first months of 2020. At the same time, the Africans were in a difficult position to get them. On one hand, while the prices also multiplied rapidly, they did not

have enough financial resources for the purchase. On the other hand, a “global race” had evolved and the ability of the continent’s states to assert their interests – given their economic weights – was limited. “The West bought most of the materials for the tests... and we are in the end of the queue,” said Robin Wood in April, a physician at the Desmond Tutu HIV Centre in South Africa. (ORF, 28th May 2020) Since it was not possible to accurately predict the effects of the virus, many countries were prepared for the “bad or worst-case scenario”, which only increased competition further. National selfishness made opportunities difficult, as almost every state tried to limit the sale of medical devices by taking their own interests into account. “Politicians instinctively try to protect their own people and “we know that sometimes the worst in human behaviour comes out,” said Simon Missiri, African director with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (*Africanews*, 9th May 2020) Procurement was also hampered by the fact that some poor states were often unable to provide international administrative and logistical conditions for purchases, but they also received help from China in this as well. In contrast to Beijing, the EU has sought to provide a significant aid in the form of many billions of euros for African states. However, the cash nature of this could help the countries less, so its geopolitical importance was also weaker. (ECDMP, 11th May 2020)

Chinese health shipments have often been criticized in Europe or America for their quality and lack of usability. The Chinese authorities tried to pay attention to these over times, as this did not help build the positive image required by the strategy. In African states, however, this was not the case, and the local media was not overwhelmed by the information about it. To what extent this is the “merit” of the African authorities or a consequence of the Chinese shipments of the right quality, is questionable.

Help was not limited only to the gifting of protective and medical equipment. Chinese medical teams came to the continent and often tried to share their knowledge and experience with their African colleagues in online professional forums. As part of the Twitter diplomacy, the Chinese foreign spokesman regularly reported information about this. On May 13, 2020, for example, he wrote that China sent 5 teams of experts to Africa, held 30 video conferences with Africa since the outbreak of COVID19. More than 40 Chinese medical teams shared their experience with 20,000 local health care workers in 400 pieces of training. "Accordingly, it was communicated that "China-Africa brotherhood bolstered in joint anti-pandemic efforts". As of June 2, to help the fight against COVID19, China has sent a total of 148 medical workers to 11 African countries.<sup>13, 14</sup>

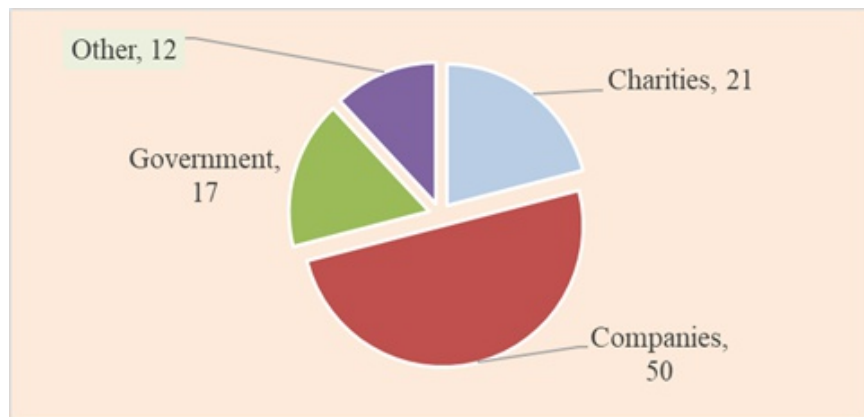
Algeria was the first African country in March 2020 to receive Chinese health assistance. A team of 13 specialists arrived in the country to provide the equipment needed to fight the virus – e.g., medical ventilators – worth US\$450,000 in total. China made a promise to build a hospital that can provide the care of thousands of local and nearly 4,000 Chinese guest workers. (In Algeria, most guest workers came from China.) (*SCMP*, 28th May 2020)

On April 3, 2020, the Nigerian government announced the arrival of an 18-member Chinese medical team to the country, including doctors, nurses, and health consultants who also brought medical equipment with them. In this, but also in the case of Algeria, the cost of protective equipment and medical staff was not paid by the central government, but by Chinese state-owned companies that operate in the two countries. In the North African state, the China State Construction Engineering Corporation, while in Nigeria a combination of more companies managed the help. (*The Africa Report*, 6th April 2020)

The presence of China has not always been fully appreciated in Africa. Thus, the provision of help was not received with the same enthusiasm everywhere. In Nigeria for example, local doctors protested against inviting Chinese health professionals and their action was also supported by other organizations such as the Trade Union Congress (TUC) or the Union of Journalists. The anti-China sentiment and local financial interests in the country may have played a role in this widespread protest beyond health care. The TUC was also in a heated debate with the government over the creation of a 5G network – possibly to be done in China. (*This Day*, 5th April 2020)

It has become a feature of Chinese aid that Chinese cities, companies, and even private companies have become involved outside the “central government.” By May 2020, Chinese aid for the coronavirus had reached US\$280 million. Half of this was provided directly by the companies, and the government’s share was only 17% during this period. (*Deutsche Welle*, 8th June 2020)

**Figure 2** Main Sources of Chinese Covid Aid (% , until early May)



Source: *Deutsche Welle*, 2020, RWR Advisory Group.

Chinese diplomacy played a role in the distribution of shipments. International echoes show that Chinese aid is not selective among African countries, as evidenced by the fact that the Asian superpower has sought to offer its assistance - thus building a global image of a responsible superpower - in almost every region of the world. For example, virus-related donations have also arrived in the US as well.

One of the “brand ambassadors” of donations has become Jack Ma, who, as one of the richest people in the world and a former founder of Alibaba, has sent a lot of donations to all parts of the world, including Africa, through his foundations. He regularly posted his activity – in connection with twitter diplomacy. The Chinese continued the practice of not linking the aid to any political-human rights conditions. In Zimbabwe – which was hit by international restrictions due to its dictatorial regime – Chinese companies donated half a million dollars to the Wilkins Hospital to renovate the country’s primary COVID-19 treatment centre. Sudan, which has also been heavily criticized, also received support, with the Chinese embassy donating more than 400,000 surgical masks to the government at the end of March. On the 23rd April, Chinese doctors held a video conference with their Sudanese colleagues to share their experiences. At the end of May, an Asian medical team arrived in the country. (*Global Times*, 5th June 2020)

## 8. A Few Conclusions

Chinese politics quickly discovered the need to adapt to the new situation that has occurred from the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic. Moreover, it perceived the pandemic as a suitable tool to get out of the crisis more strongly, and increase its international influence and reputation across the world. On the one hand, it associated the “momentary coercion” with its long-term goals. On the other hand,

China saw the pandemic not only as a threat but also an opportunity. An opportunity for the world's most populous country – to develop further its previous strategy – to present itself as a kind of global saviour and as a responsible superpower.

The pandemic also provided an opportunity (to an extent) to simplify the situation for competition between China and the US in which it is important which party can perform better than the other. American isolationist policy has given room for China to act as an initiating, proactive power in many areas. In the first months of 2020, both the Chinese and American leadership were concerned with pandemic management errors, which they tried to cover up or “over-shout” with many various “techniques”. The Chinese opted for an increased international presence, “mask diplomacy,” for this purpose. In contrast, due to its inward-looking nature, American politics found the main culprit in the outside world, international institutions, and China. In 2014, the U.S. was still the coordinator of international assistance for the Ebola epidemic, whilst it had to deal with its own issues in 2020. (*Deutsche Welle*, 25th March 2020) Based on these, we accept our hypothesis that “China has tried to adapt to the new situation, but still keeping in mind its goal to reshape the international institutional system to suit its own needs”.

China's interest in Africa did not change during the epidemic, the Asian state continued to try to maintain and strengthen the established relations and alliances. The main tool for this was to continue the aid policy that had been pursued in the past and to adapt it to the new situation. Thus, it could rightly rely on the diplomatic links built in previous decades. At the same time, it tried to react to unexpected events. This adjustment, also due to the flexibility of Chinese diplomacy, has, in our view, been successful.

With the appearance of the pandemic in Africa, China's assistance has, of course, intensified. The characteristics of China's Africa policy remained the same even in the new situation. It tried to show its selflessness and solidarity, its policy still did not make a difference based on the political system of the countries. It tried to take the circumstances into account and help in those areas that – due to their level of development – were problematic for Africans. Assistance in kind was a response to the lack of financial resources in Africa, with logistical assistance to the underdevelopment of infrastructure. At the same time, the pandemic has increased the attention of ordinary Africans onto China – partly because of the origin of the disease and partly because of the aid. The Chinese soft power adapted to this, of which the mask and, as a part of it, the twitter diplomacy presented in the study became important parts. At the beginning of the study, we formulated our hypothesis as “China has continued the traditions and used the tools it has developed in its policy towards Africa in recent decades.” In our interpretation it has been fulfilled.

However, the answer to our third hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the study – “A pandemic does not cause a break, a significant change in long-term Sino-African relations.” – is far from clear.

The coronavirus pandemic can be interpreted as a contest of different political systems: are (more) authoritarian systems or liberal democracies able to protect their societies more effectively against “external danger”? In the first months of the epidemic, autocratic tendencies and state policies that endanger human rights intensified in some African states. For example, the report of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation or the Human Rights Watch forewarned this. “Parliaments are being closed, the media is being suppressed and the elections are

being postponed. Police and the military have received such permits that have resulted in disproportionate violence.” (ORF, 28th May 2020)

However, in the first months of 2020, divergences in the political arrangements became more pronounced in the Sino-African relations than ever before. African leaders – because of Chinese atrocities against Africans – wanted their voters to comply on social media, so in many cases they made strong criticisms of China. This reinforced the differences which previously were discussed and solved behind closed doors. Now, however, diplomatic messages and actions have been taking place in public. This may predict that conflicts between African states and China may arise in the future. This may be due in part to differences in political systems. In China, it is inconceivable that certain news would spread freely on the Internet. But it can also increase tensions if the Asian country is free to be criticized by African states with democratic features. These could even jeopardize China’s positions in the long run. The question is if China will turn to a direction in the future that seeks to influence the political system of these states. (The former has not been done so far, or in a very polite way.) The question may also be: to what extent can the Chinese model set an example for African societies? Is that the political regime that broke out of poverty in a few decades and now “is handling” the pandemic well.

Chinese efforts may be aided by the unexpectedly severe consequences and costs of the virus in Europe and the United States. These cast a shadow over the West, and about global actors that were previously able to respond well to any disaster, through their strong democratic institutions and developed economies. The international community has viewed them not only as dominant military and economic powers, but also as models of social well-being, and implementers of good and effective governance. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus has thus become not only a health challenge for them,

but also one of the most serious “stress tests” of good governance that has often been voiced by liberal democracies.

The question is that what kind of effects the pandemic will have on the functioning of the world economy, including the Sino-African relations. After these events, will globalization stop or turn around? Several analysts predicted that during the pandemic the production chains around the world would change, disintegrate, and shorten radically. The events may force transnational companies to rethink and some of the European ones may decide to replace Asian or Chinese suppliers with closer partners. The large number of free and low-wage African workers can be a good argument in this regard. Especially North African states – due to their geographical proximity – can take advantage of these opportunities. This process was partly observed even before the pandemic. (*Deutsche Welle*, 13th May 2020) At the same time, it would not be favourable to those plans that aim to make China the world’s originator under the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. The latter is a centre that connects Europe, Africa, and the rest of Asia with modern routes.

Regarding the economic impact of the epidemic, it is also a question of how China will be able to finance future projects, such as infrastructure developments supported by the “One Belt, One Road” – which aims to increase the influence of the Asian superpower on the continent. Debt repayment, which is becoming more difficult for African countries, may increase Beijing’s influence on the continent.

All this, of course, can be overridden by how long the coronavirus pandemic will be with humanity. What are the social and economic implications beyond this? These can start new processes and bring new consequences. Therefore, what is said in our study can be considered as a snapshot that the future can rewrite, even very quickly. At the same time, in our opinion there is a continuity, a kind of predictability in

China's policy towards Africa. This will certainly remain the same in the future, with possible changes, though.

The pandemic has created new opportunities for the great powers, including China. Successful vaccine developments have made it possible for these countries to seek to represent their geopolitical interests through their vaccine deliveries. The geopolitical aspects of emerging vaccine diplomacy raise interesting and important questions that could be the subject of future studies.

## Notes

\* Engelberth István, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Budapest Business School – University of Applied Sciences in Hungary, at the Department of Business Economics, with a teaching scope of Introduction to the European Union Studies, Economic Geography, Economic History, Global Infrastructure Networks and Logistics, and Political Science (in Hungarian). <Email: Engelberth.Istvan@uni-bge.hu>

\*\* Judit Sági (corresponding author), PhD habil., is an Auditor and a Consultant with project management background, and a contributing member and leader of international academic projects. She is an Associate Professor at Budapest Business School – University of Applied Sciences in Hungary, at the Department of Finance, Leader of the Financial Services specializations, and a Visiting Professor with track record in several European universities, mainly for full courses in Banking and Finance. <Email: Sagi.Judit@uni-bge.hu> (ORCID: 0000-0003-4197-3530)

1. There is one condition for cooperation on the part of China: the so-called “One China Principle”, Beijing demands also that its African partners do not recognize the Republic of China, i.e. Taiwan.
2. *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong)
3. Data for the end of 2018. (GSM Association, 2019.)

4. In 2019, 19 Chinese diplomats and 13 foreign embassies or consulates had twitter accounts. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50832915>)
5. FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), ITU (International Telecommunication Union), UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization), ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization)
6. As the head of the WHO, one of the first steps taken by an Ethiopian politician was to appoint the Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe as the WHO's goodwill ambassador, which may be related to Mugabe's good relations with Beijing. The position of charity was eventually withdrawn by the WHO as a result of international outrage.
7. According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the value of bilateral trade in 2014 was over US\$222 billion.
8. The *South China Morning Post* refers to McKinsey's estimate of 2017.
9. Although the Beijing government does not publish accurate data on loans.
10. However, as the researchers state, these are not accurate data either, as they do not contain everything. For example, how much a given country has already paid back. But it also happens that a loan agreement does not use the full amount of a state. But it also happens that the loans are partially or completely released by Beijing.
11. Femi Gbajabiamila, a spokesman for the Nigerian House of Representatives, called on the Chinese ambassador in a public post to express his dissatisfaction. (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/16/coronavirus-china-africa-191444>)
12. Devi Sridhar, researcher of Edinburgh University (FAZ, 06.04.2020)
13. <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1267788140342697984>
14. <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1260562675643199488?s=19>

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