

# China Unleashes the Health Silk Road Against Corona Pandemic

by Hussein Askary, board member of BRIX, the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden

March 28—When China was fighting alone against the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, back in January and February, Western media mocked China and its leadership for mismanaging the nation's health affairs. A Danish newspaper gleefully published a cynical cartoon of the Chinese flag with a cluster of coronaviruses instead of the stars. Others called the COVID-19, a “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus.” China was described as “Asia's sick man” in the *Wall Street Journal*. Chinese and Asian nationals suffered racist attacks in Europe and the United States.

Throughout this, the Chinese people and their leadership were busy fighting ferociously, making huge sacrifices in lives and wealth to control the epidemic. Their fight was praised by the World Health Organization (WHO), which called on the other nations of the world to learn from China in dealing with the outbreak in their own countries. Now that China has successfully stopped the advance of the virus, with zero cases reported on March 19 in mainland China, what are the Chinese people and their government doing? Are they mocking the EU nations and the U.S., which have become the centers of the global pandemic? Is the Chinese media making cartoons about the “European virus”?

No, China has instead unleashed the full force of the “Health Silk Road” to help not only one nation, but virtually all nations, now that it is regaining its production capacity and its medical staff is not under so much stress. As President Xi Jinping indicated in his speech to the March 26 virtual G20 summit, what's required to defeat the pandemic is a “global all-out war.” Interna-



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*Chinese medical professionals show solidarity with Italy in its fight against COVID-19. China has already sent three teams of medical experts to Italy.*

tional cooperation is required “so that humanity, as one, can win the battle against such a major infectious disease.” Nations must all work together, he emphasized, so that together “we can build the strongest global network of control and treatment that the world has ever seen.” That was a point that Xi also made forcefully in his March 27 phone call with President Donald Trump.

## What is the Health Silk Road?

President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 to connect the nations of Asia, Europe and Africa along the routes of the ancient Silk Road with modern transport corridors. However, the BRI has soft infrastructure aspects too, such as health. In the most detailed description of the Belt and Road Initiative by the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road,” published in March 2015, one can read this:



health security and development along the terms of the initiative.” They argue that “Based on these agreements, the building of a Health Silk Road has become a core task leading to an extensive engagement in global health development.” Chen and Bergquist refer to the “Belt and Road High-Level Meeting for Health Cooperation: Towards a Health Silk Road,” held on August 18, 2017 in Beijing, at the end of which the 64 participating countries signed the “Health Silk Road communiqué.”

*The Chinese government responded where the EU failed, with shipments of medical supplies to Italy*

### **East-West Cooperation the Key**

On February 26, Mrs. Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the founder and president of the Schiller Institute, issued a call for an emergency summit among those leaders, as the most important step to cope with the coronavirus pandemic, because it is imperative to coordinate and mobilize all the resources and technologies of all nations toward a common goal and in a unified manner. Otherwise, the COVID-19 virus will be able to penetrate through the cracks created by the schism between East and West based on completely unfounded geopolitical grounds. A very important element in this international effort is to help poor countries build modern hospitals and healthcare centers as soon as possible, to prevent the contagion from bouncing back again.

We should strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries on epidemic information sharing, the exchange of prevention and treatment technologies and the training of medical professionals, and improve our capability to jointly address public health emergencies. We will provide medical assistance and emergency medical aid to relevant countries.

In his speech delivered in the Legislative Chamber of the Uzbek Supreme Assembly on June 22, 2016, President Xi emphasized:

We should step up efforts in deepening medical and health cooperation, and enhancing mutually beneficial cooperation in the alert of infectious diseases, disease control and prevention, medical assistance, traditional medicines and other areas, so as to jointly build a healthy Silk Road.

In an April 2019 scientific [paper](#), “Combating infectious Disease Epidemics through China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” researchers Jin Chen, Robert Bergquist, *et al.* wrote that, “The Healthy China 2030 plan, promulgated in 2016, considers health as one of the national policy priorities, and the Memorandum of Understanding with the World Health Organization (WHO), [was] signed in 2017, which promotes global

On March 19, the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministers, Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi, respectively, discussed the proposed UN Permanent-5 Security Council summit (proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin), the Foreign Ministry reported on March 18. Lavrov and Wang spoke by phone on the international coronavirus situation and their bilateral cooperation in confronting it, in the spirit of their strategic partnership. They also “touched on” the UN Security Council’s “preparations for the summit of permanent members of the Security Council, and the development of cooperation in the Russia-India-China format.” China is the Security Council chair this month.

What the coronavirus should have already taught the leaders of the world is, that it does not care if

the victims are Asian, European, American or African. It attacks them because they are human. The leaders' response should be likewise—as humans! Every nation is called upon now to join the Health Silk Road to save lives and build a secure and healthy future for all mankind.

In a March 25 [opinion piece](#) in the *Financial Times*, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmedi made exactly that point. African nations have no ability to launch large stimulus packages as is being done in advanced-sector nations, he warned. “We can defeat this invisible and vicious adversary, but only with global leadership,” he said, adding that “If the virus is not defeated in Africa, it will only bounce back to the rest of the world.” A few days earlier, on March 19, African finance ministers called for the suspension of interest payments on their multilateral and sovereign bonds due in 2020, to free up \$44 billion to combat the coronavirus and its economic impact.

It is noteworthy that in his [address](#) to the August 2017 Beijing conference referenced above, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus observed:

As you know, the world faces increasing and more complex epidemics, pandemics and disasters. Not only are these events more likely to occur, they're also likely to have a bigger impact on human health, the social fabric, security and the economy....

President Xi's proposal for a Health Silk Road, which strengthens and renews ancient links between cultures and people, with health at its core, is indeed visionary.

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.... WHO has proposed a strategic partnership with China to target vulnerable countries along the Belt and Road and in Africa....

The Belt and Road Initiative contains the



*A team of Chinese experts arrived in Iraq March 8, 2020, as part of China's assistance in confronting the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.*

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fundamentals to achieve universal health coverage: infrastructure, access to medicines, human resources, and a platform to share experience and promote best practices....

China has much to teach us about these issues. It is a world leader in disease surveillance and outbreak control, and was one of the first countries to step in during the Ebola outbreak. China has built a nationwide health insurance scheme that covers more than 95% of its population. The country also has a great capacity for research and development, and was one of the first countries to meet the Millennium Development Goal for maternal health.

We should build upon those experiences.... Let us, the health leaders of 60 countries gathered here, and public health partners, build a healthy Silk Road, together.

Toward this end, now that it has its own COVID-19 epidemic more under control, China has been providing vital assistance—both equipment and personnel—to many countries. In a March 26 press conference, Zeng Yixin, Deputy Director of China's National Health Commission (NHC), reported that the commission has compiled documents on the latest diagnosis and treatment, prevention, and control plan, as well as other technical documents, and has shared them with 180 countries, and more than ten interna-

tional and regional organizations. Moreover, he said, the NHC held a joint meeting with the World Health Organization, to share China's epidemic prevention and control experiences, attended online by representatives of 77 countries and seven international organizations. More than 100,000 people watched the meeting online, Xinhua reported March 27.

As part of this effort, China has achieved extraordinary outreach to more than a hundred nations, conducting video-conferences with medical experts and government officials in Asia, Africa, Ibero-America and the Caribbean, and the United States—sharing its expertise and experiences in combatting the coronavirus pandemic.

### Italy and Spain Case Studies

In the European Union, it's worth looking at the situations in Italy and Spain. In a March 16 phone conversation with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Xi promised to provide additional help in the battle against COVID-19. Noting that the Italian government has taken a series of resolute prevention and control measures in response to the epidemic, Xi said that China firmly supports Italy and has full confidence in its victory over the epidemic. Xinhua reported Xi as saying:

China identifies with Italy's urgent concerns, and will send more medical experts to Italy and do its best to provide medical supplies and other assistance. China is willing to work with Italy to contribute to international cooperation in combatting the epidemic and to the construction of a Health Silk Road.

On March 17, China sent a team of experts to Italy, including medical doctors and pediatricians, who first went to Rome, to the Spallanzani Hospital, and commented that the work done by Italian doctors is excellent, but "there are still too many people around." Then in Milan, at a March 19 press conference with Lombardi governor Attilio Fontana, the head of the Red Cross in China, Sun Shuopeng, pointed out that also in Milan and Lombardy, the epicenter of the contagion, too many people are still running around and violating



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Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the UN's World Health Organization (WHO).

the government restrictions. "This is not good, it is a matter of life or death," he warned.

Italy has since then become the epicenter of the coronavirus in Europe, with 86,498 confirmed cases—second after the United States. The Italian people have expressed their gratitude to China in many ways, including by singing the Chinese national anthem from their balconies.

As for Spain, its initial fierce attachment to the European Union and insistence on dealing with China only through the EU, quickly changed as the coronavirus infection rate began to soar, and it became obvious that the EU, now in the process of disintegration, had no intention of responding. A report in the March 16 *El Confidencial*, "Welcome Mr. Xi: Chinese Marshall Plan against Coronavirus Lands in Spain," noted that the Spanish government had initially turned down the Chinese government's offer of medical material and advice, on grounds that "we prefer to do that through the EU."

But on March 15, Foreign Affairs Minister Arancha González Laya spoke with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi about Spain purchasing medical material to build up its stockpiles, and China facilitating imports from thousands of Spanish small and medium companies. "Cooperation to protect health and the economy," she tweeted. "It is inevitable that we accept the Chinese offer, as Italy has done. At this moment, we need help urgently and we could care less about the China propaganda," a Foreign Ministry source told *El Confidencial*.

Since then, the Spanish situation has dramatically worsened, creating in many parts of the country scenes straight out of the Middle Ages. As of March 28, Spain has registered 72,248 cases and 5,812 deaths. This is the fourth highest number of cases in the world. It is not that the Spanish government has done nothing, but, like almost every other government in Europe and the Americas, it failed to act in time. The crisis is such that security forces have been called in to transport the bodies of the dead from hospitals and nursing homes in Madrid to a large ice skating rink which the city government commandeered as a temporary mortuary, needed to store the bodies until the personnel of funeral homes receive the personal protective equipment (PPE) to handle them.

Now under discussion is the establishment of an “air bridge” between Spain and China involving Spain’s Iberia airline and several government ministries, along with companies that produce medical equipment, to begin operations on March 30 to bring in urgently needed equipment. Discussion of retooling Spanish companies to produce medical supplies is underway, and, as elsewhere, China is stepping in to help right away. The cities of Madrid and Valencia contacted China directly to purchase material, with the acquiescence of the national government. Valencia, which is taking patients from Madrid in addition to its own, was expecting two planeloads of PPE, beds and respiratory ventilators to arrive by March 25. The city government dubbed this “Operation Silk Road,” in honor of the 2,000-year-old history of Valencia’s connection to the East, from the ancient Silk Road to today’s New Silk Road.

### **Working Overtime to Produce Equipment for the World**

More broadly, China has ramped up production of medical equipment to meet the growing needs of countries fighting the coronavirus. Shenzhen’s Mindray Bio-Medical Electronics Co., Ltd. said the Italian government had procured nearly 10,000 devices for fighting the disease, most of which are for patient monitoring, from the Guangdong-based medical equipment giant, whose products were part of the Chinese medical aid that arrived in Italy on March 12.

Shenzhen-listed Guangdong Biolight Meditech Co., Ltd on Tuesday disclosed that since March 2 it had

received orders for nearly 2,000 pieces of medical equipment from eight countries including Italy, France and Germany. Zhejiang Dali Technology Co., Ltd, another manufacturer of infrared thermometers, said production is running at full tilt to meet growing orders at home and from Asia, Europe, and America. Oriental Energy Co., Ltd, says that since February it has exported over 3,000 tons of Y381H, an essential fiber for making the melt-blown non-woven fabric used for making face masks and protective suits, to countries including India and Vietnam.

Mask maker Great Star Industrial Co., Ltd has received the EC declaration of conformity document approving the quality of its products for sale in the EU. At least 10 Chinese producers of detection kits for nucleic acid and antibody testing have also won approvals to enter the EU market. Meanwhile, 14 novel coronavirus testing kits developed by five Chinese universities, including Tsinghua University, have obtained the CE marking certification, which allows them to be marketed across the European Union, according to the Ministry of Education.

In addition, China has sent the following items to virus-stricken nations:

- The first batch of 300,000 face masks donated by Chinese charities arrived in Belgium on March 16.
- An aircraft carrying 500,000 medical masks from China arrived at Zaragoza airport in northern Spain on March 17, as confirmed COVID-19 cases in the country rose to 11,178.
- A team of 12 medical experts from China’s Zhejiang Province was sent to Italy March 17 by the Chinese government.
- China donated 2,000 fast test kits for COVID-19 to the Philippines on March 16.
- Beijing will donate protective supplies including medical isolation gowns and gloves to the cities of Seoul, Tehran, Tokyo and Yokohama to help with their novel coronavirus control. Some 200,000 medical isolation gowns, 100,000 pairs of gloves, 200,000 pairs of shoe covers and 200,000 disposable medical caps will be delivered to these cities.
- South China’s Guangdong Province has donated more than 80,000 testing kits to countries including Iran, Japan, Iraq and Peru.
- Central China’s Hunan Province has donated supplies to aid the novel coronavirus fight in Laos and the Republic of Korea.