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Covid-19: China and Europe



*The kowtow of Serbia's President Vucic to Xi Jinping – hailing him as his “brother” – upon arrival in Belgrade of medical goods from China was rightly dismissed as a bizarre footnote by a European outsider grasping for any lever to force Brussels to deal with him in his quest for membership. But what about a Chinese plane landing in Rome with much needed help at the height of the medical emergency while in the Italian perspective “Europe” was abandoning one of the EU's founding members? Gains for China's reputation in Europe from spectacular PR actions against the virus will be short-lived. The virus has not shifted the geopolitical landscape between the old European, and the new Chinese world, writes Dr. **Daniel WOKER**, Co-founder of [Share-an-Ambassador/Geopolitical coaching](#) and Former Swiss Ambassador to Kuwait, Singapore and Australia.*

Not to be outdone by his autocratic partner and strategic rival in Beijing, Putin sent Russian military personnel to Italy at about the same time, to help in the decontamination of hospitals in the worst affected province of Lombardy. China and Russia helped, but not the EU. No wonder on the spot polls pointed to alarming decrease in “Europeness” within the Italian population. More than a blip?

Not really. Because already that Italian perception was wrong. Germany and France together donated, as opposed to sold, more medical equipment to Italy than China. If anybody, Europe will save Italy medically, let alone economically.

In the real world, the EU had sent medical help to the Chinese government in the containment of the virus, when in February Beijing finally owned up to the seriousness of the crisis and its international consequences. And this without making a geopolitical spectacle out of it. Contrary to the Chinese attempt to depict Beijing as benevolent donor, disbursing assistance anywhere in the world, and of course especially in the proud

European nation from where Marco Polo once started pursuing Western interests, and the following subjugation of China by Europe.

Over the top Chinese playacting as global leader in pandemic times, disbursing local advice and highlighting the failure of others backfired elsewhere in Europe, too. An example was an alarmist twitter message by the Chinese Embassy in Paris claiming abandonment of elders in French old age homes.

In this context, the claim that the outbreak of the pandemic showed the weakness of decentralised structures in China and thus cemented the authority of Xi's role as the embodiment of a strong party deserves some scrutiny. European countries, by and large are decentralised. Italy is no exception. But the lessons of the crisis, with regard to China and Europe, are read differently here. China's decentralisation is fake insofar as locals are mere underlings with no sense of civic responsibility outside the holy grail from the centre. The opposite is the case in decentralised Western democracies. Local structures are here to respond quicker and better to local demands than the national centre. They are also supposed to feed local needs and evaluations to the central government so the latter can shape its national policy accordingly. The strikingly different performance of the two neighbouring Italian provinces of Lombardy – Europe's initial Covid-19 disaster zone – and Veneto – early and successful fight against Covid-19 – was caused by erroneous initial decisions from the provincial government in Milan, led by the far-right party "Lega". The Italian justice system has already been activated to determine whether such decisions should be subject to prosecution.

Cause of real concern in Europe, however, is the prospect of takeover of companies weakened by the economic crisis triggered by Covid-19. Internally, companies given equity injections by EU member states will not be able to buy up others while repaying the state. But the real worry is foreign, especially Chinese takeover of financially embattled companies in Europe. 14 out of the 27 EU members already have FDI screening mechanisms in place, and they and especially those without controls have already received guidelines from Brussels to step up controls of FDI and large portfolio investments.

But of course, the real test of who does most in the race of countries and continents to fight against the global economic recession caused by the virus will be the effect of respective financial and fiscal measures for producers and consumers alike. China, who has provided a gigantic stimulus to keep the global economy humming after the financial crisis 2007/8, will not be able, so the unanimous opinion of experts, to repeat the same performance. It has therefore bet on early resumption of its enormous producing capacities. The EU institutions and the European states on their side have thrown overboard all their previous rules of fiscal prudence in a concentrated effort to prop up demand and supply. And thus cement the European internal market as one of the three largest economies of the world.

The size and effect of this effort in Europe will have to be examined. That is another story, but it can already be said that the geopolitical landscape has not shifted in favour of China by the pandemic. However spectacular its PR antics.



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