

Toward a Health Silk Road

China's Proposal for Global Health Cooperation

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Abstract: Originally designed as a component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under the pillar of people-to-people bonds, the Health Silk Road (HSR) has aroused intense interest and scrutiny amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than a new geopolitical strategy within the BRI framework, the HSR is an emerging diplomatic initiative for promoting health cooperation in a world increasingly threatened by proliferating public health emergencies. China's medical aid in the developing world before the HSR's inception and broader health diplomacy since the onset of the coronavirus crisis have been misinterpreted in much of the developed world and some Asian neighbors. Although the HSR will be a bumpy road in a post-coronavirus era of growing geopolitical rivalry and fractured world market, the health cooperation initiative can still be built into

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a transregional health network to the benefit of nations concerned. To achieve this end, Beijing should take a two-pronged approach: building up a stronger and more resilient domestic health system and upgrading its multilayered partnerships with BRI participant nations and international organizations.

Keywords: Health Silk Road; Covid-19; Belt and Road Initiative; global health governance.

In the five years before late 2019 and early 2020 when a previously unknown coronavirus hit Wuhan, a transportation hub in central China, Beijing's proposal to build a Health Silk Road (HSR) within the Belt and Road Initiative, a signature foreign policy of the Xi Jinping administration, had garnered little attention abroad compared with other high-profile BRI projects. Now in retrospect, China's proposal looks all the more prescient, as the Covid-19 global pandemic continues its rampage, having killed hundreds of thousands of people around the world, sickened many times more, and caused the largest global recession since the Great Depression. In a phone call with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on March 16, President Xi Jinping brought up the HSR proposal again and said that China stood ready to increase anti-coronavirus cooperation with the rest of the world and contribute more to the construction of the Health Silk Road.¹ When the Wuhan lockdown was lifted in early April after eleven weeks of mass quarantine, signaling that the virus had been brought under effective control, Beijing's antiviral efforts began to focus on fending off large-scale resurgences at home and providing medical assistance abroad. As the first major economy to have resumed some semblance of pre-crisis normalcy, Beijing's robust anti-coronavirus diplomacy has attracted growing global attention. While some countries have appreciated Beijing's assistance in battling the virus,² others remain deeply skeptical, believing that China is exploiting the health crisis to launch a new round of soft-power offensive.

¹"Xi Says China to Send More Medical Experts to Italy," Xinhua News, March 17, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/17/c_138884664.htm.

²Dusan Stojanovic, "China's 'Mask Diplomacy' Wins Support in Eastern Europe," Associated Press, April 14, 2020, <https://apnews.com/76dff4b113e82d85716262895909f151>.

Critics have charged that Beijing is recasting itself as a global health champion at a time when Washington, the presumed leader, has abdicated its responsibilities under the watch of an erratic president.³

This article argues that the West's portrayals of the Health Silk Road and China's broader antivirus efforts are either ill-informed misinterpretations or pure fabrications. Beijing's HSR proposal announced as early as 2015 and its diplomatic activism in recent days are all earnest efforts to promote global health cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world. This article begins by tracing the HSR's origin and evolution to a number of government documents and official speeches. It then lays out China's objectives, approaches, and priorities for the implementation of the HSR, and identifies the challenges and opportunities Beijing has encountered in its broader health diplomacy. The concluding section presents a few recommendations on how to adapt the HSR to a post-coronavirus world.

The Health Silk Road Revisited

Nearly two years after President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, the Chinese government issued a BRI action plan in late March 2015, identifying five priority areas for advancing this "project of the century," one of which is expanding people-to-people bonds along the two routes. Cooperation in the health sector is underlined as one of many vehicles to forge closer people-to-people bonds. According to the action plan, China aims to

... strengthen cooperation... on epidemic information sharing, the exchange of prevention and treatment technologies and the training of medical professionals, and improve... capability to jointly address public health emergencies... [China] will provide medical assistance and emergency medical aid to relevant countries, and carry out practical cooperation in maternal and child health, disability rehabilitation, and major infectious diseases including AIDS, tuberculosis and

³See, for example, Kirk Lancaster, Michael Rubin, and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Mapping China's Health Silk Road," Council on Foreign Relations, April 10, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/mapping-chinas-health-silk-road>.

*malaria... [China] will also expand cooperation on traditional medicine.*⁴

In October of the same year, China's National Health Commission released a three-year plan for promoting BRI health exchanges and cooperation, formally introducing the idea of the Health Silk Road.⁵

In 2016, the opening year for the implementation of the United Nations 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*, China's State Council issued a *Healthy China 2030* blueprint, vowing to raise China's health standards to those of the developed countries by 2030 and meet the targets envisioned in the 2030 *Agenda*, especially SDG3 (good health and well-being). In an address to Uzbekistan's Supreme Assembly in June 2016, President Xi Jinping called for increased cooperation in infectious disease prevention and information sharing, medical assistance, and traditional medicine development as a way of building the Health Silk Road.⁶ With active promotion by China's top leader, the idea soon received international endorsement. During President Xi's official visit to the WHO headquarters in Geneva in January 2017, China and the international health body signed a memorandum of understanding on Belt and Road health cooperation.⁷ Six months later, following the first Belt and Road Forum for

The Health Silk Road was originally designed to strengthen people-to-people bonds along the Belt and Road.

⁴National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, Belt and Road Portal, March 2015, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>.

⁵"Three-Year Implementation Plan for Promoting Health Exchanges and Cooperation along the Belt and Road (2015-2017) [国家卫生计生委关于推进 "一带一路" 卫生交流合作三年实施方案(2015-2017)]," National Health Commission, October 14, 2015, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/ghjh/201510/ce634f7fed834992849e9611099bd7cc.shtml>.

⁶"Xi Calls for Building 'Green, Healthy, Intelligent and Peaceful' Silk Road," Xinhua News, June 22, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/22/c_135458138.htm.

⁷An Baijie, "WHO, China Sign Pact Establishing 'Health Silk Road,'" *China Daily*, January 19, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm.

International Cooperation, Beijing sponsored a high-profile conference focusing on promoting health cooperation under the BRI framework, hosting senior health officials from 30 countries and representatives from a number of international health organizations, like the WHO, Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), and Global Fund. A joint communiqué was adopted at the meeting, laying out the lines of effort to strengthen health cooperation under the BRI, including:

- establishing a health policy research network and a health industry sustainable development alliance;
- improving coordination on monitoring, prevention and control, and response with regard to major infectious diseases;
- enhancing training and capacity-building for health professionals;
- strengthening cooperation in medical research and development and the use of traditional medicines;
- increasing medical assistance and health aid in BRI countries;
- supporting the WHO in playing an important role in global health governance and its reform process.⁸

The HSR proposal thus emerged as a full-fledged multilateral initiative for promoting global health cooperation, merging the policy measures that had previously been included in other domestic and international health action plans. Since then, Beijing has been promoting the institutionalization of health cooperation within the HSR framework by organizing and sponsoring a number of health-themed regional forums, for example, the Silk Road Health Forum, China-ASEAN Health Forum, China-Central and Eastern European Countries Health Ministers Forum, and the China-Arab States Health Forum. Beijing has also launched a series of cooperative programs on disease control and prevention in partnership with its neighbors in Central Asia and the Greater Mekong Subregion. In addition, regional health networks including the China-ASEAN Forum on Hospital Management Cooperation and the Association of Sino-Russian Medical Universities were founded to promote closer

⁸“Beijing Communiqué of The Belt and Road Health Cooperation & Health Silk Road,” National Health Commission, August 18, 2017, http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2017-08/18/c_72257.htm.

coordination and exchanges.⁹ All these efforts were made as part of Beijing's broader health diplomacy before the coronavirus pandemic hit the world. The global pandemic has only made Beijing's earlier initiatives and activism all the more relevant and invaluable.

As the first victim of this historic public health crisis and its devastating economic and social consequences, China knows from the outset that the most important task for national governments and international organizations is to contain the virus as soon as possible and restore normalcy to the economy and people's daily lives. If it cannot be contained throughout the world, this unprecedentedly contagious virus could create new epicenters in any part of the globe, be it Africa, Latin America, or the Pacific islands. This is a daunting task that requires herculean efforts and cannot be done by any country alone. The Covid-19 virus is invisible but not invincible. Beijing has repeatedly called for greater global solidarity and coordination in combating a common enemy. In early April 2019, a joint appeal by more than 230 political parties from over 100 countries, including the Communist Party of China, called on world leaders to put people's lives first and warned against virus-induced politicization and stigmatization that may undercut international solidarity. President Xi Jinping, in phone calls and video-conferences with national leaders and heads of international organizations, particularly at the G20 Extraordinary Leaders' Summit on Covid-19 and the 73rd World Health Assembly, explained China's antivirus tactics and achievements, emphasized China's open, transparent, and responsible approach toward information disclosure and experience sharing, and pledged to provide necessary assistance of all kinds to help the international community contain the virus at the earliest date possible.¹⁰ The HSR was made a new BRI frontier in the Covid-19 era when senior officials from BRI participant countries placed building the Health Silk Road at the top of a joint statement following a high-level video conference on Belt and Road cooperation, over traditional priorities like infrastructure

⁹Ngeow Chow-Bing, "What's Behind China's Controversial Health Silk Road Efforts," Channel News Asia, May 31, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/china-health-silk-road-what-is-it-push-influence-covid19-coronav-12782968>.

¹⁰"Fighting Covid-19: China in Action," Chinese State Council Information Office, June 2020, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202006/07/content_WS5edc559ac6d066592a449030.html.

connectivity and trade facilitation.¹¹ Now, the HSR has acquired a prominence and urgency that is impossible to achieve in normal times and become a ready-made vehicle for BRI partners to promote health cooperation.

The Covid-19 pandemic added fuel to debate over strategic implication of the Health Silk Road.

However, even as Chinese officials, scholars, and media outlets continue to promote the HSR as an emerging platform for the international community to come together in a historic partnership to combat the coronavirus pandemic, politicians and pundits in the United States, the EU, and some of China's neighbors are examining the HSR through a geopolitical and ideological prism, regarding the HSR as Beijing's new geopo-

litical master plan at this crisis moment when the broader BRI has encountered growing suspicion and difficulties. Beijing's impressive capacity of producing and delivering emergency medical items like face masks, ventilators, diagnostic kits, and protective gear have triggered growing anxiety in the West about the world's overdependence on China. Some argue that the HSR has changed from a venue for sharing medical knowledge to a route for aid delivery, giving Beijing an extra opportunity to flex its economic muscles in the greater Eurasian region.¹² Others fear that the world's heavy reliance on Chinese exports of medical items may give Beijing additional leverages at a time when it is rebalancing its external relations with the rest of the world. Indeed, China has long been the world's leading exporter of face masks, manufacturing nearly half of the world's total. In 2018 alone, over half of the EU's and 48 percent of America's imports of personal protective equipment (PPE) came from China. When the novel coronavirus hit China hardest in February 2020, many in the West anticipated a sharp decline in Chinese medical exports. But contrary to their expectation, Chinese exports of PPE to the rest of the world only dropped

¹¹"Joint Statement of the High-level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation: Combating Covid-19 with Solidarity," Chinese Foreign Ministry, June 19, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1790079.shtml.

¹²See, for example, Zahra Beg, " 'The Health Silk Road': Implications for the EU under Covid-19," European Institute for Asian Studies, April 29, 2020, <https://www.eias.org/news/the-health-silk-road-implications-for-the-eu-under-covid-19/>.

by 15 percent in the first two months of 2020, compared with the same period in 2019.¹³ Instead of weaponizing its medical-supply productive capacity, beginning in early April, Beijing has mobilized impressive amounts of Chinese aid, in the form of medical items and antivirus experience, to other hotspots and the most vulnerable regions in the health crisis.

Why China's Global Health Diplomacy Matters

Virus-related politicization and stigmatization, as well as vilification of China's health diplomacy have done nothing to help contain the pandemic or mitigate its devastating economic and social impacts. In the face of an unprecedented public health crisis, the world should stand together in greater solidarity to vanquish the virus. Instead, politicians have been locked in wars of words from the very beginning, seeking to deflect criticisms of their own inaction or ineptitude. To make matters worse, as great powers trade blame, the WHO is caught in the crossfire and increasingly marginalized, unable to play its given role in coordinating a global response. When great powers are unwilling to provide more public goods for global health cooperation, an ensuing leadership vacuum only exacerbates the crisis.

Apart from offering expert opinion and advice on public health improvement and overseeing the implementation of the *International Health Regulations*, the WHO has limited influence over national health policies. In practice, the health body often has difficulty in ensuring policy coherence and consistency across different countries. The Ebola crisis of 2013–2016 in Western Africa has exposed the WHO's deficiencies resulting from shrinking budgets and continued brain drain. After a 2011 funding shortfall, the WHO cut its already insufficient budget by nearly \$600 million and scaled down its emergency response units, with some epidemic control experts leaving the agency. The WHO has full discretion on only 30 percent (assessed contributions calculated according to member states' income levels and populations) of its budget and depends on voluntary

¹³Chad P. Brown, "Covid-19: China's Exports of Medical Supplies Provide a Ray of Hope," Peterson Institute for International Economics, March 26, 2020, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/Covid-19-chinas-exports-medical-supplies-provide-ray-hope>.

contributions from member states to fulfill its mandated obligations.¹⁴ The share of assessed contributions in the overall budget has steadily declined, from about 47 percent in 1998–1999 to 16 percent in 2018–2019.¹⁵ Although the WHO has launched an international strategic preparedness and response plan, the major problems that have been constraining the operation of the world's largest health body have not been addressed.

National governments are the primary guardians of their own citizens' health and safety. But infectious diseases respect no borders. Given the limited resources and mandate of the WHO, strong political leadership from the developed countries, the reigning hegemon in particular, is the prerequisite for an effective worldwide antivirus campaign. The United States has long remained the chief provider of global public goods and its leadership role has been deemed indispensable in the fight against epidemics like Ebola and in bolstering global health security. Major public health initiatives sponsored by Washington include the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief launched in 2003 under President George W. Bush and the \$63 billion Global Health Initiative (GHI)¹⁶ started by President Obama in May 2009. The United States also played a pivotal role in launching the sweeping Global Health Security Agenda in 2014. However, since early 2017, an increasingly inward-looking Washington under an unconventional president who has doubled down on efforts to withdraw the United States from the world, has lost the appetite for playing a leadership role in multilateral efforts to tackle major global challenges, from climate change to nuclear nonproliferation to water scarcity. Having failed to act swiftly and decisively in response to the coronavirus at home, the Trump administration has resorted to the policy of retreat abroad, not only halting U.S. funding to the WHO but threatening to end its WHO membership. The United States

¹⁴Chen Dongxiao *et al.*, "International Cooperation for the Coronavirus Combat: Results, Lessons, and Way Ahead," Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, March 2020, <http://www.sis.org.cn/Research/Info/4888>.

¹⁵Misha Ketchell, "World Health Organization: What Does It Spend Its Money On?" *The Conversation*, April 23, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/world-health-organization-what-does-it-spend-its-money-on-136544>.

¹⁶Caren Bohan, "Obama Unveils \$63 Billion Global Health Initiative," *Reuters*, May 6, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-obama-globalhealth/obama-unveils-63-billion-global-health-initiative-idUSTRE54457U20090505>.

has long been the WHO's most generous patron, accounting for 29 percent of the organization's voluntary contributions, far ahead of other contributors. Its absence from the WHO will make global health coordination and scientific collaboration far more difficult.

The European Union, another major contributor to global health governance, has also failed the coronavirus test in the early stages of the crisis. Many of its member states had to look to outsiders for the supply of urgently needed medical items when leading nations like France and Germany imposed restrictions on medical exports.¹⁷ As German Chancellor Angela Merkel put it in her speech to the Bundestag, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed "how fragile the European project still is," and "the first reflexes were rather national and not entirely European."¹⁸ With the United States and the EU unable to show vigorous leadership in a traditional way, the world has inched closer toward the so-called "Kindleberger Trap," which will give rise to more uncertainty, anxiety, and instability at a time when shortages of public goods further weakens the global health system.¹⁹

In contrast with the advanced economies, what China has contributed to the global coronavirus combat becomes even more commendable. Statistics show that Beijing has provided considerable amounts of medical assistance to the rest of the world, including 70.6 billion face masks, 340 million protective suits, 115 million pairs of goggles, 96,700 ventilators, 225 million test kits, and 40.29 million infrared thermometers to 200 countries and regions during the period of March 1 to May 31.²⁰ Besides government actions, donations from Chinese enterprises are

¹⁷Chad P. Brown, "EU Limits on Medical Gear Exports Put Poor Countries and Europeans at Risk," Peterson Institute for International Economics, March 19, 2020, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/eu-limits-medical-gear-exports-put-poor-countries-and>.

¹⁸Hans Von Der Burchard, "Merkel: Coronavirus Pandemic Revealed Europe's Fragility," *Politico*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-coronavirus-pandemic-europe-fragility/>.

¹⁹Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "The Kindleberger Trap," *Project Syndicate*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-china-kindleberger-trap-by-joseph-s-nye-2017-01?barrier=accesspaylog>.

²⁰"Fighting Covid-19: China in Action," Chinese State Council Information Office, June 2020, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202006/07/content_WS5edc559ac6d066592a449030.html.

also impressive. Over 150 countries have received donations from Jack Ma, co-founder and former executive chairman of Alibaba Group, including about 120 million face masks, 4 million testing kits, and 3,704 ventilators.²¹ Mr. Lei Jun, CEO of Xiaomi, a Chinese electronics giant, announced on March 6 that his company had donated tens of thousands of face masks to Italy.²² China's medical professionals have also played a vital role in the global coronavirus battle by contributing their therapeutic knowledge and experiences on the frontlines in many virus-impacted countries. As of May 31, China had sent 29 medical teams to 27 countries and offered assistance to 150 countries and four international organizations. It has shared medical best practices with a multitude of international organizations, including the ASEAN, EU, African Union, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Caribbean Community, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as some of the hardest-hit countries such as South Korea, Japan, Russia, the United States, and Germany. In addition, China's Covid-19 diagnosis and treatment protocols and prevention and control plans had been translated into multiple languages and shared with over 180 countries and ten international organizations.²³

Despite all these remarkable efforts and significant contributions, it is still premature to conclude that Beijing has taken over the leadership role from the United States or any other regional or international bodies in terms of delivering global public goods for health. China's antivirus efforts have indeed shown that it is not a free-rider in the international system that seeks only to derive enormous benefits without making any contributions. China is the first major economy to have effectively contained the virus within its borders, and a leading donor and contributor of public goods in this global pandemic. But in a global pandemic, the world cannot count on a single

²¹Celia Hatton, "Jack Ma: The Billionaire Trying to Stop Coronavirus (and Fix China's Reputation)," BBC News, April 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52325269>.

²²Chen Dongxiao *et al.*, "Working Together with One Heart: People-to-People Diplomacy in the Coronavirus Crisis," Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, March 2020, <http://www.sis.org.cn/Research/Info/4916>.

²³"Fighting Covid-19: China in Action," Chinese State Council Information Office, June 2020, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202006/07/content_WS5edc559ac6d066592a449030.html.

nation's effort, experience, and goodwill to vanquish the virus. What is regrettable is that there seems to be little political will on the part of other major powers to provide the most valuable and hitherto elusive public good — global solidarity and coordination.

A Bumpy Road Ahead

Western observers believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is presenting a rare opportunity for Beijing to burnish its global image and acquire extra geopolitical weight on the world stage, by filling the widening leadership vacuum in global health governance. But international reactions to Beijing's robust health diplomacy in recent days have been mixed and China's promotion of the HSR has already aroused intense suspicion from most developed countries. The pandemic has only exacerbated China's deteriorating relations with the United States, the European Union, and some of its Asian neighbors. Growing geopolitical competition is the biggest hurdle on the Health Silk Road. According to the Western national security outlook, in a world increasingly defined by great power rivalry, global health threats, however imminent they may look and devastating they might turn out to be, only play second fiddle.

Over the past few years, the United States has been leading a demonization campaign against China's BRI, depicting it as a symbol of hegemonic ambition and accusing Beijing of seeking to acquire diplomatic leverages by creating debt traps in the developing world. In January 2020, the U.S. Department of State appointed a new special envoy with the mandate to counter Beijing's growing influence in the United Nations and keep other member states from rallying behind the BRI.²⁴ For the Trump administration, like in other spheres of strategic rivalry, international health cooperation is a zero-sum game between the United States and China. To compete with China's HSR in Southeast Asia, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the U.S.-ASEAN Health Futures initiative in April 2020, focusing on strengthening medical research, building health system capacity, and developing human capital. Middle Eastern countries who

²⁴Colum Lynch, "U.S. State Department Appoints Envoy to Counter Chinese Influence at the U.N.," *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/22/us-state-department-appoints-envoy-counter-chinese-influence-un-trump/>.

have moved closer to Beijing amid the Covid-19 crisis have also been under growing pressure and scrutiny from Washington. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker advised Gulf states to weigh the value of their partnership with the United States²⁵ before fostering a closer relationship with China.

Besides Southeast Asia and the Middle East, Africa is also viewed by the Trump administration as another battleground in the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, despite the fact that during his three-plus years as president, President Trump had hosted few African leaders at the White House and rarely prioritized African issues.²⁶ In April, President Trump signaled in a flurry of phone calls with African leaders that Africans should look to the United States instead of China for help. In early May, the Trump administration announced it would donate up to 1,000 ventilators to South Africa, the country with the highest number of coronavirus cases on the continent.²⁷ In the meantime, the newly founded International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) launched the Health and Prosperity Initiative (HPI) to make \$2 billion health-related investments in Nigeria, Uganda, and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. These investments are expected to be channeled through various financial tools including equity and debt financing, political insurance, and technical development.²⁸

In South Asia, through which the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road passes, India is also stepping up engagement with its neighbors to counter China's HSR. In March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi revived the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a little-known subregional economic initiative, in a video conference of SAARC states,

²⁵Sabena Siddiqui, "Mapping China's Health Silk Road in the Middle East," *Belt and Road News*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.beltandroad.news/2020/05/20/Covid-19-diplomacy-mapping-chinas-health-silk-road-in-the-middle-east/>.

²⁶Meridith McGraw, "Trump Courts Africa to Counter Coronavirus — and China," *Politico*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/29/trump-africa-counter-coronavirus-china-288106>.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Aarthi Swaminathan, "'Health Silk Road' Heats Up as China and U.S. Boost Efforts Amid Coronavirus," *Yahoo Finance*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/health-silk-road-heats-up-as-china-and-us-boost-efforts-amid-coronavirus/ar-BB13UhYn>.

calling for collective actions to rein in the threat of coronavirus. This move has been seen as a calculated strategic move to respond to China's growing influence during the pandemic by reasserting India's leadership in the region.²⁹

Apart from geopolitical competition, another challenge for the HSR arises from China's largely bilateral approach to BRI and HSR cooperation. China's longstanding friendships with countries along the BRI, for example, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar in Asia and Czech, Serbia, and Greece in Europe, have helped secure remarkable progress in its implementation. But the BRI, with its focus on infrastructure development and trade facilitation, remains a loose network. Likewise, the HSR is unlikely to develop into a closely knit health network in the near future, even though a handful of regional institutions and dialogue mechanisms have been set up. In retrospect, Beijing should have focused more on building a closer network in which participant countries could share anything from health technologies to medical expertise to case information. Nevertheless, even if a well-coordinated health network is hard to come by anytime soon, Beijing can still do more and better to unlock the potential of the HSR within the BRI framework. On the one hand, the HSR could build on China's decades-long health cooperation with neighboring states. A case in point is Beijing's substantial support to Sri Lanka's healthcare system which can be traced back to as early as 1967. Today, China has become the second-largest recipient of cornea donations from Sri Lanka and around 1,500 corneas are flown to China for transplant each year. What's more, the annual Chinese aid to build the health sector in Sri Lanka has reached as much as \$20 million. In 2000, a nine-storey new wing of the Lady Ridgeway Hospital was completed with the support of Chinese government grants. Another Chinese-funded landmark project is the Kidney Hospital in Polonnaruwa that is expected to open by the end

The Health Silk Road
is not immune to
rising geopolitical
competition.

²⁹Brabim Karki, "Why Did India Decide to Activate SAARC During the Covid-19 Pandemic?" *Diplomat*, March 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/why-did-india-decide-to-activate-saarc-during-the-Covid-19-pandemic/>.

of 2020.³⁰ With increasing investments flowing into the BRI and HSR partners, Beijing will continue to face Western accusations that it is pursuing debt-for-leverage diplomacy in the developing world, but a key fact has been obscured intentionally in the West's portrayal of Chinese aid in countries like Sri Lanka: China is the front-runner in funding projects in the third world, far ahead of other Western donors.³¹ On the other hand, China could also embed HSR cooperation into existing BRI infrastructure projects. For example, in Argentina's remote Santa Cruz Province, China's *Gezhoubu* Group, an engineering and construction conglomerate, and Argentina's electric engineering firm *UTE Represas Patagonia*, have been working on the world's southernmost hydroelectric dams under the BRI framework. When Covid-19 hit the remote province, the two construction giants joined hands to contain the local virus outbreak by distributing medical supplies from China and applying China's scientific and medical expertise. As Mariano Musso, UTE's director of institutional relations said of the coordinated antiviral efforts, "[t]he characteristics and dimensions of our project turn the construction sites into temporary communities that are incorporated into the local health-care system. That's why right healthcare planning and right attention to healthcare help to strengthen the public system, not overburden it."³² In a similar fashion, the huge investments made by Chinese telecommunications companies such as Huawei and ZTE in e-health technologies in a number of African countries over the past years could also be integrated within the HSR and BRI as data platforms to help local health authorities better monitor and track infectious diseases like Ebola, Zika, and Covid-19. Additionally, the China-Europe railway network, which now links dozens of cities along the Belt and Road, can also serve as a route for shipments of medical supplies in the Covid-19 era.

³⁰Yasiru Ranaraja and Maya Majueran, "Is the 'Health Silk Road' a 'Debt-Trap' of China's BRI for Sri Lanka?" *Belt and Road News*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.beltandroad.news/2020/04/26/is-the-health-silk-road-a-debt-trap-of-chinas-bri-for-sri-lanka/>.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²"Joint China-Argentina Energy Project Boosts Health Silk Road," *Xinhua News*, May 21, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/21/c_139074643.htm.

Conclusion

Rather than a new geopolitical strategy within the BRI framework, the HSR is an emerging diplomatic initiative for promoting health cooperation in a world increasingly threatened by new and resurgent infectious diseases. In a post-coronavirus world, the HSR will be a bumpy road due to rising geopolitical tensions along the Belt and Road. Bumpy journey notwithstanding, if envisioned as a new BRI frontier, the HSR could be built into a multilateral health network. To achieve this end, Beijing should take a two-pronged approach: building up a much stronger domestic healthcare system on the one hand and upgrading its multilayered partnerships with BRI participant nations and international organizations on the other.

First of all, as an old Chinese saying goes, it takes a good blacksmith to make good steel. Robust health diplomacy begins with well-developed domestic health services. The coronavirus crisis has exposed major vulnerabilities and shortfalls in health systems of developed and developing countries alike. Despite Beijing's efforts to strengthen local health services and improve nationwide emergency response and coordination after the SARS outbreak in 2003, the current coronavirus still revealed significant loopholes in China's national health system. To promote HSR cooperation, Beijing must first double down on the effort to reform national and local public health emergency response systems, including establishing a full-fledged and well-functioning monitoring, surveillance, prevention, control, and coordination network, and an open-access center for information disclosure and knowledge sharing.

At the same time, to mitigate the potential shock wave created by Washington's abdication of global health leadership, Beijing also needs to work with like-minded partners to strengthen the WHO's role in global health governance by committing far more political and financial resources to the health body. For example, through collective action, Beijing could help the WHO set up strategic stockpiles of medical supplies for future health emergencies and create an independent WHO fund to promote scientific collaboration. Besides, China should also identify priority regions to advance HSR cooperation. Since it will be difficult for the HSR to make inroads into the developed world, more HSR resources should be devoted to developing nations to help them improve their capacity and performance in epidemic prevention and control. More specifically, China could upgrade

its partnership with ASEAN by contributing to the Covid-19 ASEAN Respond Fund, sharing information and best practices with ASEAN members, and helping the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Center) fulfil its new mandate of addressing public health emergencies. Africa is another priority area for HSR cooperation. During the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit On Solidarity Against Covid-19, President Xi reaffirmed China's commitment to help Africa's capacity-building for disease prevention and control, and expedite the construction of the Africa CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) headquarters. Beijing also promised that it would make the Covid-19 vaccine a global public good as part of its contribution to vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries, in particular African countries.³³

³³"Joint Statement of the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against Covid-19," Xinhua News, June 18, 2020, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/18/c.139148645.htm>.