4 China and the World Health Organization

Not an Easy Road for Either

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Abstract

The role of the World Health Organization (WHO) as a global health agency has come under mounting pressure since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have linked the WHO's negligence and mistakes to the strong influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the organization. However, this chapter argues that China's leadership potential in the WHO has been constrained by three factors: its insignificant contribution to the WHO compared to the traditional donors, its illiberal and fragmented domestic governance structures, and its assertive health diplomacy. Despite the US withdrawal from the WHO under the Trump administration, it would be incorrect to assume that China currently has sufficient resources to take on a leadership role in the WHO.

Keywords: China (People's Republic of China), COVID-19, global health governance, World Health Organization, China-United States relations, multilateral institutions

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in China on 31 December 2019 (World Health Organization 2020), the WHO has been thrust into the international spotlight. Governments across the world have criticized the organization for its handling of the pandemic. The WHO's slow response and heavy reliance on the Chinese authorities has drawn sharp criticism,

particularly from the US. One accusation has been that the WHO has become an accomplice of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in handling the global health crisis. After the WHO's Director-General lauded the PRC's 'speed, scale and efficiency' (Pilling 2020) in reacting to the spread of COVID-19, many American think tanks and media outlets expressed their concern that the organization was 'bowing to China' (Schaefer 2020). The WHO was accused of 'acting too slowly' (Hernández 2020), of being 'fully controlled by China' (Archyde 2020), and was seen as 'misleading the world' (Berger et al. 2020). The then US president Donald Trump initially threatened to cut US funding and eventually declared a formal withdrawal from the organization. In contrast, Chinese president Xi Jinping gave high-profile opening remarks at the WHO annual assembly in May 2020, reiterating the country's support for the organization. Xi also pledged to donate another USD\$2 billion to help other countries fight against the virus in the next two years (Xi 2020).

Against this backdrop, this chapter asks: Is China a leader in global health governance? And is China able to overshadow the US's global leadership? Although it has been argued that China's fast response to the domestic health crisis may indicate a change of international order (Campbell and Doshi 2020), this chapter argues that China's leadership potential in the WHO has been constrained by three factors: its insignificant contribution in the WHO compared to the traditional donors; its illiberal and fragmented domestic governance structures; and its assertive health diplomacy. This chapter also proposes that it is misleading to argue China's influence on the organization is the only factor that explains the WHO's missteps in handling the crisis.

The chapter is organized as follows: the next section discusses China's role in the WHO and assesses China's domestic governance capabilities. Following this, there is a discussion about the impact of China's health diplomacy.

China's Role in Global Health Governance and the WHO

For the past few decades, China's health governance capability has been sustained by an architecture established by the US (Huang 2015). With its ascendancy, China has been increasing its level of participation in, and engagement with, existing multilateral institutions, while also building new institutions. For instance, in 2017 China began promoting its Health Silk Road (HSR) within the WHO. China also established the Global Health Drug Discovery Institute, a partnership with the Gates Foundation that has

Figure 4.1 Number of Statements Submitted to the WHA by China, the EU, and the US

* The Archives of the WHA only show statements submitted by member states in the 68th, 71st, 72nd and 73rd WHA;

** Figure 4.1 shows only the number of statements the EU made collectively. EU member states submitted individual statements in the 68th and 73rd WHA, while they submitted statements collectively in the 71st and 72nd WHA.

Source: Authors’ summary based on WHO website (World Health Organization 2020a).

the aim of fighting epidemics. China has extended its influence through different regional mechanisms, such as the China-Africa Health Ministers Conference and the BRICS Health Ministers Conference. Given China’s increased engagement in global health, some have argued that global health governance will come under China’s leadership (Huang 2017). But is this likely?

To assess the extent of China’s leadership role in the WHO, this chapter examines China’s influence in three aspects of governance: agenda setting, funding, and expertise. The assessment criteria are not exhaustive, but they are frequently overlooked or misunderstood by international society. Besides, they can also give an overview of China’s influence in the international organization.

Agenda Setting

First, the depth and scope of China’s participation in the WHO are limited. As shown in Figure 4.1, China did not make any statements in the 68th, 71st, and 72nd meetings of the World Health Assembly (WHA), the annual

Figure 4.2 WHO Assessed Contributions by Countries (Updated until Q2 2020)

Source: Authors’ calculation based on the data from WHO website (World Health Organization 2020b).

decision-making meeting held by the WHO.¹ In contrast, the United States and European Union (EU) both submitted statements during these meetings. It was only at the 73rd WHA in 2020 that China submitted two statements: one on COVID-19 and the other on the One-China policy.²

Funding

According to the WHO, in 2020 the majority of its funding came from specified voluntary contributions (55.62% of total funding) and projected funding (27.2% of total funding), while assessed contributions accounted for 14.26%. Within the assessed contributions, the US together with the EU and Japan provided over 60% of funding; the Chinese contribution of US\$129,287,000 (or 13.5% of total assessed contributions) is comparatively insignificant (see Figure 4.2). Similarly, Figures 4.3 and 4.4, which respectively show voluntary contributions and projected funding, also indicate that most of the donors are from the West while China is a relatively insignificant player.

1 The WHA is the annual meeting of the WHO member states. Members are ‘to determine the policies of the Organization, appoint the Director-General, supervise financial policies, and review and approve the proposed programme budget (World Health Organization a).’

2 The One-China policy states that ‘Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’ and holds there is only one China (Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council 2000).

Figure 4.3 WHO Specified Voluntary Funding by Parties (Updated until Q2 2020)

Source: Authors’ calculation based on the data from WHO website (World Health Organization 2020b).

Although China’s contribution to the organization has grown in the past few years, the increase is largely within the assessed contributions while over half the WHO funding comes from specified voluntary contributions. When all the funding contributions are put together (see Figures 4.3-4.5), China’s share is extremely small compared to the contributions being made by Western state donors, or those made by private donors such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Expertise

China’s influence over the WHO can be measured through the participation of its health and medical experts with the organization. The majority of WHO staff are US nationals (Glassman and Datema 2020) who play key roles in the WHO’s operations as members of the WHO advisory committee. Apart from the former Director-General of the WHO, Margaret Chan, who is of Hong Kong origin and who helped to promote Traditional Chinese Medicine, the role of Chinese experts in the organization has been minimal when compared to their US counterparts.

China’s limited contribution is also apparent in its involvement with the WHO collaborating centres (institutions such as research institutes and universities designated by the WHO Director-General to carry out activities in support of the organization). As of September 2020, of the 844

Figure 4.4 WHO Projected Funding by Parties (Updated until Q2 2020)

Source: Authors’ calculation based on the data from WHO website (World Health Organization 2020b).

WHO collaborating centres worldwide, 181 were located in the US and 130 in China. When comparing the width and depth of collaborating centres, those in the US are more specialized (see Figure 4.5). For instance, China does not have any WHO collaborating centres for water and sanitation, aging, cancer, and cholera, while the US has at least one centre for each of these categories.

The above analysis corresponds to existing research that has shown that the WHO is heavily dependent on major donors (Gostin 2015). As described above, China’s donation to the organization is comparatively low. Constrained by its structural limits, the WHO has to walk a fine line between the need for cooperation and information-sharing from member states and the need to hold them accountable for mistakes. As such, WHO officials tend to use diplomacy instead of confrontation in order to ‘coax more information’ and foster cooperation (Associated Press 2020). The WHO’s overdependence on funding from major donors constrains its enforcement and policing powers. In other words, the WHO’s mishandling of the crisis is not a direct result of China’s influence but is largely because of its organizational constraints.

Domestic Constraints

China’s influence in global health governance is also limited by its deficient domestic health governance. Since the 1980s, China’s healthcare system has undergone several reforms (Xinhuanet 2019) and has made progress in

about insurance claims is managed by the National Healthcare Security Administration (Yip et al. 2019). The lack of information sharing between these two separate entities makes effective coordination hard to achieve.

Moreover, the persistent central-local tensions in Chinese politics have significantly limited China's preparedness for public crises. Local governments tend to be defensive when handling public crises to secure their legitimacy. As a result, maintaining stability (*weiwén* 维稳) has become a means of conflict and crisis resolution in China (Benney 2016). In times of crisis, both local and central governments tend to cover up problems and maintain a low profile. It was for this reason that Li Wenliang, a doctor who was one of the first to raise the alarm about signs of a new type of coronavirus, was arrested for sharing information with colleagues. The Wuhan government then attempted to secretly report the disease outbreak to the central government.

The fragmented bureaucracy has posed a significant challenge to China's capacity for timely response. At the national level, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC), which is responsible for handling national health crises, is under the leadership of the National Health Commission (NHC).³ When COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, local officials reportedly withheld information for the purpose of maintaining stability (Wong, Barnes, and Kanno-Youngs 2020). The Wuhan CDC first reported the outbreak to the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, under the Wuhan municipal government, instead of reporting the cases to the national-level CDC. In this way, fragmentation leads to delays in information sharing and reveals central-local frictions. The former mayor of Wuhan, Zhou Xianwang, indicated that the release of information was delayed because the municipal-level officials did not obtain authorization from Beijing, implicitly shifting the blame to the central government (BBC News Chinese 2020).

This domestic political factor, namely fragmented bureaucracy, in China appear to result in the slow release of information about the pandemic. China has become more transparent in disease control and prevention since the SARS crisis in 2003. Nevertheless, the outbreaks of H1N1 in 2009, and of African swine fever in 2019, reveal that China continues to misrepresent or cover up disease outbreaks. Zhong Nanshan, a well-known Chinese expert who participated in the fight against SARS in 2003 and who is currently head of the High-Level Expert Group of the NHC, pointed out that: 'CDC in countries like the US can directly report to the central government instead of reporting

3 There are multiple vertical lines of authority within these two agencies. For example, at the provincial level there is usually a provincial CDC and a provincial Health Commission in place.

the issues level by level [...] in China, what the CDC can do is to report to the local government and nothing else' (Zhang 2020, author's translation).

Assertive Health Diplomacy

Because of China's early missteps and cover-ups, it has come under the scrutiny of international society. Australia, the US, and other countries have called for an independent probe into the outbreak (Dziedzic 2020). Several US senators even sought an investigation into the WHO's role in the global health crisis (Tsirkin, Hunt, and Haley 2020).

Facing these accusations, the PRC government has attempted to reshape narratives about the origins of the virus (Erlanger 2020) and its approach to handling the health crisis. In early February 2020, with the domestic containment of the virus proving effective, China began to provide international assistance. The Chinese government lauded the quantity of its medical support for Europe, Africa, and other parts of the world. In early March, China announced a US\$20 million donation to the WHO (CGTN 2020) and also pledged another US\$30 million (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). In May 2020, President Xi (2020) made a speech at the opening ceremony of the 73rd World Health Assembly (WHA), where he announced US\$2 billion assistance to support COVID-19 responses and economic and social development in affected countries over the next two years. In the same speech, Xi also claimed that China would assist in building the Africa Centre for Disease Control (CDC) headquarters and make the vaccine a global public good once it was ready (*ibid.*).

To mitigate concerns over its early missteps and cover-ups and to redeem its reputation on the international stage, China launched a series of public diplomacy campaigns, contrasting its own response to COVID-19 with the responses of the US and several European nations (The Straits Times 2020). The Chinese leadership instructed diplomats to publicize China's generosity and praise the Chinese approach in handling the crisis, seeking to tell a good story of its experience with the hope of getting support and understanding (Embassy of People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom 2020).

However, many have suggested that China's attempts to enhance its image by reshaping the narrative have been seriously undermined by its assertive and provocative diplomacy, which has been labelled by some as 'wolf warrior' diplomacy (Zhao 2020). Since March 2020, the coercions and threats made by aggressive Chinese diplomats, together with the strident defence of China's image by online Chinese nationalists, have triggered

outcries in Thailand, Australia, and elsewhere. For example, Cheng Jingye, the Chinese Ambassador to Australia, threatened to use economic coercion to counter Australia's call for an independent review into the origins and spread of the coronavirus in China. It has also been reported in the media that, when providing medical assistance to other countries, the Chinese side demanded that recipients officially recognize this assistance (Erlanger 2020). These anecdotes demonstrate the growing global scepticism towards China's increasing leadership on the world stage.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that China's influence in global health governance has been exaggerated. Given China's funding of the organization, its involvement in agenda setting, and its provision of expertise to the WHO, China's role in global health governance pales in comparison to its status as the world's second largest economy. China's domestic political institutional deficiencies have likewise limited China's capacity to offer timely medical responses, thus hindering the Chinese leadership in global health governance. It is evident that China has demonstrated some degree of leadership in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic by pledging financial, medical, and professional assistance to virus-stricken countries. However, China's credibility in global health governance has suffered due to its missteps, including misinformation in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, and aggressive and incoherent narratives about the pandemic. Even if the US initial mismanagement of the pandemic serves to weaken its role as the leader of global health governance, neither China nor the rest of the world is ready for China to take over leadership in this area of global governance.

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