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Subject: China's COVID-19 Messaging: Bucking up Domestic Confidence and Shifting Blame

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Subject: China's COVID-19 Messaging: Bucking up Domestic Confidence and Shifting Blame

1. ~~(SBU)~~ **Summary:** The PRC propaganda authorities use a spectrum of narrative approaches to craft news coverage, commentary, and descriptions of China's response to COVID-19. Ensuring that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and PRC government are seen to be responsive, in control, and winning against this fight is paramount. In practice, these positive messages are often mixed with neutral and negative messages. Neutral stories are generally more factual and may feature data such as reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) or describe actions China has taken to address the epidemic. Recently, negative stories aimed at shifting blame outside of China comprises a new strategy as China seeks to rebrand itself as a global leader in the fight against COVID-19, rather the outbreak's epicenter. COVID-19 continues to be intensely monitored and avidly discussed by China's active social media users. The U.S. Mission in China has successfully countered false PRC narratives with factual, transparent, and authentic Chinese language information reaching millions of Chinese seeking information on COVID-19. **End Summary.**

Positive Narratives: China is in a Battle Against the Virus – and Will Win

2. ~~(SBU)~~ Chinese state-run media pushed out many positive narratives and messages about the PRC government and CCP response to COVID-19. These positive narratives continued from earlier in the month to focus on the PRC response to the crisis and how the CCP will win the battle against the epidemic. (Ref A). These positive narratives focused on how the CCP and PRC were responding, Xi's

direct role in leading the response, how the PRC is working closely with the international community and with the WHO, and more broadly narratives that supported trust in the PRC response.

Xi Leads the Fight

3. (U) In February media outlets covered Xi's personal and direct engagement in combatting COVID-19 with photos of visits, *CCTV* coverage of Xi chairing leadership meetings on COVID-19 and focus on scientific research. By early March Chinese news outlets were widely amplifying Xi's direct engagement in combatting the epidemic. For example, on March 2, *Xinhua* covered Xi's visit to the Academy of Military Medical Sciences and the School of Medicine at Tsinghua University in Beijing. *Xinhua* reported that Xi stressed coordination in advancing scientific research on COVID-19, and his interest in vaccines, anti-bodies, medicines and fast testing kits. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a statement on March 2 titled, "Xi Jinping Urged Greater Efforts in Scientific Research on Novel Coronavirus Outbreak."

The CCP Cares – Leading Group for COVID 19 Response

4. (U) Media outlets have all widely amplified Premier Li Keqiang presiding over the leading group of China's COVID-19 response with multiple positive stories demonstrating how the PRC government and CCP are improving prevention and control, measures to care for staff working at the frontlines and how the central government and CCP have reacted at the most crucial moments to curb the spread of the epidemic. State-run media also pushed out daily updates with information on infection rates and new cases, with many outlets developing special landing pages or resources in online platforms to push out real-time updates. Good news stories about the PRC response in sending medical teams, building hospitals and stable food supplies were continued.

Working Closely with International Community and Sharing Vital Information

5. ~~(SBU)~~ *CCTV* and other Chinese media outlets widely repeated praise from the WHO on China's "pragmatic and flexible anti-epidemic measures." *The Paper* reported on February 26, "After completing their nine-day inspection in China, WHO experts hailed China's unprecedented responses to COVID-19 and acknowledged China's role in protecting the international community and buying time for other countries to prepare for the outbreak. On the same day, UN General Secretary Guterres also recognized China's efforts to alleviate the negative impact of COVID-19 and its contributions to mankind. Chinese media said, these remarks from WHO and the United Nations truthfully reflect the aggressiveness, speed, and transparency with which China responded to the outbreak. *Guangming Daily* commented on February 26, "It is no exaggeration to say that China's resolute and powerful preventive and control measures, and its outstanding capabilities to lead, respond, organize, mobilize, and implement could not be achieved by other countries. The effectiveness of China's prevention and control work has once again demonstrated the significant advantages of the CPC's leadership and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics."

China's Response Gave the Rest of the World Time

6. (U) *People's Daily* cited China's sense of responsibility in a February 22 op-ed saying, "the Chinese speed on the technical, resource, and infrastructure fronts saved precious time for the world to address the virus while limiting the number of countries affected to just 20. The Chinese practice established new benchmarks in global epidemic control, sharing information and working closely with the WHO and

countries in an open, transparent, and responsible manner, inviting international experts and facilitating their visits to Wuhan and elsewhere." *Guangming Daily* opined on February 28, "the battle against COVID-19 is also a war to defend the world" and that China's response "demonstrates our major power's sense of responsibility." Many media outlets described China's response as "shrewd and courageous" and *Guangming Daily* said the lockdown of Wuhan minimized the spread of the virus to other countries. The op-ed claims China's "timely information sharing saved the world precious time to rise to the epidemic."

Neutral Narratives Still Promote PRC Goals

7. ~~(SBU)~~ More neutral narratives focused on the epidemic situation in Hubei and around China, as well as the complex issues surrounding the epidemic. Other topics including actions the PRC is taking on wild animals and markets, innovative and new responses to help combat COVID-19, stories about front line responders, and about other cities such as Beijing. Many of these neutral stories focused on actions that the PRC took to control the epidemic and commentary from official state-run outlets noted China's reaction and response can serve as a model for other countries.

"We Would Never Let Beijing Fail"

8. (U) The *Global Times* reported on February 27 that Beijing is facing mounting pressure in efforts to contain COVID-19 as new confirmed infections surged due to imported cases of infection and cluster outbreaks. Media reports said officials from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) confirmed that authorities made the capital the top priority of its epidemic prevention and control work, with measures matching those adopted in Hubei. A WeChat post from the CCP Party School on February 17 featured an article titled, "We Would Never Let Beijing Fail" and discussed the strict measures implemented in Beijing.

Trust PRC Information, Response, and Treatment and Don't look behind the Great Firewall

9. ~~(SBU)~~ The Chinese public has actively followed COVID-19 news, with special interest in stories from traditional and social media on what they can do to stay healthy, help their families, and learn from "trusted medical experts." The CCP leveraged medical experts with established credibility, such as Zhong Nanshan, the doctor to first publicly acknowledge SARS, to convey these messages and push official narratives (**Note:** However, many netizens continue to source information beyond the Firewall and compare statements from Chinese experts with the international community, including from U.S. CDC. In this information space, the U.S. Embassy continued to attract Chinese netizens seeking accurate and factual information with U.S. messages reaching millions. **End Note.**)

Negative Narratives – Move the Blame

11. ~~(SBU)~~ Negative narratives ranged from disinformation and conspiracy theories to questioning U.S. data and information on cases and transmission in the United States. Even in the midst of the crisis the official propaganda authorities, MFA spokesperson, and various state-run media organizations continued to critique the United States. Early stories talked about the U.S. "overreaction" and sending diplomats out of Wuhan, while more recent stories claimed the stock market changes in the United States were due to a panic over COVID-19 in the U.S. Other negative narratives compared COVID-19 to the flu, reacted angrily over naming conventions that linked COVID-19 to China or Wuhan, and claimed other international reactions were racist and unfair. As the epidemic spreads to more countries, these

negative stories push the blame outside of China as the PRC seeks to rebrand itself as a global leader in the fight against COVID-19, rather than the country where it originated and spread.

U.S. Overreacts – Diplomatic Staff Are Safe, No Need for Bans

12. ~~(SBU)~~ The PRC response echoed in official media, social media, and from the MFA briefing podium negatively portrayed the closure of the U.S. Consulate in Wuhan, the evacuation of U.S. citizens from the city, and the departure of Mission China family members due to health concerns. China portrayed U.S. screening and travel restrictions as a “ban” on Chinese from traveling to the United States, calling the U.S. response “excessive.” In a key editorial on February 21 *People’s Daily* said, “Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pneumonia, the WHO has repeatedly stated it does not recommend countries take any travel or trading restrictions and has called on countries to take convincing measures based on evidence. However, some countries still choose to ignore WHO’s professional recommendations by taking excessive restrictive measures.” *People’s Daily* continued, “Such egoistic acts taken at the expense of others are not conducive to epidemic prevention and control. Rather, they have created panic, disrupted normal international exchanges and cooperation, and negatively affected global air transport market and the world economy.”

13. (U) *The Paper* on March 4 opined, “it’s worth noting that at the onset of the outbreak, the Trump administration was the first to evacuate expats from China and moved quickly to announce travel bans. As other countries followed suit, China was left hamstrung by what was effectively isolation, and its economy suffered. Had China decided to retaliate by banning all travel from and to the United States and imposing export controls on medical supplies such as masks and medicines, America would have been plunged into the hell of coronavirus.” *The Paper* concluded, “Despite the rhetoric of gloating U.S. politicians and attacks by racist U.S. media outlets, China chose not to take advantage of America’s plight. It’s ridiculous to demand an apology from China given the huge sacrifices the country has made. Instead, the United States should apologize to China for its wrong deeds, and the world is indebted to China for singlehandedly slowing the spread of the virus.

14. ~~(SBU)~~ Later when other countries added restrictions, *Xinhua* opined, “recently some countries have taken necessary border restrictive measures aimed at protecting the health and security of their citizens and foreigners as well as safeguarding regional and global public health security. As long as those measures are science-based, professional and appropriate, they can be understood and accepted.”

Suppressing Evidence of US Assistance

15. ~~(SBU)~~ The *People’s Daily* in commentary on February 27 commented that while the U.S. Department of State announced it will provide \$100 million in aid to help China and other countries in their epidemic prevention efforts China has “yet to see actual actions.” The commentary said, compared to the U.S. government, U.S. businesses, friendly groups, and civil society organizations are much more active. CASS statistics show that the total aid from U.S. companies ranks first, far more than those from other countries. On Embassy accounts, many netizens continue to ask about the U.S. response to COVID-19, U.S. donations, and specifics on aid to China and to other countries to combat COVID-19.

“All Those who Doubt China are Doomed to Fail”

16. (U) In early March, the CCP and official media outlets directly responded to critiques of China’s

ability to weather the COVID-19 production impacts. American politicians that want companies to leave China are doomed to fail was one topline. While the PRC representative to the UN framed the story as “confident Beijing will meet economic goals despite virus.” The PRC argued, there is no replacement of China’s “highly refined, specialized, high-quality, and efficient supply chain.” Media outlets also linked the response to COVID-19 as another reason to trust China’s production saying China’s achievements in epidemic prevention provide confidence to resume production.” The *21st Century Business Herald* in an editorial on February 2 said, “While it is natural for businesses to feel concerned, some American politicians and Western media that always want companies to leave China have taken this opportunity to promote a decoupling policy. But their move is doomed to fail.”

Is the U.S. Lying about COVID-19 Numbers in the United States.?

17. (SBU) Chinese media actively pushed questions about the accuracy in U.S. cases and reports of COVID-19 and the speed of the U.S. response. On March 2, the *Beijing News* featured a commentary opining the United States does not know the extent of the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. The fact that the U.S. stock market crashed indicates the market's misgivings about epidemic control outside of China, and lack of trust in the U.S. claimed Chinese media. In addition to official media coverage, Chinese netizens actively debated and discussed information on cases and response in the United States in late February and early March. On March 2, popular comments on *Weitianxia*, a prominent international news Weibo account operated by Sina discussed the CDC release of a COVID-19 patient and testing in the U.S. for COVID-19. The *Global Times* reported on February 27 that Chinese experts said the U.S. might not be able to effectively contain the outbreak of COVID-19, as the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have different perspectives on the situation, and President Trump's priority is still the economic data and the presidential election.

18. (SBU) On March 4 *People's Daily* issued a commentary titled, “The spread of coronavirus in the United States raises concern.” In the commentary *People's Daily* highlights concerns over the nursing center in Washington State, public health officials' reactions in the U.S., and claims the U.S. administration acted slowing in testing potential COVID-19 cases. Active debate and discussion on Weibo in February closely tracked and monitored news announcements in the U.S. on COVID-19 response and cases. On social media Chinese netizens criticized the U.S. CDC's measures, debating whether the U.S. system is up to the task of addressing the novel coronavirus outbreak, while also opining that Europe's decision to increase refugee admissions will further help the virus spread. As one Chinese netizen put it, “the ‘glorified’ countries, without exception, are caught in a panic.”

Stock Market Decline Shows U.S. May Not Have Control

19. (U) The *Global Times* opined on February 27 that “panic driven by the possible spread of COVID-19 in the United States has sent the country's stock market plummeting for days.” The *Global Times* said, “only actions to combat the virus, rather than words, can save the U.S. stock market from a meltdown and stop it from once again becoming the center of a global financial crisis.” The *Global Times* claimed, the market selloff “revealed investor concerns over whether or not the U.S. can bring the situation under control, particularly as the U.S. CDC confirmed the country's first possible case of community transmission.”

Sowing Doubt on the United States with Conspiracy Theories and Rumors

20. (SBU) A key editorial published in *People's Daily* on February 28 claims although the novel

coronavirus pneumonia epidemic first appeared in China, it did not necessarily originate in China. The editorial says in contrast to cautious scientists, some Western politicians and media have made rash assertions and even conjectured a so-called biochemical war to stigmatize China. *People's Daily* continues the drumbeat of "viruses know no borders" and says it is "everyone's duty to defeat ignorance with science, smash rumors with truth, resist prejudice with cooperation, and stop 'political viruses' such as conspiracy theories from causing chaos." Also in late February, Chinese media outlets all widely amplified well-known Chinese epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan saying the epidemic first appeared in China, but it may not have originated from China. This led to active discussions by netizens guessing that Zhong implied it came from the U.S. *Global Times* highlighted the origin story as well by amplifying a joint China-WHO report on February 29. Another popular online rumor that was widely circulated on Weibo and other social media platforms was that the U.S. was responsible for making the virus as either a bioweapon or a way to limit China's rise. While Chinese official media outlets debunked many of these rumors including that the CIA creating the virus, the conversations online were not quickly censored or limited which allowed many different conspiracy theories to circulate.

Mission China's Response: The Chinese People are Still Listening to us, Seeking the Truth

21. ~~(SBU)~~ Throughout February, Mission China's Chinese language social media platforms Weibo and WeChat shared content about the COVID-19 virus reaching more than 34.5 million Chinese and generating more than 748,000 engagements, showing that some Chinese audiences are hungry for fact-based, transparent reporting provided by the United States. The top post by engagement across Department of State properties the past month was the Embassy's February 8 post on China's Weibo about how the Department of State assisted in shipping nearly 17.8 tons of medical supplies to China.

22. ~~(SBU)~~ U.S. government messages have been effective in countering Chinese narratives – the Embassy translated and amplified information from the U.S. CDC with facts on prevention, response, and definitions that have been widely read and discussed. While not entirely immune from censorship, the U.S. Embassy Weibo page was filled with debate between netizens about which viewpoint was right, and where information differed from official Chinese narratives. Public exchanges on our page continue to offer unique models of transparency by showing our whole of government approach to epidemic response in near real-time.

23. ~~(SBU)~~ **Comment:** Taken together, China's positive messages on its official COVID-19 response, neutral factual discussions, and negative rumors have been effectively combined in official media and online discussions. The CCP's core narrative: that China must be on a war-like footing and mobilize to combat COVID-19, continues to have wide popular support. Additionally, as the virus spreads outside of China, the CCP will strain to counterbalance the COVID-19's Chinese origins deflecting attention with a rosy picture of how PRC authoritarian control stalled the epidemic in its tracks. Anti-American sentiment stirred up by the CCP has not effectively deflected criticism of the CCP. Moreover, reframing of the COVID-19 story as an authoritarian triumph seems intended to serve as another installment in the story of a global power competition between effective, authoritarian, rising China, and a weakened hypocritical West in decline. **End Comment**

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Signature:

Branstad
