

In Search of Solidarity: The Coronavirus and China's Views of the UAE and Iran

by [Sheng Zhang \(/experts/sheng-zhang\)](/experts/sheng-zhang)

Feb 20, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/bhthana-n-altdamn-fyrws-kwrwna-wara-alsyn-tjah-alamarat-alrbyt-almthdt-wayran\)](/ar/policy-analysis/bhthana-n-altdamn-fyrws-kwrwna-wara-alsyn-tjah-alamarat-alrbyt-almthdt-wayran)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sheng Zhang \(/experts/sheng-zhang\)](/experts/sheng-zhang)

Sheng Zhang is a contributor and Research Fellow of Chengdu Institute of World Affairs in Sichuan province, China. He was a Research Fellow at the International Peace Institute-Nepal and an Honorary Expert Advisor for the Jeevraj Ashrit Foundation. Zhang has published a number of academic journals in China, Britain, and Nepal, including on the International Conference on Economic Management and Green Development at Oxford University.



Brief Analysis

Around the start of the Lunar New Year holiday on January 25, fears heightened as experts announced that the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia (NCP) could no longer be contained in its origin city of Wuhan, China. Because much remains unknown about the virus, the international public has been reacting in a kind of mass hysteria to the idea of the virus's spread. While of those infected with or killed by the Coronavirus have mainly been from China, other countries have imposed travel restrictions or outright bans on international travel from China.

As Chinese officials monitor the responses of the international community, there are several signs that this latest incident is likely to shape aspects of China's foreign policy. On the one hand, China recognizes the rationale behind the decisions of those states that chose to suspend travel and bears no ill will towards these states—with the exception of the United States. In Post-Maoist era, Chinese foreign policy can generally be characterized as realist and driven by its national interests.

However, thousands of years of Confucian influence in Chinese civilization also continues to characterize Chinese foreign policy. In particular, international recognition is an important source of legitimacy for successive Chinese governments. At this vulnerable moment, as the Chinese government is mobilizing people and resources to confront the Coronavirus crisis, officials are also looking for international acknowledgement and praise for its efforts to combat the virus. Such international recognition plays an important role in China's internal messaging, helping to demonstrate the legitimacy of its policy to its domestic audiences.

The U.S. response to the Coronavirus, for example, proves the exact opposite of what China is looking for from the international community. As such, it has been widely publicized and condemned in Chinese media. According to Hua Chunying, spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the United States was **"the first to evacuate personnel from its consulate in Wuhan, the first to suggest partial withdrawal of its embassy staff, and the first to impose a travel ban on Chinese travelers** (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1739548.shtml). Hua publicly criticized U.S. for "overacting" and "creating and spreading fear," demonstrating the Chinese government's grievance toward the United States for leading other states to impose travel restriction on China. More explicitly, Chinese officials are

perturbed by the example that the United States has set for other countries so counter to its own hopes for international support during this time of crisis for China.

For China, international moral support and acknowledgement are likely just as important as medical supplies from a public relations standpoint. And just as China's officials value international praise and recognition, they are also notable for prioritizing the concept of reciprocity. Throughout the diplomatic history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the PRC has granted large amounts of foreign aid to other states to reciprocate public expressions of support. Perhaps the most famous case of this is the PRC's ongoing and notably large amount of foreign aid provided to Africa—principally in response to African states voting to bring the PRC back to the United Nations in 1971.

Reciprocity in the Middle East: The Implications of UAE and Iranian Support

This facet of Chinese soft power may now be aligning to help shape its Middle East policy

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/how-can-the-united-states-counter-iranian-influence>) as key states in the region shape their responses to the coronavirus outbreak. China is already one of the largest investors in the Middle East, and enhancing China's profile in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a crucial grand strategy supported by President Xi Jinping. While China's health crisis could put a damper on its increased economic role in the region, China is closely monitoring each country's response to the tragedy—and Chinese attitudes towards countries in this region are likely to be heavily impacted by them both in the short and the long term.

China has received donations or other forms of material support from various Middle Eastern states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, but the most publicized and popular instances of verbal and material support have come from the UAE and Iran.

On January 26, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of UAE Armed Forces explicitly announced his support for China's efforts to fight against the Coronavirus epidemic and his willingness to provide medical support to China. Al Nahyan stated that "we are closely following the Chinese government's efforts to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. We are confident in their ability to overcome this crisis." This sentence has been featured and highly praised by the *People's Daily* (**<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0204/c1002-31570270.html>**), the official news agency of the PRC.

In addition, while the UAE suspended most of the flights to and from China, it has deliberately allowed flights from Beijing to continue operating, leaving a window for Chinese international traders and tourists to enter and exit the country. The UAE also made a symbolic gesture of friendship by projecting the image of Chinese national flag and supportive slogans in Chinese on the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company's headquarters in Abu Dhabi. The photos of this warm gesture of friendship soon swept through the Chinese internet and received gratitude from both Chinese official media and common netizens.

Iran is another Middle Eastern state that the Chinese are currently noting with gratitude. Facing common pressure from the United States, Iran and China have already become closer in recent years and China, Russia, and Iran have already quietly created strategic cooperation norms. After the Coronavirus epidemic broke out, Iran actively supported China in a way that is likely to consolidate the China-Iran partnership. The Chinese people are well aware of the recently escalating tensions between the United States and Iran as well as the economic hardship of Iran caused by strict sanctions. Especially given the circumstances, many Chinese are highly appreciative of Iran's generous help to China in such a crucial time.

Iran's responses has been both material and symbolic; despite its own dire economic straits, Iran recently donated one million face masks to China through the Red Crescent Society. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also demonstrated excellent diplomatic skills in his communication with the Chinese side; his announcements hit all

of the talking points officials might hope for. In his **phone conversation (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/04/c_138754613.htm)** with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Zarif first praised how the Chinese government “in a responsible and transparent manner, has taken timely and resolute measures in fighting the epidemic.”

Zarif also made a point of posting two tweets in Chinese on **his Twitter (https://twitter.com/JZarif?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)** account, which have also garnered considerable positive attention on the Chinese internet. The first claims that Chinese measures against the Coronavirus is “more successful and more responsible” than U.S. measures against the H1N1 influenza in 2009. The second is particularly notable: there Zarif quotes an ancient Chinese poem on the subject of camaraderie from famous *Classic of Poetry*, one of the most important Confucian “five classics” allegedly edited by Confucius.

For the Chinese government, which is facing accusations from U.S. politicians and media on its policy fighting against the epidemic, these types of words have very high cache. In the same phone call, Zarif also openly condemned the West for “exploiting the epidemic,” a condemnation Chinese officials would likely want to make but are refraining from voicing directly.

Zarif’s phone call has made an impact in China: Foreign Minister Wang Yi hailed Zarif as “the first foreign minister publicly voicing support for China,” while Director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department **Hua Chunying (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1736529.shtml)** has stated that Iran’s response is a reflection of the “traditional friendship and sincere partnership between China and Iran.”

The UAE and Iran’s public recognition of the Chinese government’s measures taken, along with their words of solidarity, have made an impact both on the Chinese government and the common people. Given China’s policy of reciprocal democracy, these responses may well shape a new high in bilateral relations between China and these two countries.

While the considerable economic loss due to the suspension of Chinese economic activities may cause China to take a temporary break in granting foreign aids through the BRI framework in the first quarter or half of 2020, the Chinese economy can recover relatively quickly once the economic activities restart. It is very likely that China will expand its scale of investment and aids to the UAE and to Iran as reciprocation. Regarding Iran, China will also probably enhance its support for Iran in international affairs and the China-Russia-Iran quasi-alliance will further consolidate.

In the case of the UAE, while the Emirates certainly do not need monetary aid from China, a stronger partnership would benefit UAE through access to technology, Chinese experts, infrastructure projects, and—perhaps most notably—easier access to China’s extensive domestic market. Especially given the alarming recent predictions from the IMF that the Gulf’s oil wealth is unlikely to be reliable long-term by the middle of the 21st century, the UAE is looking to develop a diversified economy and energy sources. China could involve itself in this respect by providing clean and renewable energy technology and experts to the UAE. China has also already made its interest in infrastructure projects as a form of soft power known, and the UAE may be a future beneficiary as well, such as in the case of Chinese investment in **Khalifa Port I (<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/10/belt-and-road-abu-dhabi-ports-sees-huge-trade-boost-from-cosco-deal.html>)** as part of its ‘Belt and Road’ initiative.

This newest strain of coronavirus appears well on its way to making a global impact, not just in terms of those affected by it directly, but also in the ways that Chinese view international responses to their plight. With the extensive global coverage of this event, Chinese officials and the public alike are searching for recognition of the tragedy and words of support. Iran and the UAE’s willingness to respond to this need is likely to bolster good will towards these countries. And while China’s foreign policy towards the region of the Middle East writ large is notable for its limited nature in compared to other major powers involved in the region, future developments between

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

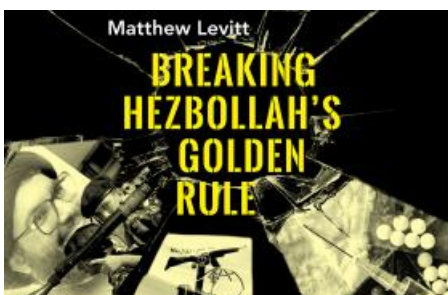
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

