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Lessons in public diplomacy from Italy's COVID-19 response

When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic swept through Italy, the country looked outside its borders and received aid from two major world powers: China and the United States. Giulia Sciorati and Frank Maracchione show that this historical moment offers a compelling case study of how international aid can dramatically shift public opinion in times of crisis.

At the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Italians **blamed China for the outbreak of the virus**. But by April 2020, a remarkable change occurred: 52% of Italians **viewed China as a “friendly” nation**, a sharp rise from just 10% the previous year. How did this shift happen?

In a **new study**, we find evidence suggesting that China's highly visible responses played a crucial role. The Chinese government **swiftly sent medical supplies**, including masks and ventilators, at a time when Italy desperately needed them. Italian media widely covered these donations, contributing to a more favourable view of China, despite suspicions about the virus's origins.

In contrast to the slower response from western countries, many Italians began to see China as a potential model for pandemic management. While Twitter users continued to express some distrust toward China, they increasingly praised its efficiency and willingness to assist Italy.

Public diplomacy

While China's image was on the rise, the same could not be said for the United States. Once considered a reliable ally, the US saw a significant decline in public trust during the pandemic. By April 2020, only 17% of Italians **still regarded the US as a true ally**, down from 29% the previous year. The answer to this steep decline lies largely in how the US responded to the pandemic under the leadership of then-President Donald Trump. Unlike China's quick response, the US was perceived as hesitant and chaotic.

Trump's public statements – such as downplaying the severity of the virus and **suggesting untested treatments like injecting disinfectant** – were widely mocked on Italian social media. On Twitter, Italians criticised Trump for his lack of responsibility and accused him of prioritising his interests over public health. Many expressed disbelief at how a great power like the US could have allowed the crisis to be so severely mishandled.

This shift in how China and the US have been perceived highlights the importance of public diplomacy: in other words, how nations manage their image through strategic communication as well as through actions. With a major reputational crisis on its hands, China managed to shift public opinion in its favour through *visible* aid.

Its public diplomacy was well-coordinated, and although some Italians remained sceptical of Beijing's intentions, many viewed China as a reliable partner during the crisis. On the other hand, the US struggled to maintain its position as a trustworthy global leader. Trump's dismissive attitude toward the pandemic and the US's delayed responses made it difficult for Italians to trust US leadership.

It's not just what you do, it's how you're seen doing it

Our research offers insights into Italian public sentiment at this critical juncture. By using Natural Language Processing, we analysed **the emotions and sentiments expressed on Twitter** about China and the US. Our findings revealed mixed emotions toward both countries.

For China, the dominant emotions were fear, anger and trust. Although many Italians feared the virus and were angry at China, its perceived origin, the aid that the country provided gradually built a sense of trust. Beijing was increasingly seen not just as the country of origin of the pandemic but as a pragmatic helper.

Toward the US, sentiment was more polarised. Some Italians still expressed trust in Washington, but these feelings were outshone by anger, ridicule or even disgust – especially aimed at Trump. Many were perplexed by the chaotic US responses and questioned whether the US could still be considered a reliable ally to Italy.

China's image in Italy improved, not because Italians admired its political system, but because the country crafted an image showing Beijing taking the pandemic more seriously and acting decisively against the virus vis-à-vis the US. This highlights an important lesson: in times of crisis, actions and words must align, and public perception can be dramatically reshaped by contrasting them with those of competing nations.

For China, the pandemic became an opportunity to improve its global image, even if only temporarily, by branding itself as the country that dispensed aid. For the US, the pandemic exposed the risks of inconsistent leadership and highlighted the long-term impact this can have on its

partners. This case serves as a reminder of the power that public diplomacy plays in shaping how nations are perceived. In times of crisis, it is not just about what you do – but how you are seen doing it.

*For more information, see the authors' accompanying open-access paper in **The International Spectator** (co-authored with Claudia Roberta Combei).*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: **Alessia Pierdomenico / Shutterstock.com***



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