

China's Vaccine Diplomacy: Soft Power, Hegemony and its Geopolitics

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped both human lives and traditional state function since its start in early 2020. In an effort to combat the deadly disease, countries around the world introduced suspensions of travel including, restrictions in cross border travel and nationwide lockdowns. However, as restrictions were eased, the world witnessed a rapid increase in infections with newer variants of the virus, proving that the fight was far from over. While restrictions again are widely being avoided for economic reasons, countries are now looking to create public immunity through the vaccines that have been made available by a select few countries. Among them, China has sought to play a leading role by developing and mass producing indigenous vaccines that have marked its presence all around the world. As countries continue to mass import Chinese vaccines, the essay intends to explore the possible ambitions of China's 'vaccine diplomacy' and its implications on the global politics.

Keywords

China, vaccine diplomacy, foreign policy, hegemony, soft power.

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In 1956, during the heights of the Cold War era, the US and USSR saw an unexpected collaboration to research and produce a new oral polio vaccine that was tested on millions of school children in the Soviet Union. The US State Department and its counterpart in the Soviet Union were seen to facilitate links between the American virologist Dr. Albert Sabin and the two Soviet virologists, Dr. Mikhail Chumakov and Dr. Anatoli Smorodintsev to collaborate and produce such vaccines on a mass scale. This collaboration not only helped pave way for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, but also facilitated subsequent medical collaboration between the two super powers.

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Soviet Union also refined the technique for freeze-drying smallpox vaccines in order to deliver it intact to the remote areas, which helped US epidemiologist D.A Henderson to lead the global smallpox eradication campaign under the World Health Organisation (WHO). In both these cases, what could be observed was the interest shown by two arch rivals to solve greater public health crisis and pandemic threats, setting aside their political differences. Such collaborations had once helped ignite a

modern international framework for vaccine distributional equity and promote scientific collaboration for future vaccine development.

More than six decades later, the principles of vaccine diplomacy remain largely intact, notwithstanding a more complex world today. The formation of Gavi Alliance (formerly the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation) and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) are some of the key instances where public health emergencies were seen to have taken a priority through forging of alliances several countries and institutions. That these alliances have got strengthened in the aftermath of the pandemic is hardly surprising; after all, the COVID-19 pandemic has set in motion a process of reshaping both world history and the existing world order. The uniqueness of the coronavirus and especially the fact that it is constantly mutilating, has left behind a devastating impact on human life and public healthcare systems. The widespread disruption caused by lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus, have taken a huge toll on lives and livelihood. As the world looks to fight back this virus, vaccines have now become a necessity to provide safe and effective protection to the vulnerable population.

However, the very nature of the pandemic seems to have induced a global competition among major economic powers, each trying to hedge against the other, while developing and

producing vaccines. As countries look to secure adequate supplies of vaccine, the developers of vaccines have now embarked on policies to forge relationships by exporting indigenous vaccines to other countries in an effort to display their soft power. While the US and Russia have always been revered for their medical innovations, China has emerged to be the leading competitor in the race to develop friendly relations and hedge against its strategic competitors in the region. With its vaccines being exported to more than 80 countries now, the paper aims to map, analyse and understand the motivations behind this new wave of vaccine diplomacy that China has embraced.

While foreign policy helps in setting the agenda based on a country's surrounding environment, diplomacy becomes the tool for the country to pursue its foreign policy in a systematic manner by enhancing intergovernmental engagement.

Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy: A Relationship between Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Objectives?

Although vaccine diplomacy has had no universal definition, scholars have widely used the term to describe the realisation of foreign policy objectives of the vaccine supplying

countries. Gideon Rose, in his article *The Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, writes, foreign policy underpins a set of international objectives that are defined by a country's internal political structure and external systematic pressure. However, Brian Hocking complements the essence of foreign policy by defining diplomacy as the nature of interactions by these actors to pursue their foreign policy. Thus, while foreign policy helps in setting the agenda based on a country's surrounding environment, diplomacy becomes the tool for the country to pursue its foreign policy in a systematic manner by enhancing intergovernmental engagement. This explains not only prominent diplomatic channels such as health, economic and military but also the rarest diplomatic vistas such as panda and culinary.

However, the forum and content of vaccine diplomacy seen during the COVID-19 pandemic varied widely across countries. While the US and most Western countries preferred sharing vaccines with their partner countries only after they had ensured that their domestic requirement would be met, China seems to have played a key part in contributing to global vaccine equity, besides meeting its domestic demands. The global interpretations of China's vaccine diplomacy have greatly been under the notion of it trying to reshape its image after the Wuhan criticism. However, most usually ignore the internal developments in science and technology that contributed

much to its foreign policy objectives. As the first country to experience the devastating effects of COVID-19, China's vaccine research began as early as January 2020 when the virus was still mostly restricted to Wuhan. The Ministry of Sciences and Technology (MOST) was seen to have taken a lead role here by launching emergency projects to accelerate indigenous vaccine research by quickly identifying companies and enterprise with the capability to. It went on to sponsor five technological roadmaps and twelve vaccine candidates that included not only private sector giants but also nascent start-ups. These enterprises also greatly benefited from this government-collaborative model through necessary funding and resource allocation. For instance, the COVID-19 Task force, comprising of members from the National Medical Product Administration (NMPA), the MOST and other concerned departments, were given the task to direct and guide the indigenous vaccine development program by coordinating and collaborating with the multiple players involved to accelerate vaccine research and market approval.

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The success of the entire internal framework could be well seen with the array of vaccine options that are available from China. BBIBP-CorV by Sinopharm and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, CoronaVac by SinovacBiotech, Convidecia by CanSinoBOP and the Academy of Military Medical Sciences, and the ZF2001 by ZhifeiLongcom and the Chinese Academy of Sciences are the four vaccines that make up most of its arsenal in the fight against COVID-19. Although it is true that China's ambitions through vaccine export has been mostly to reposition its image, one cannot disagree that such a diplomacy with its neighbours have always been the long-standing response to the world outside since its government reformation.

The origins of China's modern day foreign policy can be traced back to the 1950s under Mao Zedong. The country had then applied Civic Diplomacy in response to the international isolation by focussing on official, semi-official and civilian exchanges. Under Deng Xioping's open-door diplomacy, China's Civic Diplomacy expanded beyond the limited goal of creating a perfect image of an autarkic nation by focussing on building ties with other countries to create a stable environment for its own economic reforms. However, in the recent 21st century, under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping's leadership, China has focussed a lot more on public diplomacy as a key process to express its foreign policy interests and rebrand itself on

the world stage. Under Xi Jinping, the country's diplomatic goals have mostly been of communicating the *China Dream* to the international community by highlighting Chinese characteristics and lobbying international support. While the focus has greatly been to 'explain China to the world,' the *China Dream* is also associated with the wish for a better life for people in its neighbouring countries and potential regional development opportunities through the idea of 'a community of shared future of mankind.' This explains why in May 2020, Xi Jinping noted in the World Health Assembly that Chinese vaccines are for 'public good' and that it would be a part of China's vision of a 'shared future for the people of the world to work as one.'

By, February 2021, 56 percent of COVID-19 vaccines had already been purchased by high income countries, which represent just 16 percent of the global population.

However, one must also notice that the COVID-19 pandemic has left behind a soft power vacuum that was historically dominated by Western countries. In particular, when viewed in light of the recent developments in Sino-US relations, China's foreign policy through vaccines have endeavoured to fill this vacuum left by the Trump-led US retreat from various diplomatic stages. In a global

pandemic, the most critical challenge is to ensure equitable access to vaccines, including the periphery and semi-periphery countries, for reaching the needed levels of global population immunity. But months before the first COVID-19 vaccines were even approved, wealthy western nations had already secured billions of doses through advance purchase agreements. For instance, by the end of 2020, Canada had already ordered 338 million doses which was four times the required number, while UK had secured three times of what it needed to inoculate its citizens. Thus, by February 2021, 56 percent of COVID-19 vaccines had already been purchased by high income countries, which represent just 16 percent of the global population. Despite the international efforts to address this vaccine inequity through the COVAX network and Only Together campaign, the periphery and semi-periphery countries were left out from most of the supplies that had been locked by the core countries. Thus, China's massive vaccine exports have mostly been to capitalise on this vacuum through a flurry of bilateral deals, free sample and donation of their vaccines to the needy countries of the world. In an effort to stand as an alternative against its Western competitors, China's COVID-19 soft power projection has mostly been based on its ability to contribute life-saving vaccines as international public good to ensure better accessibility. In response to the challenges of importing and transporting mRNA vaccines by Pfizer and Moderna that require sub-zero

facilities, Chinese state medias are often seen emphasising on how some states prefer Chinese inactivated vaccines due to their competitive costs and easier logistics considering their geographical features such as tropical heat, distance and scarcity of ultra-cold freezers. For instance, when Indonesia had expressed the logistical challenges that it faces due to Pfizer, China was quick to jump in and export four million Sinovac vaccines for the country to begin its inoculation program.

Providing public goods was the inherent responsibility of hegemon states such as the US and UK because it would benefit their own interest by gaining widespread support from the international community.

The frequent usage of the term ‘public good’ has caught the attention of most scholars in their research to study the future of Chinese foreign policies. The term, first coined by Erik Robert Lindahl was one of the first to use the term ‘public goods’ which he did in his book 1919 classic article, *‘Just Taxation-A Positive Solution’* in the context of domestic taxation policy, but later the term was given an international context by Olson and Zechauser in *An Economic Theory of Alliance*. Today, this term, has been often used by Chinese officials in the 21st century. The White Paper of the Information Office of State Council in 2005,

the China Arabic Cooperation Forum in 2014 and the very recent World Health Assembly in 2020 are some of the key instances where China had used the word ‘public good’ to express the intention for safety and development. However, its interest in using this form of an expression becomes even clear when viewed through the theory of hegemony. According to the theory, providing public goods was the inherent responsibility of hegemon states such as the US and UK because it would also benefit their own interests by gaining widespread support from the international community. When looked from the Chinese perspectives, its growing ambitions as a major exporter of Covid vaccines could be well seen as a huge opportunity to counter the growing tensions between itself and the Western powers, the rise of India and Japan as strategic competitors and the international discontent over reluctance to satisfactorily set at rest the so-called ‘Wuhan theory’.

The Diplomacy Standpoint: Has China Induced a Shift to the Original Idea of Vaccine Diplomacy?

While pre-Covid conceptualisation of vaccine diplomacy has mostly centred around the multilateral frameworks of conflict resolution, there is limited precedence to better understand bilateral vaccine diplomacy. However, the theory seems to be unique in practice as China seeks to adopt a bilateral pathway that is

dictated by its own experience during the time of the COVID pandemic. China's model of bilateral vaccine diplomacy strikingly differs from the previously focused vaccine equity through multilateral negotiations and programs initiated through GAVI and the WHO and is also contrary to the set notions of scientific collaboration witnessed during the Cold War era. However, when looked through the concepts of national imaging, self-reliance and the ambitions of being a dominant supplier of vaccines are clearly the features in understanding China's vaccine diplomacy.

The same political structure that had once accelerated China's soft power supremacy, now also poses a threat to its ambitions.

Although it is true that such diplomacy has also grown out of its desire to re-position its previously lost image stemming from the 'Wuhan theory', vaccine deployment during one of the most devastating pandemics provides a perfect national imaging space for an aspiring hegemon. China also seems to have effectively leveraged the universality of suffering and emotional appeal that it has the capacity to supply vaccines to many countries. African nations such as Sierra Leone's live telecasting the Chinese vaccines landing in Freetown's Luigi Airport is an example of how China had effectively exploited the emotional dimension over vaccine necessity amidst a

pandemic. Even in Europe, Chinese vaccines have been able to penetrate despite the initial hesitancy. While it is necessary for vaccines to secure the European Medicines Agency's (EMA) authorization, most Central and Eastern European countries like Serbia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia have already secured enough Chinese vaccines to begin the vaccination process.

However, the same political structure that had once accelerated this soft power supremacy, now also poses a threat to its ambitions. The rapid developments of Chinese vaccines have continued to court controversies over time. Some suggest that Chinese authorities had allegedly detained vaccine safety advocates, censor information critical of the Chinese-made vaccines and spread disinformation about vaccines produced by other nations, including a state-led media campaign questioning the efficacy and safety of Western vaccines. China's reluctance to share data and protocols relating to its vaccines was evident when Singapore after importing 200,000 Sinovac doses in February 2021, had sought additional data before vaccinating its citizens, but the Chinese company did not respond. The opacity in its transactions with partner countries could adversely affect China's position on the world stage, especially its ambitions of being the numero uno.

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