

# Vaccine Race: Charting a New Cause to International Relevance in the COVID-19 Era

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**Abstract**—Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, international health organizations, especially the World Health Organization, are concerned about what can be done to save the lives of millions of infected people worldwide. Concerns about public health have risen to the top of every nation's agenda. About 24 countries have created home-grown vaccines that might be used to project soft power and gain worldwide relevance because emotive social media debates and international media coverage imply that immunizations bring influence. Using nation branding and soft power theory, this paper examines how specific states have leveraged access to COVID-19 vaccinations to gain favor with allies and foes alike. Both documentary and qualitative-descriptive methods were used to collect and analyze the data. In addition to regaining their international reputation and position, the findings suggest that countries like China, Russia, and India have sought to exploit vaccine access to secure and explore new prospects in other economies. Soft power has been shown to be significantly more effective than military hard power in gaining access to and securing new prospects in other economies throughout the world.

**Keywords**—Hard Power; International Relevance; Nation Branding; Soft Power Theory; Vaccine Race

## I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, over 500,000 people have died as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, hundreds of millions of jobs and billions of money has also been lost. Unsurprisingly, there is considerable interest in producing a vaccine, with more than a hundred research now ongoing worldwide. The rapidity with which the research community created the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the degree of global collaboration

displayed in this attempt, were really remarkable. Since then, vaccine politics have resurfaced, endangering the possibility of a balanced global health strategy. After generating several vaccinations in the absence of a clear global push, some powerful nations began employing their vaccines to forge regional ties and expand their own influence.

Vaccines have become a weapon of international geopolitics and a component of what some have dubbed "global nationalism" for use in political conflict. Getting a nuclear weapon is far easier than getting immunizations. Selling or distributing vaccinations beyond national borders helps vaccine producers spread their impact. The COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) facility was formed by GAVI (the Vaccine Alliance), the World Health Organization, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovation (CEPI), and several governments and private organizations with the sole aim of treating any successful vaccination that becomes a globally acceptable product equitably, regardless of where it was created or the purchasing capacity of a country.

Whereas the West risks losing international ground in order to inoculate its own population first, China and Russia have spread their soft power stocks throughout the developing world. What was supposed to be a mission to save humanity from a terrible virus has morphed into a power grab for a few states and corporations. The time it took to produce a safe and effective vaccination before COVID-19 was measured in decades (Graham, 2020). Safe and effective vaccines have been developed at rapid speed as a result of years of fundamental scientific research that has resulted in a greater knowledge of human cells, how viruses attack them, and how viral defenses might be deployed (Isaacson, 2021).

Covid-19 vaccinations are progressively being recognized as the pinnacle of success in terms of

offering the most hopeful, efficient, and successful approach to putting an end to the pandemic. With the ethical and practical limits of providing newly licensed COVID-19 vaccinations fairly to those in most need, a shifting image of vaccination trust exists (Larson & Broniatowski, 2021). Depending to Lazarus et al. (2021), readiness to get a COVID vaccination is dynamic, shifting according to the level of the pandemic danger and perceived risk, as well as different safety concerns and conspiracies promoted by social media.

It is then critical to guarantee that COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing is ramped up quickly worldwide. Efforts, procedures, and policies are being put in place to ensure that these vaccinations are available. Overall, the WHO and COVAX groups have proposed a worldwide allocation methodology that prioritizes the most vulnerable populations and health-care professionals. Such measures, however, may be unachievable since all governments would be under immense pressure to prioritize the needs of their own populations.

Bollyky and Brown refer to this as the "my nation first" viewpoint in Foreign Affairs (Bollyky & Brown, 2020). The rationale for this reaction to vaccine procurement and dissemination has been framed in terms of national security, culminating in the medicalization of insecurity (Elbe, 2012). Vaccine nationalism, rather than vaccine multilateralism, is almost going to triumph (Haass, 2020).

As an alternative to nationalism, vaccine internationalism advocates that immunizations be made available on a need-to-know basis at the international level through multilateral collaboration (Bacchus, 2020; Baker, Wilson & Anglemeyer, 2020). A group called the European Association of Public Health Schools says that coordination and fair access are very important for the global community to be able to control and contain Ebola (Wong, Green, and Reid, 2021).

Western countries' vaccine nationalism made it possible for these other countries to engage in vaccine diplomacy. Vaccine diplomacy is a notion that bridges the gap between nationalism and internationalism by pursuing national strategic goals while also focusing on providing and selling vaccinations to other countries (Hotez, 2014). Historically, worldwide, fair access to medications and vaccinations has been a challenge for health diplomacy during major disease outbreaks. For instance, during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, smallpox and polio vaccinations, as well as HIV/AIDS drugs, were frequently made available only after wealthier countries purchased pharmaceuticals for domestic use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Fidler, 2022). Developing nations like China and Russia have attempted to break free

from this pattern by developing their own pharmaceutical research and manufacturing capabilities. Vaccine diplomacy from China and Russia has already covered the supply gap left by the West and India (Sahgal & Sahu, 2017).

China has surpassed India as the COVAX initiative's greatest vaccine supplier; their vaccine diplomacy is definitely winning. Despite public opinion favoring vaccinations from Western countries, insufficient supplies have pushed people in underdeveloped countries, particularly in Latin America, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe, to rely on Chinese vaccines. Russia, which was the first country to create a COVID-19 vaccine, has progressed in its vaccine diplomacy as well, but on a much lesser scale. Following some initial criticism, the Sputnik-V studies revealed a 92 percent effectiveness rate in early 2021, establishing their credibility. Despite vaccination hesitancy in Russia (8.2% of the population is immunized), the country has sold doses to 43 nations.

However, with the development of COVID-19 vaccines, we are approaching the sphere of geopolitics. It's called geopolitics, and it's all about how countries' positions in the international system, particularly variations in the power balance, impact their actions (Fidler, 2020). Since 1801, when Edward Gantt, the first White House physician, treated Native American diplomats against smallpox during their visit to Washington, DC, vaccines have been used to establish diplomatic ties (Hotez, 2014). Vaccine collaborations go beyond humanitarian scientific undertakings. As a result, the present study will examine how particular nations have exploited access to their COVID-19 vaccines to gain favor with both friends and adversaries, while also including an ex-post facto research methodology.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

##### *The Soft Power Theory*

According to Nye (2004), as opposed to hard or command power, which comes when one country forces others to do what it desires, co-optive or soft power arises when one country persuades other countries to desire what it desires. Soft power, he argued, is the capacity to influence others to achieve desired objectives by appeal and persuasion rather than force or reward. He went on to call it "attractive power" (Nye, 2019). Soft power is built on the cultural, ethical, and economic resources of a country. A smart-power method combines hard-and soft-power resources. Soft power was critical to the Cold War victory. Public diplomacy promotes a country's soft power. According to Joseph Nye Jr. (2002), a state's power consists of both hard and soft components, with the former referring to the economic and military sectors and the latter referring to the cultural dimensions or values that determine a state's

character and practices. Soft power, as contrasted to hard power, which is based on carrots and sticks, entails bringing people to the global agenda, according to Nye Jr.

According to Nye Jr. (2004), a country's soft power is derived from three basic resources: culture, political principles, and foreign policy. High culture (literature, art, and education) coexists with popular culture, which is primarily concerned with mass entertainment. Political values relate to a country's internal ideals and policies. According to Nye Jr., the third component of soft power is a country's foreign policy, which may generate attractiveness if viewed as legitimate by other countries.

In applying the soft power theory to the study, we observe that many countries want to use the soft power of COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy to influence and entice other countries. On one hand, there is a low-income country suffering from a growing pandemic and tired of waiting for COVID-19 vaccine doses, which is disregarded by nations with greater wealth, while on the other hand, there are major countries with nationalist political objectives. The race for vaccine production by about 24 countries, who have developed a home-grown vaccine that will be exported to other countries, creates a means of projecting soft power and attaining international relevance. Hence, the reason behind the sentimental on social media and international media coverage is that where vaccines go, influence will follow.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The data for the study was gathered through the use of secondary sources and the documentary method. Primary sources include textbooks, journals, government documents, periodicals, newspapers, and websites. It also requires a lot of research into the literature, especially the ones that are relevant to the subject. The produced data was also analyzed using the qualitative-descriptive approach to data analysis.

### *Covid-19 Vaccines Diplomacy and Political Influences*

The US and China viewed the outbreak as a geopolitical disaster from the start. When the new coronavirus developed in late 2019 in Wuhan, the global system was once again ruled by balance-of-power politics, this time centered on the Sino-American military, political, and economic competition. After China's strength and influence were questioned, the US administration, led by Donald J. Trump, escalated the competition between the two countries. The US chastised China's leaders and political system for the catastrophe, while also seeing opportunities to profit from China's difficulties (Mead, 2020). When the tables were turned and the US faced COVID-19 after China had contained its outbreak, the same tendencies persisted. China tried to use the epidemic as a springboard to grow its worldwide influence and reclaim the title of world leader (Wong, 2020).

On a global scale, the politics of balance-of-power has re-emerged. National responses to COVID-19 have been shaped by geopolitical concerns, with the US and China viewing the outbreak as another battleground in their war for dominance and influence (Fidler, 2022). When it comes to power politics, getting vaccines for coronavirus has become a top priority. This is because it can help the country make up for lost money at home, in export markets and inside important power zones.

On October 19, Russia's misinformation campaign proceeded to sow uncertainty, discord, and division in American politics with the goal of undermining the country's power and influence (Rankin, 2020). As a result of the pandemic, Russia has been able to expand its influence in Latin America beyond Venezuela. The relationship between the Russian and Bolivian presidents is based on their vaccination deal. Authoritarian governments have used the pandemic to strengthen their power around the world, with China and Russia growing and democracies in chaos (Roth, 2020).

Throughout history, nations have used their ability to obtain, manufacture, and distribute vaccines as a barometer of their state's authority. In the case of the COVID-19 vaccines, a small group of wealthy nations – Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union – have already committed to approximately half of the planned supplies of the leading vaccine candidates through vaccine manufacturing investments and advance purchase agreements.

From the beginning, politics has had a significant effect on COVID-19 and its reactions to the epidemic. At the same time, Democrats were far more likely than Republicans to take the threat of the virus seriously and support measures to combat it from the start (Hamilton & Safford, 2020). Stay-at-home directives were met with greater resistance in states with a higher proportion of Republican voters (Hill, Gonzalez, & Davis, 2020). Politics has had a significant impact on public perceptions about COVID-19 vaccinations. According to research, there is a substantial link between political opinions and vaccine uptake in various nations. Political conservatives have repeatedly been found to be more vaccination resistant in recent research (Sun & Monnat, 2021; Viswanath et al., 2021). Furthermore, great power politics has hampered global immunization efforts, jeopardizing international attempts to make vaccinations more widely available.

According to Holmberg et al. (2017), vaccination campaigns coordinated by the government aim to mould the immunity of entire communities. They argue that it is not a neutral practice; therefore, it must be evaluated in terms of state authority, national identity,

and the individual's feeling of responsibility to oneself and others.

Furthermore, producing enough doses of one or more vaccinations and distributing them throughout the world might be a difficult undertaking that could take years to complete. For example, production businesses would hope to recuperate their research and development expenditures as well as the costs of manufacturing and distribution, which might amount to tens of billions of dollars (and probably much more) when considering the worldwide population, let alone when profits are added together. However, there are significant political issues to consider in the vaccine's development and distribution, such as: who should receive the first doses of any vaccine? What are the advantages of developing a vaccine in the nation where it is developed? How much will wealthy nations push poorer countries out? (Haass, 2020).

#### A. COVID Vaccine Diplomacy in China

Beijing avoided outright Western criticism of the virus's origins, opting instead to use diplomatic methods such as the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccinations to transform the health catastrophe into a geopolitical opportunity. China is the largest manufacturer of the COVID-19 vaccine, with 169.4 million doses of four vaccines: Sinovac, Sinopharm, CanSino, and AstraZeneca. China has sent vaccinations to African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American countries. The first Chinese vaccination experiment outside of China began in July 2020 in Brazil, marking the start of China's vaccine diplomacy. China's vaccine manufacturers have formed alliances with dozens of nations, primarily low- and middle-income countries, to supply them with Chinese-made vaccines as early as November 2020.

President Xi Jinping of China has chosen the soft power approach in order to provide a revitalized China with more global clout. This is consistent with Joseph Nye's view of power, which stresses soft power while downplaying military might and conquest in the past. Soft power, according to his view, is persuading others to seek the same results as you do, rather than coercing them (Nye, 2004). In Africa, China employs "smart power," which combines soft (cultural and health diplomacy) and hard (economic power). Its public diplomacy combines assistance initiatives, grants, and low-interest loans with African countries to strengthen economic connections. Vaccine doses have been used to keep relationships strong and make the most of new opportunities in Chinese vaccine diplomacy, which has been a mix of business and politics.

China has attempted to expand its political dominance in nations like Paraguay and Brazil. Paraguay was able to obtain 20,000 Sinovac pills thanks to a

contribution from Chile, Karásková & Blablová (2021). Later, it was alleged that Chinese government officials expressly said that Paraguay would no longer have access to the Chinese vaccination until it altered its attitude towards Taiwan (Alhmidi, 2021). In April 2020, as COVID-19 raged across the country, the communist caucus in the Paraguayan Senate introduced a bill to establish relations with Beijing, which would mean the severance of relations with Taiwan. Proposal: 25–16. Opposition lawmakers said they would recognize China if the power balance in Paraguay changed.

Additionally, Brazil, which is now experiencing one of the world's worst COVID-19 outbreaks, was informed that it would be unable to get Chinese vaccines unless it agreed to remove Huawei from its 5G wireless network auction (Alhmidi, 2021). Algeria did not pay a dollar for the Chinese vaccines that came in March, according to Smith (2021). China has used the terms "core interests" and "internal affairs" to defend itself against criticism of Hong Kong's autonomy and allegations of human rights violations in Xinjiang, which China rejects. Additionally, it stated that it was opposed to foreign meddling in China's "internal affairs."

While China's vaccine diplomacy helped to foster good ties with several African countries, it did not do so with Nigeria (Itugbu, 2020). Medical professionals in Nigeria were angry when they learned that Chinese medical staff had arrived to help with pandemic mitigation efforts. They thought they were better than the Chinese medical staff.

Due to the soft power, institutional, and socio-ecological factors at work, China's vaccine diplomacy is impossible to ignore. Beijing has said that it plans to give COVAX vaccines made in China. This doesn't mean that China can't use its vaccines to show its power in areas other than COVAX.

#### B. COVID Vaccine Diplomacy in Russia

The Russian delegation emphasized the significance of continued international collaboration and dialogue (RussiaToday, 2020). As a result, Russia experimented with soft power diplomacy by promoting its Sputnik V vaccination. On August 11, 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the coronavirus vaccine developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow had been approved for use by the FDA. This vaccine protects against the virus.

Although Russia's Sputnik V vaccine has yet to receive regulatory clearance from the European Union and is unlikely to play a significant role in the bloc's deployment, it has already begun to sow dissension among and within member states (Henley, 2021). Shots have been authorized in 61 countries and sold

to 40, but safety worries remain as many EU politicians are wary of Russia's intentions after the country only gave out 19 million doses to its 144 million people. The fact that Russia has a vaccine that is supposed to be cheap, easy to make, and effective doesn't explain why it has a low immunization rate.

Despite the fact that the Russian version is still seeking legal approval from the European Union, Moscow took advantage of delays in the European Union's immunization program to offer its own vaccine to Hungary (Safi, 2021). Hungary and Slovakia, two EU members, have taken a stand against the bloc's collective policy by ordering the shot, which Hungary has deployed (Henley, 2021). Russia has also increased its goods supply to Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Prasad, 2021).

Nigeria's officials did not hurry to adopt the Sputnik V vaccination when Russian efforts to push it to African countries gathered traction in 2020, despite the fact that it was the first accessible on the worldwide market (Page, 2022). Sputnik V's elite and popular appeal in Nigeria was harmed by a mix of internal circumstances. High costs and questions about its effectiveness made it difficult for the vaccine's approval process to move forward. Nigeria's existing ties to Western health and immunization groups also made backroom deals for Sputnik V doses difficult for Nigerian officials to make.

Furthermore, the Russian vaccine was rejected for a variety of reasons, including the government's authoritarian nature, the fact that the Sputnik V trials utilized an unrandomized sample of patients, and the fact that the data was not publicized. The majority of industrialized democracies will not trust Russia in creating a viable vaccine, leading to the term "hybrid weapon of Russia" (Kunierkiewicz et al., 2021).

### C. COVID Vaccine Diplomacy in India

Indian pharmaceutical businesses are important producers of vaccines that are disseminated worldwide, particularly in low-income nations, delivering more than 60% of vaccines to poor countries (Niladri, Mahmood, & Marcussen, 2021). Currently, the government has licensed both Covaxin, a vaccine developed by Bharat Biotech and the government-run Indian Council of Medical Research, and Covishield, a locally made version of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine. Indian producers, despite a robust production base and early access to COVID-19 vaccines, are unable to generate enough doses to adequately treat the epidemic. India has declared immunization support for neighboring countries and has sent immunizations to Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Bangladesh as "gifts" or grants in compliance with New Delhi's "Neighbor First" policy (Hindustan Times, 2021; Srivastava & Kay, 2021). India also supplies on a contractual basis to Saudi

Arabia, South Africa, Brazil, Morocco, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

India entered the competition in February 2021, giving millions of doses to its South Asian neighbors, where it had been competing with China for political clout (Safi, 2021). With China's growing presence in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, and other African countries, India has faced stiff competition for influence in its South Asian region. Due to a lack of economic resources, India's efforts to match China's economic clout have been mainly fruitless thus far. From the standpoint of international diplomacy, one cannot condemn India for using its resources to expand its geopolitical diplomacy, even if it does so at a time when the world is experiencing global health issues (Niladri et al., 2021). India's vaccination gifts will surely contribute to India's global image improvement and acquisition of goodwill, notably in South Asia, where it is occasionally criticized for its "big brother" attitude. India has a better advantage over China because of China's history of vaccination debates (Wee, 2020), a lack of vaccine effectiveness (Reuters, 2020), and a lot of doubt (Minter, 2021; Yang et al., 2020).

Patent protection raises prices and makes drugs, diagnostics, vaccinations, and medical equipment more difficult to get. Both India and South Africa have requested that the World Trade Organization waive the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights clauses, allowing them to participate in compulsory licensing and parallel importation of COVID-19 medicines (Reuters, 2020; Sell, 2020). Their previous experiences with HIV/AIDS, swine and avian influenza have left them wary of the barriers to access that intellectual property can erect.

### D. COVID Vaccine Diplomacy in the United States and the United Kingdom

True, Western countries' vaccine diplomacy efforts have steadily expanded. Apart from heavily investing in and leading the development of some of the most effective Covid-19 vaccines, including the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, and supporting local vaccine production, Western nations have been among COVAX's most generous supporters, both financially and in terms of vaccine contributions. By investing early in Oxford University's immunization program, the United Kingdom joined the vaccination race with the United States.

Despite this, just a fraction of the 870 million Covid-19 vaccinations agreed at the June G7 Summit have been delivered, and supply bottlenecks have hampered the Western-led COVAX campaign. COVAX has also received less than 1% of the 500 million doses of vaccines that wealthy countries agreed to donate. The EU and the UK didn't send any

of their extra vaccines to COVAX, and donations from the US have only recently started to come in.

### III. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to various newly popular terms. It's been a while since the pandemic world used the terms "Vaccine Race" and "Vaccine Diplomacy." Some countries use their vaccines to boost their own power and global status, and also to strengthen regional ties. As a result, in the post-COVID-19 era, a new cause has been charted with international relevance. From the outset, the viral reaction has been entwined with global power and diplomatic squabbles. For example, in the absence of vaccine supplies to poorer countries, some in the West were forced to cast doubt on the credibility of Chinese and Russian efforts, portraying them as cynical diplomatic ploys, even as Western countries wrapped their own international assistance in conditions that frequently included their desire for trade deals (Jennings, 2021). As a result of the soft power diplomacy associated with vaccine development, the race and fight to create vaccines have featured measures to erode belief in competing countries' intentions and efficacy. In other words, the idea of global health becoming a new battlefield for global power struggles and rivalries should concern us all, as any advantages derived from such contests in the past were achieved through cooperative rivalry.

Appropriate suggestions suggest that the wish to push and attract good tidings through vaccines through soft power has proven much more effective than the use of military hard power to engender access and secure new opportunities in other economies of the world has become a fact. This has thus far tended to make the global response to COVID-19 uncooperative and divisive, as casting blame or seeking to spread distrust has become the new deal.

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