

Covid-19 Vaccine Diplomacy: Redefining the Post 2020 World Order

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There are many words synonymous with the year 2020 such as pandemic, COVID-19, lockdown, and variant. All evoke the same feelings of dread and sadness worldwide. Amidst such commonly shared emotions regarding the coronavirus outbreak, there is one phrase, not as commonly known, that has slowly crept into recent political dialogue and that has the potential to shape geopolitical relations around the world for the next decade: vaccine diplomacy.

Vaccine diplomacy is defined as “almost any aspect of global health diplomacy that relies on the use or delivery of vaccines and encompasses the important work of the GAVI [vaccine alliance], as well as elements of the WHO, the Gates Foundation, and other important international organizations.”¹ At its most basic, vaccine diplomacy is the strategic use and distribution of vaccines as a means of creating influence in other countries or of strengthening and improving diplomatic relationships as a whole.

Not only does vaccine diplomacy provide a country with the means of creating a form of producer-consumer dependency among other nations but it can also lead to the formation of collaborative relationships among historically opposed countries.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, nations have raced to be the first to produce a vaccine, the first to actually distribute the vaccine, and the first to reach widespread recognition for their efforts². A situation that would naturally call for unity, has actually led countries to compete for global predominance in light of a worldwide vulnerability. By looking at the efforts pushed by Russia, China, and the US, we can get a more focused understanding of how COVID-19 vaccine distribution has already begun to shift perceptions of historical global relationships and the implications this may have in the future.

Vaccine diplomacy, although a seemingly new term, has in fact existed for some time. Given its relevance to the larger scope of global health diplomacy and its more specific relevance to vaccine science diplomacy -- defined as “a unique hybrid of global health and science diplomacy”³ -- vaccine diplomacy has been part of multiple events throughout history. The larger term of global health diplomacy has had various meanings historically, which can be categorized into three main subsets of interaction: “core diplomacy, formal negotiations between and among nations; multistakeholder diplomacy, negotiations between or among nations and other actors, not necessarily intended to lead to binding agreements; and informal diplomacy, interactions between international public health actors and their counterparts in the field.”⁴

1 Peter J. Hotez, “Vaccine Diplomacy”: Historical Perspectives and Future Directions,” PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases, June 26, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4072536/>.

2 “The COVID-19 Vaccine Race,” Gavi: The Vaccine Alliance, May 2021, <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/covid-19-vaccine-race>.

3 Ibid.

4 Peter J. Hotez, “Vaccine Diplomacy”: Historical Perspectives and Future Directions,” PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases, June 26, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4072536/>.



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All three explain the various types of negotiations drawn up by world leaders in their quest to distribute the vaccine. These various levels of engagement demonstrate the evolution of the concept of diplomacy, over time.

Diplomacy is no longer just about verbal expressions and dialogue, but about the successful collaboration of experts in different disciplines in order to jointly solve pressing global health issues. The fruit of this collaboration redefines the core of what diplomacy will look like in the future and is what allows vaccine diplomacy to serve as a form of humanitarian intervention.⁵ As global health diplomacy and science diplomacy grow more intertwined, the joint development of life-saving vaccines becomes all the more possible and the delivery and distribution of those vaccines gets streamlined. The faster a vaccine can be produced, the faster it can be sent out, the greater the aid that can be offered, the greater the global impact, and thus the greater the recognition. This careful calculation is what makes vaccine diplomacy such a useful “soft power tactic.”⁶

The first signs of vaccine diplomacy date to the creation of the first vaccine in 1798. During that year, English physician Edward Jenner discovered that by inoculating people with cowpox, smallpox could be prevented. Given the deadliness of the epidemics caused by smallpox at the time, the discovery of this vaccine gained worldwide recognition.⁷ By the beginning of the 1800s, the smallpox vaccine was already widely available across England and France. In 1801, more concrete signs of vaccines being used as diplomatic tools began to emerge when Dr. Edward Gantt vaccinated Native American diplomats, who were visiting Washington DC, against smallpox.⁸ Throughout the 1900s, this diplomatic momentum was kept in motion and resulted in one of the most widely recognized moments of vaccine diplomacy.

The virologist Dr. Albert Sabin traveled to the USSR and formed a sustained collaborative relationship with two Soviet virologists. This partnership led to the creation of a prototype oral polio vaccine that would be tested on some 100 million people, mostly children within the Soviet bloc countries.⁹ This exchange of ideas and scientific findings paved the way for one of the most unprecedented partnerships between these two enemy countries. The partnership managed to remain positive despite the various proxy wars that the two were inflicting upon each other.

The more the relationship between the USSR and the US developed on this scientific front, the greater the breakthroughs they made. The Soviet Union pioneered a freeze-drying technique for the smallpox vaccine which allowed for around 450 million doses to be dispersed in support of the global smallpox eradication campaign being carried out in developing countries. The successful and unprecedented collaborative relationship between these two countries led them to work together, “on what remains the most successful vaccination program in human history,”¹⁰ completely eradicating smallpox. The partnership achieved between two historically enemy countries amid Cold War times shows the resiliency and effectiveness of vaccine diplomacy for responding to global health needs, independent of national gains.

After almost two years of undergoing a deadly global pandemic and with the global death toll for

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michael Leigh, “Vaccine Diplomacy: Soft Power Lessons from China and Russia?” Bruegel, April 27, 2021, <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/04/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-china-and-russia/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J. Diane Pearson, “Medical Diplomacy and the American Indian: Thomas Jefferson, the Lewis and Clarke Expedition, and the Subsequent Effects on American Indian Health and Public Policy,” *Wicazo Sa Review*, Spring 2004, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1409489>.

⁹ Stephen Mihm, Kairvy Grewal, Raghav Bikhchandani, and Himani Chandna, “World Badly Needs Vaccine Diplomacy, That’s the Lesson from Polio & Smallpox,” *ThePrint*, May 05, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/world-badly-needs-vaccine-diplomacy-thats-the-lesson-from-polio-smallpox/652522/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

COVID-19 exceeding four million,¹¹ the need for mass vaccination programs becomes all the more important in order to return to a more “normal” future. Russia has spearheaded much of the dispersal of its vaccines especially in more underdeveloped countries but not without major setbacks. Russia currently has only one publicly available vaccine which is Sputnik V, named after the world’s first satellite “Sputnik” produced during the Cold War space race,¹² and two emergency-use only vaccines: “EpiVacCorona, produced by the Vector Institute in Novosibirsk, and CoviVac, from the Chumakov Centre in St. Petersburg, known for its collaboration with US scientist Albert Sabin on the polio vaccine during the Cold War.”¹³

Sputnik V, which is reported to have a 97.6 percent efficacy rate,¹⁴ has been promised at a cost of less than \$10 for international consumers thereby making it a more accessible and affordable alternative for international consumers. The Russian Direct Investment Fund, which is in charge of the distribution of the vaccine, says it has signed contracts with more than 12 manufacturers in ten countries to produce around 1.4 billion doses and 29 countries have allegedly approved Sputnik V for emergency use.¹⁵ Despite the fact that it has not yet been approved by the European Medicines Agency, already 57 countries have authorized it due to its low cost and easy storage. Given the varied relationships between EU countries and Russia, the credibility and validity of the vaccine has been highly questioned, with some arguing that the lack of concrete information about Sputnik V could pose a risk to human lives.¹⁶ The lack of EMA approval has not stopped many EU countries from signing on with the Russians and has created a division among the member states and several highly contentious debates. In one of the biggest political scandals caused by the vaccine, Igor Matovic, the Slovakian prime minister, formally resigned after signing a secret deal to purchase dozens of doses of Sputnik V vaccines despite lacking the approval from his colleagues.¹⁷ The crisis led around six other cabinet members to resign and led many opposition parties to accuse Matovic of mishandling the pandemic more generally. The pushback concerning Matovic’s decision exemplifies the EU’s response towards Russian vaccine ventures. On one side, there is a general disinformation campaign to discredit the Russian jab and on the other are the people who support the import of the vaccine. Opponents of Matovic’s decision stated that the Russian government was using its vaccine as a “hybrid war tool” while Matovic defended his actions stating that the Russian vaccines are “reliable” and that they are the only solutions available to ameliorate the slow domestic vaccine rollout. This specific case highlights the general discrepancy in approach towards the Russian vaccine which has created divides in what were previously tight-knit EU countries.

Russia’s ventures into the European Union have been staggered with some deals signed and others rejected. Russia has allegedly sent the vaccine to Serbia and Montenegro at the same time that Croatia began talks to acquire Sputnik V. The Croatian health minister also authorized the vaccine without awaiting the EMA’s approval.¹⁸ Austria, after expressing similar needs, led talks of acquiring the vaccine and openly accused EMA of being slow to approve the Russian

11 “Coronavirus Cases,” Worldometer, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

12 Chelsea Gohd, “Russia Names Its 1st COVID-19 Vaccine ‘Sputnik V’ after Space Race Triumph,” Space.com, August 11, 2020, <https://www.space.com/russia-names-coronavirus-vaccine-sputnik-v.html>.

13 Chris Baraniuk, “Covid-19: What Do We Know about Sputnik V and Other Russian Vaccines?” The BMJ, March 19, 2021, <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n743>.

14 “Russia’s Sputnik V Covid-19 Vaccine Shows 97.6% Efficacy,” Pharmaceutical Technology, 2021, <https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/news/russia-sputnik-v-efficacy/>.

15 Chris Baraniuk, “Covid-19: What Do We Know about Sputnik V and Other Russian Vaccines?” The BMJ, March 19, 2021, <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n743>.

16 Jon Henley, “Is Russia’s Covid Vaccine Anything More than a Political Weapon?” The Guardian, April 30, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/30/is-russias-covid-vaccine-anything-more-than-a-political-weapon-sputnik-v>.

17 Ibid.

18 Talha Ozturk, “Croatia May Get Russian Virus Vaccine without EU Nod,” Anadolu Ajansı, March 3, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/croatia-may-get-russian-virus-vaccine-without-eu-nod/2163653>

jab. The severe fragmentation and inconsistency of the EU's response highlights the reality that smaller member states in the EU often lack the power to combat the influential operations of larger players such as Russia and China.¹⁹

Where anti-Russian sentiment exists, countries have turned to China, as was the case with Poland, or they have opted to suffer through their own slow production. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has expressed concern over China and Russia's overbearing presence in these NATO-abiding regions and has called for greater unity stating, "Our multilateral solutions must succeed, if we don't want to lose our ground to those who argue that authoritarian regimes are better at dealing with a crisis like this."²⁰ These calls for unity amidst growing disintegration show that in face of need and domestic production insufficiency, the EU is not as unified as it once may have been. The vaccine diplomacy has revealed the potential of "soft power" in separating seemingly tight-knit communities of countries. It has also shown that when domestic initiatives to develop antidotes or other equipment are weak, there is often no other alternative left but to turn to "stronger" nations.

Despite this larger European Union debate, Russia's vaccine diplomacy has met other pushback. The Brazilian government banned the import of Sputnik V citing safety concerns and multiple news outlets have condemned Russia for sending the vaccine to reassert its global influence in areas where it has historically struggled to exert its power.²¹ Despite the level of outreach Sputnik V has been able to garner, the increased demand has not been met with equal levels of production. This has forced Russia into outsourcing production to China as a means of satiating global need.²² The united front created by these two countries has thus been perceived as a threat by the West and a means of covering as much ground as possible with their vaccines especially in areas where they would gain greater influence. The powerful pair has already been able to supply more than 70 countries with their doses and their efforts have even prompted US' strategic partners in the Middle East to approach them for vaccines.²³ While these moves may appear benign, many leaders in the US and the EU have accused the two countries of aggressive sales tactics, lack of transparency, and of undermining trust in other vaccines.²⁴ Both countries, however, given their rocky relationship with the West, have much to gain from these forms of "soft power diplomacy" to rebuild their credibility abroad.

Their increased global outreach raises the questions: what happened to the United States? Why hasn't it gotten involved? The US, which has produced three vaccines to date (Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson), has manufactured less than a quarter of the world's total supply of vaccines, with even less exported to other countries.²⁵ The reluctance to export surplus coronavirus vaccines or to engage in foreign manufacturing of the jabs, has left the United States vulnerable to criticism. What was at one point seen as a protective measure to ensure complete domestic vaccination, is now seen as selfish isolationism. Only after a substantial push from humanitarian groups, did the US begin to share its limited stockpile of AstraZeneca vaccines with other countries.²⁶ Many people have claimed that exporting the shots before securing complete domestic rollout would only create pushback among Americans themselves and might

19 Tim Gosling, "Russia and China Are Exploiting Europe's Vaccine Shortfalls," *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/russia-china-vaccine-diplomacy-slovakia-europe-eu-slow-rollout/>.

20 Ibid.

21 David Biller, "Brazil Regulator Rejects Sputnik Vaccine; Russia Cries Foul," *Associated Press*, April 27, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/health-global-trade-brazil-russia-business-b92f2914cc338beb44e594b6472cf42f>.

22 Huizhong Wu and Daria Litinova, "Russia Turns to China to Make Sputnik Shots to Meet Demand," *Associated Press*, May 03, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-europe-russia-china-coronavirus-b041b3ad9d699de25a05c8f7ebcb4eb9>.

23 Yasmeen Serhan, "Here's How Russia and China Are Helping the U.S.," *Defense One*, April 14, 2021 <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/03/heres-how-russia-and-china-are-helping-us/173014/>

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

send the message that global predominance comes before domestic health concerns. However, the consequences of not doing so have the potential to undermine the global image of the United States as a leader willing to offer scientific, technological, and diplomatic assistance to countries in need.²⁷ The slow rollout would also mean greater chances of the emergence of variants and an inability to reach herd immunity worldwide. Many world leaders have stated that the longer vaccines are “sequestered” the greater the chances of a “vaccine apartheid” where favoritism, self-interest, and personal gain come before the actual widespread distribution of the antidote. In order to truly engage in substantial vaccine diplomacy, the US would benefit from fulfilling the needs of countries that have rejected the Russian vaccines (such as Brazil) or to provide their versions of the antidote to areas that have suffered from Chinese vaccine efficacy failures (such as the UAE).²⁸ This reach, although limited, could fill in the gaps where other countries have failed to extend their diplomatic aims and could give the United States a future “leg-up” in their own vaccine ventures.

Amid the growing criticism against countries such as Russia and China for their vaccine diplomacy endeavors and the constant disinformation campaigns being undertaken, it is important to ask: does it matter? Does it matter who the shots come from? Does it matter why they are being sent? Does any of it matter if what’s being offered can provide the world with a semblance of the “normality” it so desperately hopes to return to? For many of the EU leaders, the act of collaborating with Russia and China on this front is nothing more than a simple business deal. As Michael McFaul, former US ambassador to Russia, puts it, “We grossly exaggerate the payoff you get from trying to play geopolitics with humanitarian crises...It doesn’t do any good to say that China or Russia are using their vaccines to undermine our interests if you don’t have something else to offer.” This statement shows the power of vaccine diplomacy as the perfect method of humanitarian intervention that can fill the void that domestic instability, slow production, and need, have widened. The United States’ unwillingness to engage earlier on in this endeavor means that the space was left open for other countries to step in and offer aid even if their motives were not all that altruistic. The debates formed around vaccine diplomacy reveal that at the core of the argument is a question of whether public health concerns should ever become politicized and if the two can even be separated to begin with.

Although still caught up in the midst of a current vaccine diplomacy era, the lessons gathered from this time are many and widespread. As many analysts note, global collaboration and coordination are essential in order to combat global health crises of this magnitude going forward. COVAX, the COVID-19 vaccine coalition sponsored by the World Health Organization, is one of the clearest examples of progress towards this objective.²⁹ Despite the fact that favoritism and selective distribution still remain, this type of partnership could prove fruitful in the long run when facing another pandemic. As with smallpox, the greater the collaboration, the faster the output, and the closer society gets to eradicate the disease. As COVID-19 has shown, competition, multilateralism, and scientific cooperation are important tools that have the potential to shape the relationships between countries and boost their domestic vaccine production. The regional dynamics formed during the past year and a half, due to vaccine diplomacy, also shed light on the behaviors that might be adopted in the changing world order of the future. The United States’ disengaged and isolationist approach,

27 Eliza Browning, “Initiatives and Benefits of the United States’ Vaccine Diplomacy,” *BORGEN*, April 18, 2021, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/vaccine-diplomacy-2/>.

28 Michael B. Greenwald, and Michael A. Margolis, “Can Vaccine Diplomacy Shape a New World Order?” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/can-vaccine-diplomacy-shape-new-world-order>.

29 Hung Tran, “What Vaccine Nationalism and Diplomacy Tell Us about Future Pandemics,” *Atlantic Council*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-vaccine-nationalism-and-diplomacy-tell-us-about-future-pandemics/>.

Russia's rapid competitive and ambitious stance, China's swift supportive position, and Europe's disintegrated and sluggish response, all demonstrate particular approaches to a crisis that could be indicative of similar dynamics in the future. Even China's delayed response about the onset of the virus shows just how much communication, transparency, and dialogue is needed in order for countries to be allowed the time to develop contingency plans.³⁰

The coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent vaccine diplomacy have set in motion tremendous global shifts and have exposed the very real inadequacies and rifts that exist within society. In the face of a crisis this large and deadly, we have seen how weak domestic coordination has led to the establishment of dependent international relationships.³¹ The European Union, historically known for the strength of the collaboration among its member states, has been exposed as a fragile collective of independently-minded countries in face of Russian-Chinese vaccine diplomacy endeavors. With leaders divided between need and anti-Russian sentiment, their decision to accept life-saving vaccines from other countries has become highly politicized. It is no longer just about saving lives, the coronavirus pandemic has become about influence and power.

How a country responded to the present crisis says much about its ability to respond to other pressing global events in the future. The US' decision to break away from its position as a global leader and as a scientific collaborator could affect its diplomatic negotiations throughout the next decade and risk its influence in underdeveloped countries in the years to come. While Russia and China might very well reap the benefits of their widespread vaccine diplomacy initiatives, both could also find themselves incapable of living up to the promises they have made.

The increased criticism and accusations against Russia and China for engaging in these soft power tactics, ignore the fact that these countries have provided aid in areas of need and secured those deals earlier than the United States. Vaccine diplomacy, therefore, is not just a humanitarian intervention, it isn't just another term synonymous with 2020, and it isn't just a phase in the general evolution of the world. Vaccine diplomacy has emerged as a mirror revealing a new world order.

A world order in which the United States takes a disengaged stance, where Russia and China surge to the top as global scientific collaborators, and where the European Union's former ties have disintegrated into a coalition of member states each with their own individual agendas and beliefs. Vaccine diplomacy has revealed the danger of weak domestic pandemic responses, the balance between need and anti-Russian sentiment, and the risk that comes from choosing to disengage from the global community.

Vaccine diplomacy has redefined diplomacy itself, from being all about dialogue and conversation to becoming the balanced integration of multiple spheres of expertise and intelligence. The reality of another outbreak should not be foreign, but rather a condition of an evolving world that must be confronted with adequate measures and preparations. Coming out of the pandemic, vaccine diplomacy should return to what it once was back in 1798; the undisturbed, unpoliticized, and genuine exchange of knowledge and ideas for the preservation of human life.

30 Michael B. Greenwald and Michael A. Margolis, "Can Vaccine Diplomacy Shape a New World Order?" Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, December 2, 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/can-vaccine-diplomacy-shape-new-world-order>.

31 Ibid.