

“Vaccine diplomacy” fuels rising US-China tensions

Benjamin Mateus
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Nearly 900 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccines have been administered worldwide since vaccination campaigns began in earnest at the end of 2020. Despite a massive upsurge in production, a comparison of vaccination rates by continent starkly demonstrates that vaccines have not been distributed based upon need nor in the pursuit of equity, but rather according to economic hierarchy. North America has provided a vaccine to 39 percent of its population, Europe 23 percent, South America 14 percent, Asia 8.6 percent, Oceania 3.7 percent and Africa just over 1 percent.

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted recently that one in four persons in high-income countries has received a vaccine. In low-income countries, only 1 in 500 has gotten the jab.

As the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe is shifting to more impoverished regions of the world, vaccine inequity raises significant concerns.

A surge in cases in mid-March in the Pacific island nation of Papua New Guinea, its first since the start of the pandemic, saw its inadequate health care system collapse in a matter of days, with hospital beds fully occupied and medicinal oxygen running out. India is facing a massive wave complicated by a variant with a double mutation that has driven daily case counts over a quarter million, and the death count has begun to soar.

The current pace of new infections had caught up with the previous highs during the winter months in the Northern Hemisphere, when Europe and the United States remained the epicenters of the pandemic. Though they still have the highest disease burden, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands are seeing current infections surging fastest.

Additionally, the health care systems of countries like Poland, Ukraine and Turkey are facing a deluge of patients. While still suffering under a “maximum pressure” US sanctions regime, Iran is coping with a fourth and more extensive surge.

The world’s rich income countries have used their vaccination campaigns to ensure their populations are vaccinated first and foremost. The aim is to get the working class back into the factories to generate profits and to diffuse social tensions, a byproduct of utter neglect of the welfare of the population during the worst of the pandemic.

The paradox remains that the pandemic has been an enormous boon to financial capital, as evidenced by the rise in the indexes of stock exchanges, even as the death toll and mass misery have continued to grow.

Meanwhile, international tensions have only escalated as a result of the pandemic. Global relations increasingly resemble the pre-World War I years, with rival nation-states hell bent on securing control over world resources and markets. China’s more than 18 percent expansion in the first quarter of 2021 is seen as an existential threat by US and European imperialism.

Given these developments, the current and emerging COVID-19 vaccines are being promoted for prosecuting the ongoing geopolitical

brinkmanship that is pitting the US and Europe against China and Russia in a struggle for the division of the globe’s resources. This struggle has the potential to rapidly escalate into open military conflict, posing an existential threat to life on this planet.

It is essential to take account of the state of the current global vaccine campaign.

Beijing has announced that it is committed to vaccinating 40 percent of China’s population by June. Last week, China had administered nearly 190 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to its population, translating to approximately 13 doses for every 100 people. The seven-day average has remained steady between 3 to 5 million daily jabs but far short of the 11.5 million doses a day to meet the stated goal.

Though vaccine acceptance remains exceptionally high, the urgency to seek vaccination remains low. Since January 31, the country has reported less than 1,000 cases of COVID-19, of which the majority are imported. Since April 17, 2020, only six people have died from COVID-19. By all accounts, the coronavirus has been eradicated within the country. Still, national health officials and epidemiologists are concerned that they will not be able to maintain strict border controls forever. As a whole, the population remains biologically naïve to the coronavirus, and any outbreaks would create a severe public health crisis.

China exports vaccines to more than 30 countries

Thus far, China has exported close to 115 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccines (accounting for 42 percent of all the COVID-19 vaccines it has produced) to more than 30 countries. It has gone primarily to low- and middle-income nations, especially in Latin America, where China has increasingly supplanted the US as the region’s leading source of trade and investment.

Additionally, it is providing vaccine aid to dozens of countries. However, as Beijing is refocusing on its domestic vaccination campaign, it will need to produce 1.1 billion doses to meet current commitments to other nations.

The United States has administered 207 million doses of the 210 million COVID-19 vaccines it has manufactured to its own population. This accounts for 38 doses for every 100 people. India has produced 173 million doses and exported 37 percent, while the EU has made close to 157 million doses and exported 41 percent. The UK has provided over 22 million doses domestically.

Russia’s Sputnik V COVID vaccine has yet to be approved by the European Medicines Agency. However, many European countries are turning to Moscow out of frustration over the EU’s slow rollout. As of March of 2021, the Russian Direct Investment Fund has licensed production in India, China, South Korea and Brazil. By the end of March,

Russia had manufactured at least 30 million vaccine doses, and 5 percent were exported.

By comparison, the WHO-led COVAX facility, created to provide equitable vaccine access to low-income countries, has supplied only 40 million doses to the world's poorest nations and is far from its goal of delivering two billion doses. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "The COVAX division meant to help countries prepare for vaccine rollouts has received only around \$600 million in contributions, leaving a gap of \$7.3 billion for this year, and the World Bank has committed just \$2 billion of a \$12 billion financing package meant to help countries buy and distribute vaccines and strengthen health systems."

Due to "incredibly tight" global supplies, Seth Berkley, CEO of the Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, told Reuters it would be unlikely if the COVAX dose-sharing facility would be able to procure more supplies this year. The ambitious goal of delivering 2 billion doses by the end of 2021 to participating countries, including 92 low-income countries, is severely hampered by lack of funding, vaccine nationalism and export restrictions on supplies.

These developments are most certainly the consequence of strategies to employ the COVID-19 vaccines as weapons in great power struggles.

The White House has predicted that the US will reach herd immunity sometime during the mid-summer. It intends to position itself to challenge China's present lead in global vaccine distribution. *Politico* noted back in February that Chinese-made vaccines had "rolled out quicker than COVAX and even European vaccines earmarked for EU countries. China is providing vaccines for 19 African countries, for Serbia, Colombia, and many places in between."

According to the purportedly independent multimedia organization, the China-Africa Project (CAP), "If the US really wants to make an impact and present a legitimate alternative to Chinese vaccines in places like Africa, it only has about six to nine months left. ... China alone, not to mention India, may be able to satisfy much of the demand. Last week, Zheng Zhongwei of the National Health Commission said that Chinese vaccine output in 2021 would reach three billion doses. By the end of next year, that number will rise to five billion. Those are probably conservative estimates. And with local production deals already in place in Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas, Chinese vaccine output will increase even more."

The high-income nations that are leaving poorer nations in the lurch have primarily taken up the supply of high-priced Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. According to Duke University, rich countries had collared 5.4 billion of the 7.8 billion doses purchased globally. China has positioned itself to fill this gaping void. Its vaccines have used traditional technologies making storage and shipping easy. If the World Health Organization (WHO), which is currently reviewing supporting documentation for COVID-19 vaccines from Sinopharm and Sinovac, provides these products emergency use listing, it will bolster China's global role.

WHO-Europe vaccination expert, Siddhartha Datta, told journalists, "We are in touch with them to review the dossiers that both vaccine manufacturers have submitted. We will be hearing about a decision on the emergency use listing in April or early May, so please keep an eye on that."

Currently, the WHO has issued emergency listings only for Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. The WHO's emergency listing is a prerequisite for any vaccine manufacturer for purchase by the COVAX facility, which would extend their portfolio of vaccines to deliver shots to poorer countries.

As Washington has opted to hoard the COVID-19 vaccines for its own needs, the US corporate bourgeois media is working diligently to tarnish China's vaccine initiatives. The language used in its reporting is characterized by unabashed nationalism and anti-Chinese provocations.

Wall Street Journal, *Washington Post* and *New York Times* have been direct conduits for Washington's anti-Beijing rhetoric. Allies have utilized their press against China as well. Canada's CTV News recently stated, "China and Russia have been using their locally produced COVID-19 vaccines to grow their international soft power by giving doses to desperate countries in order to have more political influence over them." Benjamin Gedan, deputy director of the Latin American program at the Wilson Center in Washington, told CTV News, "It's never encouraging to see the world's largest dictatorships taking most advantage of this diplomatic opportunity."

On April 5, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the appointment of former Obama administration official Gayle Smith as the coordinator of Washington's global COVID-19 response and health security. Smith, who led the US response during the Ebola crisis, was asked to join the Biden administration to coordinate vaccine diplomacy efforts against those pursued by Chinese and Russian authorities.

In announcing Smith's appointment, Blinken said, "We have a duty to other countries to get the virus under control here in the United States. But soon, the United States will need to step up our work and rise to the occasion worldwide because, again, only by stopping COVID globally will Americans be safe for the long term."

Aside from its unvarnished appeal to nationalism, Blinken's statement betrays concerns within the US ruling elite over both social tensions within its own borders created by the homicidal response to the pandemic, as well as Washington losing its grip over hearts and minds globally because of its failure to provide significant aid in the fight against the pandemic.

While vaccine diplomacy serves as an auxiliary of Chinese foreign policy in pursuit of bilateral agreements with poorer nations, China's long-term efforts to produce and distribute its vaccines remain on unsteady footing. It faces similar issues with vaccine supplies as many other manufacturers. Constraints placed by the Biden administration through the Defense Production Act on the export of critical raw materials impede the world's ability to produce COVID-19 vaccines.

Dave Lawler of *Axios* put it succinctly, "Few countries other than the US have the capacity to manufacture vaccines at scale, and most lack the resources to buy their way to the front of the line for imports. That's led to a scramble for whatever supply is available." Many Latin American nations rely on the limited supplies from China and Russia to begin their vaccination campaigns.

CoronaVac efficacy controversy

Numerous concerns have been raised regarding the performance of Sinovac's COVID-19 vaccine, CoronaVac. Specifically, data from Brazil in January placed the vaccine's efficacy barely above 50 percent, the threshold needed for regulatory approval. However, recent real world data from Chile, covering 10.5 million people, demonstrated that it was 67 percent effective at preventing symptomatic infections. The data also showed the vaccine to be 85 percent effective in preventing hospitalizations and 89 percent effective in preventing ICU admission. Prevention of death was at 80 percent.

The Western media, however, has cynically latched onto the low efficacy after a single jab of the two-dose vaccine regimen to besmirch its effectiveness. It should be noted that many in Chile had not heeded public health warnings or comprehended that the completion of the vaccine series was critical to providing maximal benefit and that continued public health measures needed to be implemented, leading many to become infected.

Still, the real world data is far more compelling as to the function of the vaccine, which has proved effective in protecting the elderly, making the surge less deadly for them. Dr. Rodrigo Cornejo, head of the ICU at the University of Chile's hospital, told the *Wall Street Journal* that several of his close colleagues had died of COVID-19 infections early in the course of the pandemic. But since the medical staff has been completely vaccinated, he had not heard of any physicians dying from the contagion.

On April 9, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence published its annual threat assessment, stating: "In the coming year, the United States and its allies will face a diverse array of threats that are playing out amidst the global disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and against the backdrop of great power competition. ... Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang have demonstrated the capability and intent to advance their interests at the expense of the United States and its allies, despite the pandemic."

It continued: "The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to strain governments and societies, fueling humanitarian and economic crises, political unrest, and geopolitical competition as countries, such as China and Russia, seek advantage through such avenues as 'vaccine diplomacy.'"

The pandemic has already claimed the lives of more than 3 million people without any significant international measure to bring it to a stop. Without a doubt, millions more will perish. The economic fallout and instability portend long-term financial instability and humanitarian crises that will plague developing nations for decades. High food insecurity doubled from 135 million in 2019 to 270 million in 2020. By year's end, the US threat assessment projects the figure will rise to 330 million.

For the working class, vaccines are necessary to save lives. For the ruling elites, they are seen as weapons as deadly as bullets in the drive toward global war.



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