

Beyond Soft Power and Image Building: China's Vaccine Diplomacy in South Asia and Pakistan

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Abstract: *The Pandemic transformed and reshaped the structure of the geo-political landscape of the planet. Moves made by the Global North and Rising Powers were discussed under various politically driven motives. This was the case with China too, arguably China's effort in COVID relief has been seen through the prism of Public Diplomacy in an effort to enhance its soft power and brand its global image. Though this could have been the motive, the paper however argues that China's moves were not driven by these motives only, though it did appear as an additional supplement for China. The COVID relief and supplies of COVID-19 vaccine by China served the greater purpose of humanitarian and medical aid in particular for developing nations. Asia at large and South Asia in particular received a massive dose of vaccine and within South Asia, it was beyond image building for China to provide maximum aid to Pakistan; a nation that ranks China among the top most favored states and nations.*

Key Words: *China, Covid-19, Vaccine Diplomacy, Soft Power, Image Branding*

1. Introduction

Though disagreement prevails over the origin of COVID-19 (Gaviria et al., 2023), presumably the pandemic began when different individuals in the Wuhan province of China, developed a disease for some unidentified reasons (Li et al., 2020). It rapidly spread across China between December 2019 and the start of 2020 before spreading to other countries (Huang et al., 2020). The WHO (World Health Organization) classified it as a health emergency at the global level on January 30, 2020, and declared it a pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020. More than 169 countries were affected by this disease across the globe. This disease alone caused the death of more than 6.9 million people across the world. More than 699 million people got infected with this disease (WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard).

The COVID-19 outbreak caused important changes in society and how people interact. The pandemic had not only created immense challenges to people's health but also had deep socio-political implications. It has had a big impact on how societies are run and how people interact. It has affected things like how governments make decisions, the economic system and how it responds to such outbreaks, the healthcare systems, how much people trust each other and their leaders and their capabilities to deal with situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, and how countries work together during and after these catastrophes. The pandemic called for collective

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action or group effort across and beyond regions rather than creating political differences, building technological barriers, and questioning one another's intentions.

The effects this outbreak had, were huge and affected almost every country on this earth. In that situation, the most challenging and pressing issue was to create immunity among the masses by vaccinating them, the daunting and gigantic task of confronting the evolving crisis. The crisis provided an opportunity for nations both from the developed and the developing world to come forward and present solutions to the global population. As a result, a wave of response in terms of vaccine development and testing by multiple nations was inevitable. Obviously, in such a situation of hopelessness, fear, and chaos, the vaccine was more than a savior. Consequently, using vaccines as a tool to build relationships and influence on how people think has also become a really important decision during the pandemic (Lee, 2021). Thus the crisis-led situation created an opportunity for those who were well-prepared and ready to embrace the challenge.

A brief survey of history reveals that to deal with these contingent diseases and catastrophic situations, vaccines were developed. Back in 1798, the first vaccine was developed for immunization against smallpox (History of Smallpox Vaccination, n.d.). Since then vaccines have been used as a tool for portraying a state's ability to mitigate the challenges and present solutions beyond national territories. This could be understood in terms of enhancing a state's soft power, or power of co-optation. Vaccine diplomacy emerged as a direct outcome of global health diplomacy (Nye, 2008). Vaccines have been used in diplomacy since the time of the Cold War. When a state can produce and share life-saving vaccines with those in need, it gains soft power, as creating appeal for that state and its nation was a direct result of their gesture of kindness towards the recipient nation. This means that the providing state earns respect, and gratitude, and potentially creates a sense of indebtedness (Y. Huang, 2021).

Because the world needed vaccines to come out of this epidemic situation, states like the United States, Russia, China, and India had generously provided a lot of COVID-19 vaccines to the developing countries and even to some from the advanced world in order to build a better relationship. Scholars and experts have called this "Vaccine Diplomacy" because they think these countries are using vaccines to build relationships and achieve diplomatic goals quickly (Su et al., 2021). These countries demonstrated their strength and influence. The developing countries with fewer resources and minimum access to vaccines were receiving or purchasing their vaccines from them. China was in the lead in the Vaccine Diplomacy race. Beijing, leading from the front, reached over hundred countries, extending a hand of friendship in troubling times, China distributed free doses of vaccines to 69 countries across the globe and sold COVID-19 vaccines to more than 28 countries (Y. Huang, 2021).

Early on in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, China assisted countries that needed medical help. The leaders of Spain, Italy, and Serbia praised China's assistance during the health crisis. This made people wonder about the European Union and how well it works (Albert, 2020). Also, China stepped up to help the World Health Organization (WHO) when the United States withdrew its funding during the Trump presidency. The US withdrawal left a gap in funding and resources, which China helped to fill (Shih, 2020).

According to Bridge Consulting, 109 countries in four geographical regions have received Chinese vaccines. Keeping in view China's concentric security and foreign policy, Beijing started with domestic vaccination, then extended its rapid vaccination process to neighboring states and covering Asia as a border region, as it can be noticed that Asia received the most Chinese vaccines, with 454 million doses by the end of 2021. Of these, 47 million were donated (Admin et al., 2023). The top 10 countries that have received the most delivery of Chinese COVID-19 vaccines include many Asian nations. (Hayat et al., 2022).

During the pandemic, China provided assistance in multiple ways, not only sharing knowledge and expertise but also opening up a generous gateway of vaccines to states, particularly from the developing world. As expected, speculative and suspicious of Chinese diplomacy in such troubling times, India and the United States had a different view of China's Vaccine Diplomacy, the former took China's move from a strategic lens and the latter blamed it for meddling in South Asia (Fayyaz, 2021). China consistently emphasizes that vaccines are meant to protect and save lives, not for one country to gain an unfair advantage or play political games. China also highlights the importance of having shared vaccine certificates and coordinating policies based on fair and scientific principles that apply to everyone (Wang Yi, Video Conference of FM of China, on COVID-19, n.d.).

Accordingly, this paper aims to review the impact of China's vaccine distribution through the prism of public diplomacy and nation branding. By studying China's diplomatic strategies, communication tactics, and nation-branding efforts, the research seeks to understand the effectiveness of China's vaccine diplomacy in enhancing its soft power in South Asia at large and particularly in Pakistan. It argues that the COVID-19 pandemic provided China with an opportunity to enhance its image globally and improve its ties by fostering stronger relations with recipient nations both by donating vaccines and distribution and selling on easy terms for developing nations. This not only cemented China's ties with recipient nations but also provided a mechanism to perceive and evaluate China's contributions and support in their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Vaccine Diplomacy

A British doctor, Dr. Edward Jenner discovered the first modern vaccination in 1798 and found a medicine that might prevent smallpox (History of Smallpox Vaccination, n.d.). Hotez (2014) mentioned that vaccine diplomacy has been around since the beginning of vaccines. Doctor Edward Jenner, sent his smallpox vaccine to France during a time when Britain and France were constantly at war in the early 1800s. This act resulted in successful smallpox inoculations in France.

Vaccine diplomacy is a way to improve relations between countries by sharing vaccines. Peter Bourne, the Carter administration's special assistant to the president for health matters, used it for the first time in 1978. Bourne (1978) believed that the medicine and health could be used to improve relations between countries because they are humanitarian issues that transcend traditional concerns and to create soft power. Joseph Nye is credited with coining the term "soft power," which refers to the ability to effectively persuade and influence the actions of both governments and non-state entities (Nye, 2008). Soft power is a crucial part of foreign policy because it affects how a country is seen and its ability to influence other countries. The more soft power a country has, the more likely it is to achieve its foreign policy goals. China has been working on building up its soft power for a long time and will likely keep doing so because soft power helps a nation to persuade others. Studies show some countries, especially the United States, have used vaccines to improve their relationships with other countries

Shakeel et al. (2019) defined "vaccine diplomacy as a branch of global health diplomacy that promotes the use and delivery of vaccines to achieve larger global health goals and shared foreign policy objectives" (p. 82). Medical diplomacy has become an important field of study called global health diplomacy. It has gained recognition because people now understand that health problems go beyond just one country and have effects on politics, society, and the economy. These issues require global cooperation to protect the health of people around the world (Kickbusch et al., 2007). In the past, a country only needed to take care of itself, but now that is no longer enough (Cooper, 2005).

According to (Katz et al., 2011) when it comes to global health diplomacy, there are three main ways that countries and other organizations work together on international health issues. The first is through formal negotiations between nations, which is called core diplomacy. The second is multi-stakeholder diplomacy, where different groups discuss and collaborate on health matters, but without making binding agreements. The third is informal diplomacy, which happens when people from different health organizations interact with each other and with officials in the field, like government officials, non-profit groups, businesses, and the general population. As Hotez (2014) defines that the vaccine diplomacy is when global health diplomacy involves using or providing vaccines. This covers the work carried out by significant international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Gates Foundation, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and others. The Vaccine Alliance Gavi was founded in 2000. The aim of creating it was to join different forces like the government and other stakeholders like UNICEF and WHO. The main objective was to ensure that vaccines are accessible to people in countries with fewer resources in order to promote equality in healthcare (About Our Alliance, n.d.).

In a study by Hotez (2014) talked about something called "vaccine science diplomacy" which is a part of "vaccine diplomacy." Vaccine diplomacy means that scientists from different countries work together to create vaccines and related technologies that can save lives. Sometimes, these scientists come from countries that don't get along or are enemies, like what happened with the smallpox vaccine. This kind of diplomacy fits into the idea of global health diplomacy, where countries use their scientific knowledge and reputation to show their power. It is particularly useful in situations where other forms of communication are limited, as mentioned by Ruffini (2017).

However, the conceptualization of global health diplomacy by Katz et al. (2011) lacks a comprehensive acknowledgment of the distinct significance of vaccines, particularly within the framework of a widespread pandemic. Hotez (2014) rightly argues that vaccines differ from other medical or public health interventions. According to Hotez (2014), modern vaccines are estimated to have saved more lives than have been lost in the world, making them the most powerful scientific intervention ever developed.

3. Vaccine Diplomacy: A Chinese Perspective

Every country has its own image in the world, whether they actively try to shape it or not. This image, known as the nation's brand, is complex and ever-changing. It involves how the world perceives the country, whether it is seen as powerful or weak, modern or outdated, clear or confusing. It is influenced by how the global audience interprets and understands the country (Fan, 2006). China's efforts to improve its international reputation through public diplomacy were not yielding the desired results. Various scholars (Cao 2016, D'Hooghe 2011, Nye 2015, Yang 2020) have highlighted the challenges China faced in enhancing its standing in the world. These difficulties can be attributed to underlying issues in the global opinion market.

China's position in the rankings fell from fifth to eighth place this year compared to last year. This drop happened because of the negative news about COVID-19 cases in Wuhan, even though China was able to handle the crisis well and had positive economic growth by the end of 2020 (Global Soft Power Index 2021).

China took significant steps to improve its global image and show its dedication to worldwide well-being. They put forth a set of suggestions to the international community, focusing on working together to fight the ongoing pandemic. China emphasized the importance of collective effort and cooperation among countries during this global health crisis. By doing so, China aimed to present itself as a caring nation that prioritizes the well-being of all countries

and is committed to finding effective solutions for the benefit of all humanity. President Xi Jinping called for the world to join in to fight against the pandemic. He emphasized the importance of making vaccines available and affordable for everyone. China was committed in sharing its vaccine with the entire world. President Xi also stressed the need for countries to work together to strengthen the global economy and to ensure the smooth movement of people and goods across borders.

He accepted the importance of innovative technologies and the digital economy in promoting inclusive development. He proposed measures like debt relief for the developing nations. He further highlighted the value of shared contributions, and collective benefits by doing the cooperation at all levels. Lastly, he pointed out the significant role of the G20 in addressing this unprecedented global health challenge (Xinhua, 2021).

China remained fully committed to providing vaccines to the rest of the world. Even though China was itself facing difficulties due to limited production capacity and increasing demand within the country. Despite the challenges, China continued to support global vaccination efforts. China fulfilled this pledge by offering free vaccines to over 80 economically disadvantaged countries facing urgent needs. Furthermore, China extended its cooperation by providing vaccines to an additional 43 nations, actively contributing to the global efforts in combating the pandemic (Xinhua, 2021). China launched the Belt and Road Partnership for COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation, aiming to collaborate with other countries in vaccine development without political or economic motives. The Chinese Foreign Ministry emphasized their active efforts in promoting global cooperation and unity during the pandemic. He suggested international collaboration, assistance, and the creation of shared institutions in order to effectively address the challenges posed by the pandemic (“Wang Yi Attends the Meeting,” n.d.).

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, China stepped forward to help countries who need the medical assistance. Their aid to countries like Spain, Italy, and Serbia received high praise from the leaders of these European nations (Albert, 2020). Additionally, China showed support to the World Health Organization (WHO) when the United States withdrew its membership and stopped funding it during the Trump administration (Shih, 2020b). China is committed to helping the world fight COVID-19. China has already provided vaccines to more than 100 countries and is working with other countries to make more vaccines. China believes that everyone should have access to vaccines so that we can all stop the pandemic together. China opposes the idea of countries hoarding vaccines for themselves. China believes that vaccines should be a global public good and that everyone should have access to them, regardless of their nationality or ability to pay. They are also working to share their technology and expertise with other countries so that they can produce their own vaccines. China believes that this is the best way to ensure that everyone has access to vaccines and that the pandemic can be stopped. (China Calls for Unity, 2021).

4. Pandemic Relief Assistance: China in South Asia

While it is difficult to imagine the region of South Asia without India; being the largest nation in South Asia, India is the core of the region with more than three-quarters of all matrices of Population, Territory, GDP, and Defense spending, yet in the former notion of quality of states, there are seven other national states in South Asia which are unlike India, eager and keen to receive China's aid, assistance and donations for development in various ways. According to Bridge Consulting, Chinese vaccines have been distributed to 109 countries across the globe. Among these regions, Asia has been the primary recipient of Chinese vaccines. The top 10 countries that have received significant COVID-related assistance from China include

Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Bridge Consulting, 2022). China provided its main support for vaccinations to Pakistan and other small nations of South Asia Too. Though influenced by the geopolitical rivalry India as pointed out despite being the largest state in South Asia remains reluctant to receive any aid from China (Hashim, 2021). China provided medical masks, COVID-19 testing kits, and important medical supplies to countries in South Asia to help them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though India being a member of the SAARC, did not request or receive COVID vaccines from China. (Haidar, 2021).

4.1. China's Covid Relief Support to Pakistan

Pakistan's entire vaccine derive depended mainly on donations from the Chinese government and through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX). The initial shipment of Chinese vaccines arrived in Pakistan on 1st February 2021, followed by a second shipment on 1st March 2021. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccination campaign in Pakistan started a year after the pandemic embarked upon on the planet, in February 2021 after half a million doses of Sinopharm vaccine (BBIBP-CorV vaccine) were supplied to the country by the People's Liberation Army of China, the vaccination formerly began for masses (The News International, 2021).

China supplied doses of its Sinopharm and CanSinoBIO vaccines to Pakistan, helping the country initiate its vaccination drive and protect its population against the virus. Nong Rong, who represents China in Pakistan, said that Pakistan is the very first country to get help from China with their vaccines. Not only that, but Pakistan has received the largest number of COVID-19 vaccines donated by China. This shows how friendly and close the two countries are. He mentioned this during a special event when the vaccines were handed over (Xinhua, 2021).

China not only gave vaccines but also provided other medical items like masks, oxygen cylinders, and generators to help (Yameng, 2021). These supplies were crucial in bolstering Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure and enabling healthcare professionals to combat the pandemic effectively. Thanks to China's generous support, Pakistan developed its own vaccine called PakVac by June 1, 2021 (Shahzad, 2021). Pakistan successfully produced its domestically developed vaccine, further bolstering its capacity to combat the virus (Times of India, 2021). China's support to Pakistan during the COVID-19 crisis garnered attention from both local and international news outlets, highlighting the significance of international cooperation in times of global health challenges.

5. Conclusion

In the competitive world, countries try to promote their interests and reputation on the global stage, and one way they do this is through "soft power," which means using influence and diplomacy instead of force. In times of global emergencies like COVID-19, showing soft power through health diplomacy becomes important. It's like a major event where nations may show off their prowess and dedication to maintaining their standing in the international community. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown modest development in China. By filling in the gaps and refraining from boasting about it, it has demonstrated adult leadership at the international and regional levels.

During this challenging time, China consistently encouraged collaboration between countries, coordinated responses, and strengthened international institutions. The donations of Chinese vaccines have had a big impact on how countries in South Asia see China. When the West didn't offer medical help, many developing nations turned to China instead. China is also

helping these countries set up their own vaccine manufacturing so they can produce vaccines on their own. China gains from this in the global context in a number of ways. One accomplishment was the WHO's approval of the Chinese vaccines Sinopharm and Sinovac for use in an emergency. Through COVAX, a global project that offers free vaccinations to nations in need, this assisted China in achieving its objective of making these vaccines accessible worldwide (Modak, 2021).

China has shown a new way of working together with other countries to fight pandemics and health problems. They first focused on stopping the spread of the coronavirus within their own country. Then, they helped other nations by sending medical staff and supplies and sharing their knowledge and experience. This proactive approach will likely inspire future efforts of international cooperation, becoming a role model for others to follow. As COVID-19 vaccines were being developed, China asked for global involvement. They actively shared their home-grown vaccines with developing countries, which was different from what Western countries did. China's public health diplomacy started to include this as the most important part. Poorer nations in Asia, Africa, and South America had difficulty obtaining vaccinations from the West, but they could obtain those developed in China. This sparked the emergence of a brand-new type of cooperation known as South-South cooperation, in which China champions the idea of shared prosperity.

The main goal for both developed and developing countries should be to work together and eliminate the illness that has caused countless deaths worldwide and severely damaged economies. Instead of competing with each other, countries need to collaborate internationally due to the seriousness of the disease. It's crucial that powerful nations put aside geopolitical interests and focus on taking necessary actions to address the global health and economic crisis caused by COVID, which directly affects human lives.

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