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Vaccine Diplomacy Game: The Race for Soft Power

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Abstract

This article examines the motivations and dynamics of the donors and suppliers of the covid-19 vaccines to the global south countries in the context of public diplomacy to wield soft power. Thus, it investigates how the West and East use the vaccines as a public diplomacy tool to influence public opinion in other nations or continents in order to either enhance their global image and reputation or exert some form of international influence or have new allies. The article argues that covid-19 vaccines are a soft power asset; therefore, the manufacturing nations may use them to shape their target foreign publics opinion, maintain allies, and win enemies globally. The big players have used vaccines over the years to achieve foreign policy objectives in the history of international relations. As the article's findings indicate, soft power has been the implicit primary goal of supplying vaccine countries to the less-developed states. The article employs public diplomacy and soft power concepts as the theoretical frameworks underpinning the work. The literature on vaccine diplomacy is very scarce to the best of my knowledge in public diplomacy. Scholars have not given much attention in the field of this scarcity; hence, this article seeks to fill the gap. The paper concludes that human life must precede before political and selfish national interests in pandemic matters and suggests future research in other health diplomacy areas as a significant soft power resource through public diplomacy campaigns.

Keywords: vaccine diplomacy, public diplomacy, Covid-19 pandemic, soft power, vaccine

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many new nuances and rekindle old ones in international relations and diplomacy. Since the advent of the pandemic, new phrases such as 'Covid-19 diplomacy', 'Zoomplomacy,' 'mask diplomacy' have all surfaced in the diplomatic discourse and the media landscape due to their peculiar meanings. 'Vaccine diplomacy' is one of the old phrases that has resurfaced since the production of the Covid-19 vaccines. Maskey and Pandey (2021) hold that vaccine diplomacy as a form of global health diplomacy has become the talk of the day in international relations due to its inherent soft power; the manufacturing nations may use it to win more 'friends' in global diplomacy. Vaccine diplomacy has come to stay so far as there is colossal vaccine inequity, and producing nations see it as an avenue to wield soft power through public diplomacy in foreign relations, especially in the developing nations' world. Cull (2021, p. 9) also believes that the viral coronavirus pandemic has the potential to upend perceptions of international reputations. Cull's assertion is in line with perceived soft power and public diplomacy effects that the pandemic might bring to global relations and diplomacy dynamics. The vaccines have become a conduit for other (non-health) foreign policy objectives in terms of soft power through public diplomacy. They serve as currency and a resource for wielding soft power in international competitive relations. Public opinion has become an overarching trend in the globalised world, and its management has become crucial to various foreign policy-makers of different nations, thus looking for any viable means to

shape it (Potter, 2021, p. 62). The coronavirus vaccines are incorporated into the donating nations' foreign policy agenda to shape foreign public opinion of the receiving nations.

The article presents an argument that coronavirus vaccines are credible soft power resources; thus, producing nations might use them for political and national interests at the international relations level since the shots make these countries attractive and persuasive. Hence, they contribute to a country's power of attraction with positive foreign perceptions (Ji, 2017). Although health is an end in itself, the history of international diplomacy shows us that many nations, mainly the high-income countries, have used global health as one of their foreign policy means to influence international public opinion. This is noticeable in the world of developing nations. As there is no data yet on foreign publics in the receiving nations' perception of the vaccine donating countries, the article presents other equally important data showing 2021 soft power index positions of the donating and supplying nations to the developing world.

This article hypothesises that the players of the vaccine diplomacy game are supplying and donating the jabs to the global south countries for soft power purposes. In pursuance of scholarly evidence to support this premise, the relevant literature examined depicts that although suppliers and donors of the vaccine explicitly affirm the humanitarian public good of their acts, they implicitly serve their ultimate goal of wielding soft power. Thus, the vaccines are seen as a means to increase the donating nation's soft power in the global competitive stage of positive public opinion.

Methodologically, the article adopts the qualitative approach of exploring the topic. Therefore, it uses a purely content analysis method of the relevant literature and other documents such as newspapers. In addition, it examined over fifty contemporary pieces of literature that relate to the topic from December 2020 to July 2021, covering areas such as health diplomacy, vaccines in international relations, vaccine nationalism and solidarity, soft power, public diplomacy, and the motives of supplying vaccines to the global south nations by the producing countries. Besides, the author attempts to present a comprehensive picture of vaccine diplomacy covering all the six main donating and supplying nations of covid-19 vaccines. The most recent literature on vaccine diplomacy (Chen, 2021; Lee, 2021; Maskey & Pandey, 2021) focuses mainly on China's vaccine diplomacy campaign. Therefore, the study bridges this gap. It explores these activities in the light of public diplomacy and soft power concepts.

Soft Power – A theoretical framework

The concepts of soft power underpin this article. The covid-19 vaccines are a soft power resource in the form of foreign aid. As Nye (2004; 2008; 2011; 2021a) notes, public diplomacy is the most common means adopted by nations to wield soft power. Generally, how a nation is perceived abroad is an essential element in the symbolic domain of national power. Thus countries try as much as possible to do their utmost best to maintain and maximise their soft power (Wang J. , 2011, p. 2). Hence, the concept of 'soft power' has been the backbone of the public diplomacy discourse.

Moreover, it helps comprehend the larger context in which the public diplomacy concept functions (Lord, 2008a, p. 63). Joseph Nye is generally acclaimed to be the originator of the concept in the 1990s in *Bound to Lead* (Nye, 1990), and later on, expanded it to respond to the criticisms emanated in the academia. In the *Bound to Lead*, Nye suggested two types of power; hard power - economic and military abilities as the most significant resources, while soft power has an ideology, culture, and civil institutions as its core resources. He developed the concept while solving two puzzles, one disciplinary and the other about the foreign policy

query of answering the widespread view that American power was in a state of decline (Nye, 2021a). Although Nye originated the idea of soft power, the concept of power pre-existed before him (Tella, 2021). However, as Bakalov argues, even if soft power practice has its origins elsewhere, scholars still acknowledge the fact that Nye was the one who coined the phrase “soft power” and still juxtaposes their arguments against his, (in Nye, 2021a). Regardless of his expansions and responses to critics, the concept remains its central tenet - the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than by force or payment (Nye, 2021a).

In light of the international importance attached to the concept in global politics and diplomacy, and thanks to technology, soft power can now be measured through indices and indicators (Tella, 2021) through polls and focus groups (Nye, 2004). Two major organisations, The Soft Power 30 by Portland (<https://softpower30.com>) and the Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index (brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/), measure countries’ soft power capacity. The latter is used in the final stage of this article. Their analyses, subject to usual caveats on interpreting data, are generally a reliable gauge in the soft power discourse among policy-makers and scholars.

It is generally affirmed that understanding Nye’s soft power is part of the public diplomacy paradigm (Cull, 2019). The concept has become one of the principal components in foreign policy discussion, with its critics dissatisfied with either the concept or its application (Wilson, 2008). Nonetheless, Nye used the concept to discuss the place of America at the global stage of politics. Military power and economic sanctions alone could no longer win foreign publics’ minds and hearts and make America attractive. Nye (2004, p. 5) defines the term as the ability to get others to want the results you want – Co-option rather than coercion. It is also the ability to offer others to obtain preferred outcomes by the co-option means of framing the agenda, persuasion, and positive attraction (Nye, 2013, p. 565).

According to Nye, through soft power, a nation can secure the support of foreign target publics for its foreign policy goals through the lens of the attractiveness of its culture, ideology, and overseas policy (Golan, 2017). He adds that soft power combined with hard power produces smart power. A country must have both in order to yield the maximum results as Fletcher (2016) notes that a nation requires both boots on the ground and books in its hand. Hunt (2015) also asserts the enormous impact of Nye’s concept in foreign relations and diplomacy as it has been generally incorporated into the principles of statecraft. Besides, soft power is arguably one of the most referenced phrases in the public diplomacy lexicon, although not all public diplomacy scholars and practitioners agree on the phrase’s application and definition (Snow, 2020, p. 4). Therefore, public diplomacy has relation with power - it has ‘soft power’ (Snow, 2009).

Soft power is not the same as public diplomacy, argues Nye (2011); however, the two are intrinsically related, and public diplomacy practices can increase this type of power. Vaccine diplomacy discussion has resurrected since the production of the jabs and centres around the ‘soft power’ as some supplying nations such as China, Russia, and India try to amass such power thanks to the pandemic. According to Nye (2004, 2011), there are three sources of a country’s soft power and names it the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political values, and foreign policies. Vaccine diplomacy, however, falls within the last source of soft power since governments’ policies abroad are an excellent source of winning the hearts and minds of foreign publics.

Again, it is about influence and the ability to entice and attract (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Attraction thus leads to acquiescence. Therefore soft power is also known as ‘attractive power’

(Nye, 2004, p. 6). It also has the ability to shape and influence the preferences of others (Nye, 2008). As a result, soft power resources serve as an asset that generates attraction at the global stage for the country that possesses them. The coronavirus jabs have become a public diplomacy tool to convince the international community of the supplying nation's attractiveness. The covid-19 vaccine has become an asset of soft power resource that ultimately makes the donating countries much attractive in the foreign public's eyes at the receiving nation.

In contemporary diplomacy and foreign relations, the concept of soft power has been arguably the most widely accepted among policy-makers and scholars of international relations (Changhe, 2013, p. 544). Nye affirms this assertion after seeing that his concept has gone 'viral' beyond the academic field and the borders of America and has become the talk of politicians, even in Asian countries like Japan and China (Nye, 2021a). Hence, many nations have invested billions of dollars in the concept through public diplomacy programmes (Manor & Golan, 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising when in 2007, the Chinese President Hu Jintao, in his address to the 17th Communist Party Congress, employed Nye's concept and called for the need of China to increase its soft power campaigns in foreign relations and diplomacy and the Xi Jinping administration continued it (Changhe, 2013; Nye, 2021). As a result, the Chinese government even contacted the originator of the concept privately for more input on increasing China's soft power (Nye, 2021a, p. 10). Thus, China sees the covid-19 vaccine as means of improving its global image.

Vaccine Diplomacy

The concept of vaccine diplomacy existed in the health diplomacy sphere before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic (Fidler, 2013). However, the meaning given to it has changed from its original. In the history of international relations and diplomacy, the little-known element is how diplomacy is intrinsically tied to many vaccines' production and delivery (Michaud & Kates, 2013; Hotez, 2014). Hotez (2021) argues that a positive vaccine diplomacy campaign can be relied on to curtail future global health crises by all the major international health players and not for the peculiar individual national interest. Vaccine diplomacy is a country's ability to use the supply of the Covid-19 vaccine to achieve 'national interest' in global relations (Kiernan et al., 2021). Hotez (2014) defines it as the branch of global health diplomacy that relies on vaccines' use or delivery. Kickbusch et al. (2021, p. 185) also explain it as all aspects of global health diplomacy related to developing, manufacturing, and delivering vaccines as public health goods.

Arguably, the most in-demand commodity globally, the coronavirus vaccine, has become a valuable public diplomacy tool in international relations. The battle of influencing foreign public opinions in a country by another government for a political goal has been part of the history of international relations and diplomacy (Kunczik, 2009). This public diplomacy model has become an integral part of the 'big' nations foreign policies. However, on a global scale, implementing public diplomacy to wield soft power is a legitimate and reputational effort in the realm of a country's foreign policy objectives. The shots are seen as a form of 'aid' to the small states, while the donors aim to achieve a long-term relationship and global image enhancement in the diplomatic arena. Vaccine diplomacy is about image and nation branding, using vaccine supply as a public diplomacy instrument (Burns, 2021).

The producing nations have used the covid-19 vaccines to achieve foreign policy objectives through soft power and public diplomacy (Maskey & Pandey, 2021). This strategy has contributed to what is known as vaccine nationalism, where high-income countries have ordered large quantities of the vaccines more than they need and stockpiled them. Vaccine

nationalism is defined, for this paper, as the process where the wealthy nations hold on to their home produce-jobs and the emerging and developing countries having no access to them until at a later stage. It has complicated the availability of vaccines for the global south countries – the low-income states.

Intellectual property or patent rights is one of the most challenging issues facing medical practitioners and areas where the intersection of health and foreign policy is manifested (Chattu & Chami, 2020). With the high global demand for the covid-19 vaccine and its low supply by the producing nations, there have been campaigns to get world leaders to waive the intellectual property right of the vaccines in order to speed up its productions, especially in other nations to meet demand. Therefore, India and South Africa, with the support of about 55 other nations, submitted to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for a temporary waiver of patency right to enable mass production of the vaccine at a lower price to ease global vaccine inequalities (Maskey & Pandey, 2021; Sharun & Dhama, 2021). On May 5, 2021, the Biden administration openly expressed its firm support for the covid-19 vaccine patent waiver (Tai, 2021). Although it will take time, given all the stakeholders' consensus-based nature, Biden's move is an excellent sign of relief to the developing nations and WHO. The patent waiver may not automatically change vaccine inequity but gives hope to the world, especially in low-income countries.

Vaccine diplomacy comes under Global Health Diplomacy (GHD) (Heymann, 2021). Global health encompasses health issues that go beyond national boundaries in consequence and cause. It places normative attention on achieving universal health equity, thus enhancing vulnerable populations' health (Koplan et al., 2009, p. 3). The concept of GHD is defined as a multilevel and multi-stakeholder negotiation process that shapes and manages the global policy environment for health (Kickbusch et al., 2007). Fauci, in 2007, bluntly defines GHD as 'winning hearts and minds of people in poor countries by exporting medical care, expertise and personnel to help those who need it most' (in Lee & Smith, 2011, p. 1). Fauci's assertion comes to play when examining the politics of the covid-19 vaccine towards the global south nations by the producing countries.

Besides, GHD is a burgeoning field that combines global health priorities with those of foreign affairs. For Fidler (2013, p. 693), 'it is the policy-shaping processes through which States, intergovernmental organisations, and non-State actors negotiate responses to health challenges or utilise health concepts or mechanisms in policy-shaping and negotiation strategies to achieve other political, economic, or social objectives.' Fidler's definition of GHD identifies two aspects of diplomatic activity involving health. First, responding to health challenges such as communicable diseases and pandemics. Second, using health concepts and mechanisms to achieve non-health objectives, incorporating health into an overall package for improving relations among countries. The second context reflects health as an instrument of 'soft power' by states to pursue influence, allies, and competitive advantage in international statecraft. This has made the covid-19 vaccine diplomacy a buzzword globally, especially concerning the poor and low-income nations.

The players and spectators in the game

Bøås and Haavid (2020) assert that there is a game of 'vaccine diplomacy' behind the international relations of coronavirus vaccine production and supply. Therefore, this section describes the nature of the vaccine diplomacy game. This kind of game involves players and the fans, the spectators. The leading players for the great vaccine game are the United States (US), European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK), China, Russia, and India. These players are from the West and East. Two different teams on the same field, each with the

intention to win the game against the opponent. The developing nations have become the playing ground for the players (Maskey & Pandey, 2021). These players are the main actors in the Covid-19 diplomatic vaccine world. Russia was the first to announce its vaccine product Sputnik V, followed by the UK, the US, and the EU (Chen, 2021; Clarke et al., 2021).

As of February 2021, WHO as the referee of the game, reported a total financial cost of its COVAX programme as US\$ 2.018 billion, and a total of two billion covid-19 vaccines have been requested for COVAX participating nations for delivery during 2021 (WHO et al., 2021). As of March 2021, COVAX has supplied about 35 million doses of the vaccine, with 8 million sent to Africa, according to a report (CEPI, GAVI, WHO, & UNICEF, 2021).

The United States, under Trump, closed in on itself. At the same time, China has ostensibly opened itself up by deploying health diplomacy to win more allies against its competitors, the US and Europe. In the light of this, China realised the vacuum of soft power around the covid-19 vaccines as a geopolitical opportunity, significantly when the Trump-led administration retreated from global solidarity to nationalism (Lee S. T., 2021). For instance, in the Middle East, vaccine orders are influenced by diplomatic and logistical considerations (Lavallee, 2021). Countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc., had thrown their weight to the Western vaccine in that region. At the same time, other nations like Iraq, Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hedged their bets by ordering from the Chinese when UAE announced that the China vaccines are 'completely safe' (Lavallee, 2021). It also seems that the Chinese diplomatic power play was to win over Europe and the entire world and isolate Trump's America. For example, when the Trump administration withdrew its financial assistance to the WHO, China provided 50 million dollars to the organisation (Maskey & Pandey, 2021, p. 8).

In the coronavirus vaccine diplomacy, China and Russia are winning the game by choosing to be more active and cooperative (Fazal, 2020). Lavallee (2021) estimated that about 26 countries such as Argentina, Hungary, Tunisia, and Turkmenistan had authorised Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. China also has many countries, including Brazil and Thailand, requesting the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines (Meredith, 2021). The vaccine has divided the globe into producers and buyers (Arak, 2021). Health has been integrated into the East's foreign policy, particularly China, allowing it to have more allies. Steven Cook believes that Beijing's prestige is increasing in an area that has long been one of the US dominance (Meredith, 2021). The United States has been primarily absent regarding vaccine diplomacy due to Trump's "America First" policy (Lavallee, 2021). So far, China seems to be out ahead in the race for vaccine diplomacy. Still, Jonathan Fulton, an expert in Chinese-Middle East relations, holds that with the advent of a new administration under Joe Biden in the States, the playing field could shift and the game is not yet over (Kickbusch et al., 2021).

The Biden administration has rekindled America's vaccine diplomacy with his foreign policy of 'America is back' against Trump's 'America First.' In an official statement from the Whitehouse, the US president affirmed that America would rejoin WHO and the Paris Climate Accord, supported by his executive orders. US joining WHO means taking an active part in the COVAX programme: as President Biden said, 'just as America was the arsenal of democracy in World War II in this battle against COVID-19 pandemic, our nation will be the arsenal of vaccines' (White House, 2021). Biden continued to show that the US indeed will be the arsenal of vaccines and announced on May 17 that America will donate 80 million US vaccines to assist other nations battling the pandemic by the end of June 2021. In addition, the Biden administration sent six flights and up to \$100 million of support to India and is giving support to South Asia and Latin America as they encounter a new surge making India halt its global vaccine supply through WHO.

To persuade other vaccine diplomacy competitors, especially China and Russia, that America was true ‘back,’ the US government has made a massive pledge of supplying 500 million doses of Pfizer vaccines to the developing nations through the COVAX programme to be delivered by June 2022 (see *White House Press statement*, June 10, 2021). The White House asserts that this is the biggest-ever donation of vaccines by a single nation globally, and therefore shows America’s commitment to assist protect people around the globe from the coronavirus. If these US pledges are fulfilled then, the game of vaccine diplomacy and the race for soft power will be won by America. The US has become the biggest and fierce competitor to China and Russia regarding vaccine diplomacy with these vaccine donation promises.

Vaccine nationalism and Solidarity

On the issue of global solidarity in terms of the covid-19 vaccines, the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005, which is a public health treaty to create global health solidarity in times of global health situations like the covid-19 pandemic, entreats all member-nations to adhere to its principles (Heymann, 2021, p. 97). However, geopolitical tensions have dominated the coronavirus discourse, making the IHR not reach its full potential. This inability to reach the full potential of global solidarity has generated concerns and calls from all walks of life to political and global leaders, especially in the high-income nations and the manufacturing countries, to act in solidarity with the poor and developing nations (Fidler, 2013). Vaccine diplomacy has been dominated by national selfish-interest ranging from lack of transparency, data sharing, and monopolising the purchase of the jabs. This selfish interest of nations has led to the nationalism of the current covid-19 vaccine (Dyer, 2020). The basic principle of global health solidarity holds that high-income nations look after themselves and help others simultaneously. And therefore, countries should find a means of accelerating the distribution and production of the covid-19 jabs and aim to transfer intellectual property rights of vaccines (Burns, 2021).

Political and global leaders have called for the Covid-19 vaccines to be treated as a global public good that has to be accessible to all (Kickbusch et al., 2021, p.23). The vaccines' full potential cannot be realized if selfish national interests determine who gets access, instead of primary rules of fairness and ensuring that allocation will optimize their public health effect. Nevertheless, rich countries rushed to place advance orders to ensure vaccine access for their citizens with expectations of limited supplies, leaving the low-income countries to fall into their vaccine diplomacy tactics. There have been precedents around the inequitable distribution of vaccines over the years, like export controls and backstage bilateral deals, and this always causes unease in the global health campaign such as polio, HIV. Besides, the selfish behaviour of the suppliers and donors of the vaccine always makes the low and middle countries dance to the tunes of their ‘masters’ (Pannu & Barry, 2021). The US and its allies became the prime example of vaccine nationalism (Maskey & Pandey, 2021). The Covid-19 crisis has forcefully revived vaccine diplomacy with the current public debate on equitable vaccine accessibility (Kickbusch et al., 2021 p. 168).

Several months before the vaccines were approved, the rich countries pre-ordered billions of advance doses (Lee, 2021). High-income nations with only 14% of the total world population bought up to 56% of the eight most promising vaccines (Dyer, 2020; Hymann, 2021). In other words, the rich nations are vaccinating 25 times faster than those in the developing world (Randall, 2021). For example, America has 24% of the world’s vaccines but has only 4.3% of the global population according to Bloomberg’s database of Covid-19 vaccinations tracker of more than 726 million doses administered in 154 countries (Bloomberg.com). Canada also ordered 338 million doses by the end of 2020. This amount of vaccines are adequate for Canada to inoculate its population four times. The United Kingdom

also pre-ordered three times what it needed to vaccinate its citizens. The table 1 and 2 below indicate apparent disparities in vaccination among nations. The low-income countries which are in the developing world are far below the bottom of the Table. Clearly, billions of people, especially in developing countries, will not receive the covid-19 shots for years to come as the tables below show it.

Table 1: *Number of covid-19 vaccines administered according to country income group as of July 19, 2021*

Country Income-group	Number of doses administered
High-Income countries	1.12 billion
Upper Middle-Income countries	1.94 billion
Lower Middle-Income countries	625.05 million
Low-Income countries	10.28 million
TOTAL	3.7 billion

Source: OurWorldinData.org

Table 2: *Number of vaccines administered by continents as of July 19, 2021*

Continent	Percentage
Africa	1.65%
Asia	62.82%
Europe	16%
North America	12.71%
Oceania	0.34%
South America	6%
TOTAL	100%

Source: OurWorldinData.org

Vaccine nationalism has also led to vaccine hoarding (Maskey & Pandey, 2021, p. 22). Despite calls and pleas from global health leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron against it, vaccine nationalism has come to stay, and almost all the wealthy nations exhibited it in different forms. Wealthy countries such as the UK, the US, Canada, most EU member states and so forth have all exhibited it in diverse forms (Maskey & Pandey, 2021; see also the *Irish Times*, June 10 edition; Al Jazeera Africa news). It is unfortunate that the high-income nations not only managed to stockpile covid-19 vaccines for the complete inoculation of their citizens, but they have intentionally also hoarded many times more than needed when many developing nations did not even have a single shot of the vaccine. Examples of wealthy nations into vaccine nationalism and hoarding are Canada, EU members, the UK, the US, Australia, etc. The UK, for instance, stockpiled six times more vaccines than needed. Although the EU, UK, and the US are all major investors in productions and contribute to the WHO's COVAX campaign, stockpiling vaccines while many people have no access to them in other countries goes against the spirit and the letter of global solidarity. Moreover, the wealthy nations plan to inoculate their citizens with the 'vaccine booster' while some frontline workers in the developing countries have not had a single shot.

For the emergency programme, Mike Ryan, executive director of WHO, called for the high-income nations to donate some of their vaccines, conspicuously noting that many frontline healthcare workers and vulnerable in many parts of the world have not been inoculated as of July 2021 (Burns, 2021). On June 12, 2021, German Chancellor Angela Merkel affirmed that the G7 would collectively distribute 2.3 billion covid-19 vaccines to the global south nations (see *Irish Examiner*, June 13, 2021 edition). However, critically analysing the current global vaccine disparities, these pledges from the G7 will have limited impact because these are pledges. Nonetheless, it gives a small lifeline to the COVAX programme. Besides, no country is safe unless all are safe. Therefore, global solidarity – the spirit in which the Constitution of the World Health Organization was drafted and adopted after the ravages of the Second World War – must be reinforced repeatedly through the kind of relationship-building and negotiating processes that are at the heart of global health diplomacy, argues WHO director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as cited in (Kickbusch et al., 2021). The advocates of vaccine diplomacy argue that the WHO's COVAX policy did not work according to its planned goal as Western countries' national interests overtook international solidarity (Mardell, 2021). COVAX has secured only 100 million doses and shipped them to 135 low-income countries (Burns, 2021).

Motivations for vaccine diplomacy

This section deals with the rationale behind vaccine donations and supplies, especially to the developing nations by the players of the vaccine diplomacy game. Is it for 'humanitarian purpose,' global solidarity, or selfish national interest of wielding soft power through public diplomacy? Some supplying nations like China have always insisted openly through its Foreign Ministry that China is fulfilling its commitment to make the new covid-19 vaccine a global public good. Besides, scholars of international relations and the media landscape have questioned the rationale behind nations donating and supplying to developing countries. Vaccine donations are used as a soft power resource to shape what the donating country wants in the receiving state (Maskey & Pandey, 2021). The true motivation of China and the rest manufacturing nations to donate and supply to the developing world is demonstrated in Table 3 below, as it exhibits their overt and covert intentions.

From Table 3, the covert and overt motives of the vaccine diplomacy major players and their intention of WHO's partnership vary based on the strategies and tactics of each player's soft power campaign and public diplomacy agenda. For instance, China's covert motive is a well-planned soft power and public diplomacy programme. It is generally affirmed that the coronavirus pandemic originated from China, and this universal assertion depicted a negative international image and public opinion about the country. Thus, China sees the covid-19 vaccines as an opportunity to repair the tarnished international image, thereby making its shots available through donations, especially to the poor and low-income states in the global south - making a total of 33 million donations, with Asian countries receiving the more significant part of it. This plan shows how China attempts to dominate the Asian region against its fierce competitor India. Besides, China realises that it needed international credibility to beat its international competitors in the vaccine race, hence its partnership with WHO. As Nye (2008; 2004; 2011; 2021) asserts, credibility is essential to wield soft power in international relations and diplomacy. Hence, China's quest for credibility at the doorsteps of WHO.

Russia also claims to offer its vaccine for humanitarian purposes as its overt rationale. However, as demonstrated below, its covert motivation affirms its unquenched desire to win soft power dividends at global relations. It was the first country in the globe to announce its covid-19 vaccine breakthrough. Furthermore, it applied for WHO's partnership since it assumed that WHO is a creditable international organisation that will help the country achieve

its covert motives in vaccine diplomacy. In the vaccine race for soft power, an international source of credibility and support is necessary for a country to implement its public diplomacy campaigns, and Russia hoped to get it through a partnership with WHO.

According to the below Table, India adopted the vaccine diplomacy strategy of ‘vaccine maitri’ – vaccine friendship as its overt motive. This motive is promoted internationally by its ministry of external affairs. Nevertheless, the country’s covert rationale shows that it aimed to widen its soft power currency, especially in Asia, as it faced fierce competition from China. This India’s covert motivation can allude to the second wave of the virus in the country where it exported many doses to other countries while its citizens suffered from the pandemic. Nonetheless, it got international acclamation for being one of the most significant vaccine supplies to the WHO’s COVAX programme before it was hit with the second wave.

The US initial withdrawal from the vaccine diplomacy under Trump gave a chance to other major players such as China, Russia, and India to win the hearts and minds of their targeted foreign audiences through vaccine donations. As a result, these countries dominated the international arena of vaccine diplomacy. However, with the advent of president Biden, America re-entered the vaccine diplomacy race by making 580 million doses of the vaccine pledge to the global south countries, as indicated in Table 3 below. The presence of America in the race has altered the dynamics of the game as its hidden motives show in the Table – to prevent its eastern competitors such as Russia and China from taking geopolitical advantages. Although its overt motive is for global solidarity, America used its partnership with the WHO as a means of repairing its global damage image under the erstwhile Trump administration.

The EU, as a supranational organisation with its powerful member states on many occasions, stated its humanitarian goal for engaging in vaccine diplomacy. However, as indicated in Table 3, its covert motive demonstrates that the organisation is afraid that China and Russia will use the high-in-demand covid-19 vaccines to penetrate its international allies’ territory. Therefore it conceived a covert motive of engaging in vaccine diplomacy in order to maintain its foreign allies in the developing countries. The EU’s fear is affirmed when French President Emmanuel Macron accused Russian and China of using the vaccine for geopolitical and soft power advantages. The UK also has a similar approach to the EU in terms of its vaccine diplomacy. However, a greater part of its vaccines went to Africa through COVAX. Moreover, with Brexit effects still looming, UK’s vaccine diplomacy treads the line of vaccines plus trade talks as the country continues to search for international trade partners, especially in the global south nations after the Brexit. Hence, its covert motive of supplying its stockpiled vaccines to its international allies in order to keep them away from the Chinese and Russian invasion.

The data in Table 3 below demonstrates the commonality and differences among the major vaccine diplomacy players regarding their motives and partnership with WHO. For example, all the players have a common overt motive – global solidarity and humanitarian. This motive appeals to the global audiences as a worthy cause of action. However, there are no altruistic motives among the actors in the realm of international relations and diplomacy. Hence covert motives always exist in most, if not all, of their activities. Therefore, the major players’ covert motives in the vaccine diplomacy race align with the game of international relations. On the one hand, the players have a common overt motive; on the other hand, each of them has a different covert motive, which illustrates the different approaches adopted by each country to achieve its foreign policy objectives through soft power and public diplomacy. Besides, while the major players in the East – Russia and China adopt a covert rationale of repairing international image and wielding soft power, those from the West – the US, UK and EU attempt to prevent the eastern countries from achieving their covert motives at the global relations and diplomacy especially with the return of the US into the race.

Again, the players' relations with WHO are interesting to highlight, as illustrated in Table 3 below. WHO can be said to be the referee of the game (Hotez, 2021). Its role in the vaccine diplomacy battle has been to maintain fair gameplay among the two teams. Through its global initiative programme COVAX, the organisation has plans to ensure equal distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine among all the 190 participating nations of the UN, especially to the low-income states (WHO, Gavi, & UNICEF, 2021). However, each vaccine player seeks WHO's partnership for their implicit soft power motives of global credibility. As Table 3 below shows, China and Russia needed WHO's partnership to achieve their covert motives. This may be the reason for their application to WHO's partnership. The former US President Donald Trump even accuses WHO of being the puppet of China, hence withdrawing the US from the organisation. Thus, the COVAX programme is used as a stepping stone by the players to implicitly further their hidden agendas.

On the contrary, the organisation may not be aware of supporting the players' covert national interest motives. Therefore, it considers its interaction with each of the players on the value for humanitarian purposes. However, actors, especially states, search for any possible means to guide their peculiar national interest in international diplomacy, which manifests among the vaccine diplomacy actors.

Table 3: *Motivations for vaccine diplomacy towards the developing world by the major players of the Covid-19 vaccine game*

Major Players	The rationale to engage in vaccine diplomacy		Reasons for WHO's partnership (COVAX)	Number of doses donated and pledges to the global south	Global South regions gratitude to the major players
	Overt motives	Covert motives			
China	Commitment to the global public good, and South-South Cooperation	To gain geopolitical favours abroad, repair tarnish foreign image	To have global credibility since it legitimizes China at the world stage of the vaccine race	33 million (donation)	Asia - 24.5 million as a donation Africa – 7.2 million vaccines as a donation Latin America – 1million jabs as a donation
Russia	humanitarian	To win soft power dividends, to bolster global reputation	Has applied for WHO's partnership – Russia needs it for global vaccine credibility	13 million (donation)	Africa Asia Latin America
India	'vaccine maitri' – humanitarian vaccine friendship	To strengthen its soft power currency	For humanitarian purposes and global recognition as the hub of world pharmacy through COVAX supply	10.6 million doses (donation)	Africa Asia Latin America (47 developing countries)
USA	Global solidarity	To prevent its Eastern competitors from taking	To support the COVAX initiative	580 million (pledge)	Africa Asia Latin America

		geopolitical advantages			
EU	Humanitarian purposes	To retain its foreign allies in the developing world	To affirm its global health commitment	159 million doses (pledge)	Africa Asia Latin America
UK	Global solidarity	To maintain old allies in the global south	To share its left-over vaccines	100 million doses (pledge)	Africa

Source: author's compilation

The eastern vaccine donating nations like China, India, and Russia together supply the largest consignments of the covid-19 vaccines to the developing countries through either COVAX or bilateral arrangements (Maskey & Pandey, 2021). The jobs of these countries are the most suitable to the global south nations concerning storage and cold chain of transportation. These distributing nations have made their vaccines available through 'vaccine internationalism' as to 'vaccine nationalism.' However, their contributions are tagged with a soft power display. It is reasonable to assume that these vaccine donors have a hidden soft power agenda in the recipient states.

This assumption is supported by the competition between China and India in the Asia region. India's vaccine diplomacy of supplying vaccines to the world while its domestic inoculation was low can be seen as a sign of the Indian government gaining the upper hand in the vaccine soft power race against China and other perceived competitors. Russia also used its vaccines to penetrate the European and Asia markets, attracting more customers to counter the US in these regions. Thus, the coronavirus vaccines have been utilized as a soft power and a tool of selfish national interest (Maskey & Pandey, 2021) for where vaccines go influence may be the next to follow. The history of opinion polling on citizens' attitudes to foreign aid is long (Clarke, Roope, & Duch, 2021). However, surprisingly, there is very little information on public attitudes to coronavirus vaccine aid. Furthermore, this affirms why there is no data yet on public opinion in the developing nations who are the significant vaccine recipients aid, about the donating countries.

Again, the relation between health and foreign policy has been cordial and robust for the past decades to the extent that global health matters have been incorporated into nations' foreign policy programmes. Hence, health has gained status as among the significant foreign policy instrument. However, in the globalised world, very few global health campaigns function for pure altruism and humanitarian purpose, as in the case of covid-19 vaccines (Khazatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020, p. 7); therefore, more affluent countries often provide aid (including for health) to advance their own strategic interests, security goals, and values rather than to promote better health outcomes in the global south as an end in itself.

The motives for vaccine diplomacy have become the bone of contention between the West and the East (Burns, 2021). The rationale and interest are generally and overtly perceived as humanitarian, see table 3 above. However, it also applies to securing political influence zones, access to natural resources, and extending the scope of influence (Bøås & Haavid, 2020). While the Western countries accuse Russia, China, and India of having a 'hiding' agenda in their vaccine diplomacy strategies, the East has strongly refuted these allegations, especially as having no basis. The East says that what it is doing is purely for 'public good' and instead

accuses the US and Europe of not showing ‘vaccine solidarity’ to the developing nations but have decided to monopolise their vaccines and use them for their domestic populace (Mardelle, 2021). Mardelle (2021) continues to argue that the West strongly and negatively perceives China’s vaccine diplomacy. However, as it is a conceivable fact that China’s diplomatic gains will come at the expense of Western influence, it is hard to argue that donating vaccines to those in need is intrinsically wrong.

Critics of vaccine diplomacy have argued that China and Russia will use the vaccine supply to cement their long-term presence in the global south. They highlight that the jobs’ fundamental significance to nations will make it ‘super, super tricky’ for the countries to resist diplomatic pressure in the future from the East (Meredith, 2021). However, vaccine diplomacy is known to promote the donating nation’s foreign policy and diplomatic relations. In Hotez’s (2014) view, it has been an innovative opportunity to promote US foreign policy and deepen its diplomatic ties, especially between adversarial countries, long before the advent of coronavirus. For instance, Chen’s (2021) analysis indicates that China’s vaccine diplomacy has made the country have positive press coverage in the Italian media due to China’s covid-19 assistance to Italy.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows the dynamics of how the various state actors of vaccine diplomacy compete among themselves for soft power through public diplomacy, with the vaccine making them attractive and persuasive at the global statecraft. The latest Global Soft Power Index poll conducted by Brand Finance for 2021 of 100 nations affirms the study’s results. It gives the impression that the vaccine diplomacy of the covid-19 jobs of the producing nations had no impact on their soft power index (Brand-Finance, 2021). It was expected that Russia, China, India, and the US would be among the first five top positions of the 2021 soft power index, having the vaccines in their hands and donating to developing nations. However, China, the giant advocate of vaccine diplomacy to wield soft power, came 8th of the index with a decrease of minus 4.4. Russia came 13th, while India took the 36th position. For the first time, the soft power superpower, the US, was dethroned from its number one position, losing it to Germany and falling to sixth place.

The findings of vaccine diplomacy and its related issues show how the stakeholders in the game take every chance that may crop up seriously in the world of soft competitive power and public diplomacy. China, Russia, and India have shown the West that vaccine solidarity and sharing go with its implicit diplomatic goals of increasing one’s soft power, although it may not be immediate. The West may reverse their covid-19 vaccination campaign to counter the East’s vaccine diplomacy. Indeed, it has reversed its vaccine diplomacy strategy with the advent of the Biden administration in the US. Biden’s America has become the main vaccine diplomacy competitor to China. President Biden rejoined the Paris Climate Change Accord and the World Health Organisation and made pledges of vaccine half a million donation to the developing nations through the WHO COVAX programme. The sense of American solidarity is back.

It may seem that the Eastern countries have won the great vaccine diplomacy game to the detriment of the West. However, in matters of public health, the priority is always about saving lives. Soft power, image, and nation branding, or global influence do not save human life. The covid-19 pandemic has shown the world of diplomacy the big gap between the haves and have-not, the big players and the spectators, and the need to share resources (health) at the global stage for fair and equal access to global public health care. Unfortunately, the national selfish-interest of especially high-income and vaccine-producing nations led to vaccine

nationalism and hoarding at the expense of global solidarity. As a result, these developed nations pre-ordered almost all the vaccines and even stockpiled them while front workers and other vulnerable people in the developing world died of the pandemic. This unfortunate situation shows the considerable disparity in the globe.

Scholars in public diplomacy have remarkably underexplored the power of vaccine diplomacy in engaging the foreign publics for political goals such as image shaping, nation branding, global influence, and soft power attainment. Nevertheless, it is a public diplomacy resource with many diplomatic advantages, both short and long-term effects. Future research, therefore, could be undertaken in other aspects of health diplomacy, such as the supply of health personnel and equipment as a method of wielding soft power through public diplomacy strategy.

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