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# China's "Weaponized" Vaccine: Intertwining Between International and Domestic Politics

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## Abstract

Ever since China has formally joined the WHO-backed global COVID-19 vaccine initiative known as COVAX, there is a presumed notion that China's vaccine diplomacy will make a significant contribution to the international public good and thus uplift Beijing's role as the rule-maker of international order. To scrutinize this, the paper asks if China succeeded in proliferating its weaponized vaccine policy to obtain maximum diplomatic gains and soft power projection to intensify its international image, geopolitical power, and domestic politico legitimacy. The authors argue that despite its vaccine diplomacy demonstrated the robust governance capacity and responsibility to be a great power. Yet, Beijing's geopolitical influence and international image are significantly overrated and not enough to play a more prominent role in the global power fulcrum/equilibrium. On the contrary, China enjoys a leading position on the domestic political front. Its successful portrayal of China's vaccine provision in the global market and remarkable configuration to leverage a deep-rooted nationalism has fundamentally provided China with a powerful rationale to divert its public's attention from Beijing's earlier inadequate handling of the outbreak. The evaluation of the paper reveals that China's vaccine diplomacy's influence in promoting international image and geopolitics is limited but has successfully stabilized its domestic political environment and enhanced its domestic legitimacy.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Vaccine diplomacy · China · Nationalism · Geopolitics

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## Introduction

We live in an interconnected and globalized world; people and disease can quickly spread anywhere within a few hours. The high spread of the virus has made the epidemic globally, with new cases and deaths reported every day. The coronavirus has already affected 218 countries and territories. The COVID-19 pandemic, as a new global health crisis, has a long-term influence in shaping the world's economic and political future and leaves a profound cultural and psychological impact. Bieber [4] notes that the COVID-19 could trigger psychological consequences of collective anxiety, which may cause political and social outcomes that strengthen exclusionary nationalism, highlighting the role of themes related to authoritarianism and change in the international order. This enlarges more meaningful value and gives us a big picture that the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health issue but also a game-changer for world politics.

It is widely acknowledged that the accessibility of a safe and effective vaccine for COVID-19 could make significant progress in controlling the pandemic. To cure the disease, the COVID-19 vaccines have become a target that is being “weaponized” by states to gather maximum national and international support to authorize certain policy gains and geopolitical objectives. There is an increasingly emergence of “vaccine nationalism” during the pandemic, referring to the competition among superpowers to be the first on the market [70]. China, being the second-largest economy, has appeared as one of the most significant powers in the world, with no exception. While effectively utilizing its vaccine policy framework, China has made its five candidates in the phase 3 trials [68] and formally joined COVAX on October 9, 2020 [1]. Beijing works hard to promote its vaccine worldwide, and many countries already signed deals with the Chinese vaccine companies in the world [69].

The year 2021 becomes a year for vaccines. China approved its vaccine, Sinovac, for general use in China [2]. Given China's goal of approximately vaccinating 50 million people for free ahead of the 2021 Spring Festival holidays, cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen in South China's Guangdong Province, and other north and eastern China's provinces started mass inoculations of vaccines [9]. It led to many domestic citizens' praises. It is generally recognized that China uses COVID-19 vaccines to promote soft power and frames itself as a solution to the pandemic by supplying vaccine aid worldwide [40, 8]. China's vaccine policies will have an impact on geopolitics [8]. Heisbourg [25] further notes that China's invented vaccines could help increase its international image. Some scholars even suggest that China will lead a new political international order in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic [61]. Although China has attempted to increase its geopolitical power and image by vaccine diplomacy [40]. However, there is no significant evidence that China demonstrates its ability to become the leader of the global order [83].

The paper argues that China's vaccine diplomacy remains ineffective to achieve its expected goals in promoting geopolitics and international image. However, compared with a limited role in promoting geopolitics and international image due to appearance and availability of other vaccine from Western countries, China's vaccine diplomacy has successfully stabilized the domestic political environment. To

further unfold this, the paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the article begins with the explaining China's weaponized vaccine policy and elucidates its global outreach to contribute for the international public good. Secondly, it highlights the efficient utility of vaccines as a catalyst for China's Geopolitics and international image lifting. Thirdly, on the domestic politico front, it demonstrates China's government strategy through exploiting vaccines as a nationalistic tool to address domestic and foreign critiques. Fourthly, it evaluates whether China's vaccine diplomacy has successfully yielded the desired policy outcomes into a geopolitical game-changer or internal political stabilizer and finally, the conclusion.

## China's "Weaponized" Vaccine Policy and its Global Outreach

The COVID-19 triggered unprecedented socio-economic chaos since it confirmed both the high human-to-human transmissibility of COVID-19 [55] and difficulties in detecting the ability of SARS-CoV-2 to infect people through asymptomatic carriers [53]. Many efforts have been made to develop a vaccine against COVID-19, and most vaccine candidates use the S-protein of SARS-CoV-2 to develop vaccines [14]. It is extensively recognized that the development of COVID-19 vaccines will make significant progress in controlling the pandemic. According to the World Health Organization-WHO, 63 candidate vaccines in clinical development and 173 candidates in pre-clinical development until January 26, 2021, are examined [72]. Five of China's COVID-19 vaccine candidates are at phase three clinical trials from four Chinese companies [65], including Sinopharm, Sinovac, CanSino, and Anhui Zhifei Longcom.

The Chinese government offered land, loans, and subsidies for vaccine companies to make vaccines along with fast-tracking approvals [47]. The Sinopharm is a state-owned Chinese company with two COVID-19 vaccine candidates [65]. Its vaccine has been conducting late-stage clinical trials in 10 nations, including Argentina, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Morocco [13]. The UAE is the first country to approve a Chinese COVID-19 vaccine on December 9, and Bahrain followed days later [12]. The Sinopharm claims that it could produce one billion doses of vaccines in 2021 [37]. China further has given conditional approval for the first general use of Sinopharm [76]. Sinovac is a private company that focuses on research, development, and manufacturing of human and animal vaccines [65]. Sinovac is currently in phase three trials in Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey [7]. Brazil was approved for the emergency use of Sinovac Biotech Ltd vaccines against COVID-19 [73]. The third candidate, Medical researcher Major General Chen Wei at the Beijing Institute of Biotechnology, which belongs to the Academy of Military Medical Sciences, led the team to develop CanSino vaccines [36]. The development and expansion of CanSino vaccines includes cooperation among government agencies, universities, and the Tianjin-based pharmaceutical company CanSino Biologics. It is the first COVID-19 vaccine in the world to be approved for restricted use [36]. The last one, the Anhui Zhifei Longcom, is a Chinese-based company that develops a protein subunit COVID-19 vaccine [65], and it just started phase 3 clinical trials.

China officially joined COVAX on October 9, 2020, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [44]. Even though the Chinese government resists using “vaccine diplomacy” to describe its foreign policy, it is broadly believed that China is playing vaccine diplomacy and a soft power game [39]. China offers loans and priority access to developing countries for vaccinations as they move to large-scale trials [42]. Rich countries scramble for early doses may cause shortages of vaccines [42]; China's vaccine provides doses to developing countries in short supply [39]. However, it is worth noticing that although many developing countries signed deals with Chinese vaccine companies, they also signed agreements with other countries' vaccine companies for more accessibility. For instance, Thailand ordered vaccines from Sinovac, and it also signed a technology transfer deal with Oxford University-based AstraZeneca [27]. Singapore signed advance purchase agreements with Sinovac [20]; Singapore also approved the American-German Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine [27]. In other words, China's vaccine is not the only option for developing countries.

Despite China's vaccine arrival to 7.3 billion doses in multiple countries, yet the factor of immunity has been questioned for both Sinopharm and Sinovac inoculation shots, keeping in view the alternative vaccines availabilities in less rich nations. As directed by the WHO-led Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE), the China's jab immunization level remains insufficient from the two doses and necessitates for the third one from the same one or changed vaccine especially in cases above 60 years of age to confirm full safety [63]. One of the key differences remains on China's inactivate vaccine and western's mRNA-oriented vaccines such as Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Pfizer. For instance, the study conducted by the Brazilian Ministry of Health analyzed one million hospitalized patients and resulted into Sinovac shows 60% while the Oxford-AstraZeneca displayed 76% protection in 79-year-old persons [67]. Besides, a preprint Brazilian study investigated for testing 61 million between January and June and found efficient results with AstraZeneca reducing the risk level with 70%, whereby Sinovac provided 54% safety respectively [88]. Concerning antibody response, a healthcare worker study was conducted by Thailand Red Cross Emerging Infectious Diseases Clinical Centre Bangkok and demonstrated with 60% results from China's vaccine and AstraZeneca showing 86% after the patients took two shots from these vaccines respectively [5]. On the other hand, Bahrain also examined China's vaccine efficacy with Russia's Sputnik V, Germany's BioNTech, and the U.K.'s AstraZeneca. Their preprint results concluded into Sinopharm's more faced with risk for old patients in comparison with the others [3].

Although there are not much public data on China's vaccine, there is still much circulated information about China's vaccine's weak performance on China's social media. Hence, China's government protects its vaccine to domestic audiences in order to promote and safeguard vaccines' value. In responding from the western critiques, Chinese mainstream media start to question the safety of the Pfizer and Moderna shots due to the vulnerable response from Western states in curbing virus as well [69]. In this backdrop, a tug-of-war scenario was witnessed in digital platforms and social media networks, whereby questioning the preparedness and underestimating vaccine portfolios [54]. Moreover, the Chinese government focuses more on the domestic market to promote its vaccines. China started giving emergency

vaccinations as early as July 2020 [35]. Subsequently, China began to conduct mass vaccinations on December 15, 2020 [34]. It is estimated that more than 15 million people have taken vaccines in China [35]. The Chinese government also sets a goal 50 million people will be free to vaccinate ahead of the 2021 Spring Festival holidays [9]. The freeing of China's vaccine ejects a sense of proudness in the Chinese public. Hence, it is apparent that vaccines are now "weaponized" for national utilization and involve international and domestic political dimensions.

## Vaccine as Catalyst of China's Geopolitics and International Image

The US world leadership was established by constructing and maintaining the post-WWII world order and promoting globalization. The USA led the post-WWII world order to make a unipolar world [57]. China's attitude toward the international community has changed from revolutionary power, active participation to emerging power attempting to reshape the world order to fulfil its interests [83]. As it has been categorized as China's extraordinary economic growth and active diplomacy, to some extent, it is perceived in the western discourse, China's rise as a great challenge for the US-led world order [86, 28]. In its global efforts, China has long taken an à la carte approach to the US-constructed world order [83]. For instance, China has demonstrated its commitment to global peace by playing an active role in international organizations, especially the United Nations (UN), supporting multilateral cooperation and peaceful resolution over conflicts, and delivering international peacekeeping to war-affected countries [26, 74]. Those contributions have enabled China increasingly to exert political and economic influence globally. In fact, China has implemented active foreign policies to reshape the international order to fit its interests and values.

Discussions of Chinese foreign policies, especially from western countries, tend to assume a "revisionist" intention behind it and remain clouded in a fog of narratives of China's emerging role, which refer to China variously as a provider of rogue aid, or as a challenger to liberal order [87, 43, 48]. Much of the debate focuses on providing empirical and theoretical analysis on Chinese foreign policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its aggressive policy in the South China Sea. Notably, the USA has perceived BRI as a growing challenge to US domination and a tendency to establish a new one that is more responsive to China's demands [79]. In the same way, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a catalyst in Sino-US rival and manifests how balance-of-power politics have influenced the responses to this outbreak [16]. The USA blames China for not disclosing information and taking the necessary measures to control disease spread early [66, 25]. Donald Trump even labels the virus as "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" [11, 25]. In turn, China launched a campaign to reshape the narrative by questioning the virus' origins and blaming the US military for bringing the virus into China during the Military World Games held in Wuhan in October 2019 [66]. However, China's government's early responses to the pandemic still received substantial criticism from foreign countries [25].

Consequently, in order to divert the globe's attention on its early responses to the pandemic and fight back the USA, the Chinese government also led Chinese philanthropic foundations and companies to provide various kinds of assistance, including sharing its coronavirus experiences, medical equipment, test kits, masks, gloves, and medical experts to hard-hit countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe and Americas [17]. Moreover, Chinese President Xi Jinping has promised that China will make its coronavirus vaccine a global public good once available to ensure vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries [50]. The vaccine diplomacy is also coupled with the health Silk Road, which builds health infrastructure for recipient countries, especially the developing countries, to fight and prevent a future pandemic. It has already provided early vaccine access and loans to countries like Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, who are of strategic importance to shore up alliances with its neighbors before Joe Biden becomes US president [52, 62]. Through its "vaccine diplomacy," China's government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aim to frame them as a solution to the pandemic and finally deliver a geopolitical win that showcased the country's scientific prowess and generosity [69].

After successful pandemic mitigations and under controlled level on the domestic front, China started invigorating diplomacy campaign by providing free vaccinations in April 2020. The foreign policy strategy remained focused on envision its health leadership by distributing vaccine on bilateral mechanisms. In July 2020, Brazil turned out to be the first international reception for Chinese vaccine in South American continent. In the subsequent months that follows, a number of countries signed deals with China for vaccine accessibility especially for developing and under-developing countries. Later in December, Egypt received Sinopharm doses as first country for having Chinese vaccines [32]. It was observed that, where Chinese vaccines go, public diplomacy increases in favor of China. Jack Ma's Alibaba Foundation provided ship masks, surgical gowns, and diagnostic tests to numerous countries. Up to March 17, 2021, China produced 33% doses for the world and exporting around 62% to foreign countries. China has been the leading manufacturer with 169.4 million doses of Sinovac, Sinopharm, CanSino, and AstraZeneca. As of March 2021, under the Health Silk Road framework, Beijing delivered millions of free doses to 69 countries and commercially exported to 28 countries respectively [19].

The free vaccine policy helped improving China's international image and brought effects into three dimensions. Firstly, China effectively utilized this as a public diplomacy tool for promoting bilateral cooperation as savior of the world due to the biased equitable vaccine distribution from the western side. Secondly, Beijing is observant of its global public perception and image. China's diplomacy resolves to renovate itself from a reputational damage repair at both home and abroad. Thirdly, within the framework of emergent anti-globalization globally, China remains keen to increase its soft power by providing International Public Goods and shows strong motivations during the pandemic especially. Focusing on IPGs brings China's leadership status higher status. In his speech, China's foreign minister Wang Yi emphasized for equitable vaccine distribution across the globe [33].

For instance, some Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and the Philippines have welcomed the Chinese vaccine, even as they recognize that its provision is an effort to bolster China's geopolitical influence and international image



[46]. There is also growing evidence that most Southeast Asian countries rely on China's vaccine in short supply, which will increase China's geopolitical power in these regions [27]. On the other hand, the Chinese vision for the world order will also be promoted by providing vaccines, promoting its model for battling COVID-19, and launching various Beijing-led health and economic recovery initiatives to the international community. Since the outbreak, China has long advocated for promoting international cooperation on combating the virus with the vision of "building a community with shared future for humanity," which is one of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the Chinese version of world order.

China has taken many foreign policy efforts to deflect blame and restore its international image. The most critical foreign policy effort is to provide vaccines for the international community for the public good and provide vaccine access to developing countries. A successful vaccine is even more critical than medicine resources since it helps countries rebuild their economy and health system [21]. There are shreds of evidence that Beijing's efforts are working in the positive and result-oriented directions. For example, Serbia is the first European country to receive Chinese vaccines, one million doses from Sinopharm. Its president, Aleksandr Vučić, stood in chilly winds to welcome the first plane-load of China's vaccine supplies and publicly demonstrates the thanks to the Chinese government [47]. Surveys in Germany and Serbia also indicate that citizens show more positive attitudes toward China [23].

While many welcome the assistance, Beijing's medicine assistance also encounters criticisms and resistance. The more affordable Chinese vaccine indeed provides another option for developing countries. Still, China's narrative is winning the race over vaccines has gradually changed since many cast doubts over the Chinese vaccine's efficacy. Even in Southeast Asia countries like the Philippines, where Beijing's medical assistance and vaccine have been welcomed, the government is still criticized for its decision to buy a vaccine made by a Chinese company [69]. Although most countries choose to diversify vaccine producers' sources, rich nations have been signing purchase agreements with Western vaccine producers, while China is still poised to supply the developing countries [40].

Although the Chinese government resists framing its COVID-19 vaccine-related foreign policies as "vaccine diplomacy" [39], Verma [66] demonstrates that China had already taken advantage of the global health emergency by putting its vaccine diplomacy into practice as a soft power tool to expand its geopolitical influence. On the one hand, the COVID-19 vaccine offers China an opportunity to fill some vacuums left by the USA because of the Trump administration's bad performance on combating COVID-19 and its retreat from leading the world to fight against the virus [83, pp. 1]. On this account, China's vaccine diplomacy pursues to increase its geopolitical power since China is being perceived as a power that can assist internationally on its vaccines, which was once the US' role [15]. It finally delivered a geopolitical win that showcased China's scientific prowess and generosity by grasping the leadership to fight against the pandemic.



## Chinese Government-led Vaccine Nationalism

China has been severely criticized by countries, especially the USA, because they suppressed information and did not take the necessary measures to help control and eradicate the disease in the early stages [66]. Chinese government and CCP also received much criticism from the domestic public for the early stage of handling the pandemic [77, 71, 58]. Therefore, Beijing starts to “weaponize” its vaccine as a tool to ease anger and distract the public’s attention from structural problems on responding to COVID-19 at the early stage of the pandemic.

Nationalism is a handful tool for the Chinese government and CCP to stabilize its rule [82, 86]. The case of COVID-19 is not an exception [66] that nationalism and vaccines are well-connected through the Chinese government’s narratives. China’s vaccine policies could trigger a sense of nationalism to strengthen the CCP’s domestic governance and legitimacy. The Chinese government positively frames its vaccine to promote its vaccines among domestic audiences [66], leading the Chinese public to perceive a sense of national pride in China’s vaccine’s leading position. Chinese government also designs media as a propaganda tool to spread CCP’s interests and propagate nationalism [56, 80].

Zhang [81] notes that China’s media’s positively biased news could construct a biased social reality. Chinese media positively frames the Chinese vaccine as a stable product and highlights China’s vaccine’s dominant position in the global market. For instance, on January 30, China Central Television published an article highlighting that many countries recognize China’s vaccine’s safety and effectiveness. Even their leader “takes the lead” to take China’s vaccine [10]. However, Chinese media deliberately ignores the challenges of China’s vaccine in the global market. For instance, there is no trace of the report that shows only 50.38% of China’s vaccine’s effectiveness in late-stage trials in Brazil [18]. It constructs a partial social reality that China’s vaccines are highly qualified in the global vaccine industry and in high demand globally.

Furthermore, the mouthpiece of the Chinese government, *People’s Daily* on April 5, 2021, also points that China is assisting worldwide to counter the pandemic. *People’s Daily* shows that China’s vaccines are worldwide recognized and popular in the global market, and Southeast Asian countries initially cooperated with China to fight for the pandemic. For illustration, it was demonstrated that Indonesian, the Philippines, and Malaysia readily require China’s vaccines, even the President Joko Widodo of Indonesia vaccinated. Chinese media implies that China is the solution to the COVID-19. Gries [22, pp. 23] suggests that the “face,” or “collective self-esteem,” which is “an interplay of self and society in the process of constructing personhood,” is the essential ingredient of Chinese popular nationalism. Therefore, Chinese popular nationalism defends to promote “ingroup positivity,” or collective self-esteem [22]. Overall, the CCP exhibit this reality that China’s vaccine is a global solution that enables the public to self-congratulate China’s containment of the leading position of its vaccine that creates a sense of nationalism.

The Chinese government and CCP also signify vaccines as a national symbol to defend foreign critiques and construct collective national identity. China’s

government's narrative positively framed China's vaccines and started a misinformation campaign against the American vaccines to defend its vaccine. On the one hand, Chinese mainstream media start to discriminate against American vaccines by questioning the safety of the Pfizer and Moderna shots [69]. China's both news media and social media highlight the negative news of foreign vaccines. Moreover, the Chinese government's tabloid, Global Times, published an article, *why does the western mainstream media collectively silence the deaths of frequent vaccinators of Pfizer?* This article argues that the side effects of Western vaccines rank much higher than Chinese vaccines; however, Western media have no reports on this. In this context, Chinese media said that Western countries' criticism of Chinese vaccines has an ulterior motive. Their narrative reflects that Western countries' vaccines have significant drawbacks; still, they are more critical of China's vaccines instead of improving their vaccines. Hence, the Chinese media narrative engages that China emerges from a "century of humiliation" has already become a significant power in the world that will no longer be subject to the "bullying" of the West [30].

On the other hand, although the Chinese government vigorously propaganda, the Chinese government also leaves a substantial free space on spreading negative news of foreign vaccines [54]. For example, one popular Weibo post shows that "vaccination of Biden is only a meaningless political grandstanding. Biden was a better showman than Trump, and he just vaccinated saltwater like other Western vaccines." Zhao [82] notes that Chinese nationalism is rooted in its humiliating history. Chinese nationalism was triggered by suffering series of military confrontations with the West and Japan since the mid-1800s that show a vital feature of xenophobia [45, 29]. Overall, the CCP's narrative successfully connects the vaccines to the Western bully, which leads to all Chinese sharing the same identity and goal to defend the same enemy—Western democracies' bullying. By and large, the Chinese government successfully symbolized the vaccine as a national proudness product for global safety.

Chinese government's "free and mandatory" vaccine policy not only targets the developing countries but also the domestic citizens. The Chinese citizens are mandatory to be vaccinated but for free. The Chinese government's vaccine policy successfully constructed it as a responsible government support to eliminate the negative effect of its early responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese government announced that all Chinese will be free to take the vaccines and set a goal that 50 million people will be free to vaccinate ahead of the 2021 Spring Festival holidays [9]. This policy enables the Chinese public to neglect the suffering they faced one year ago and focus on the current better situation of COVID-19 in China. Kloet, Lin, and Chow [31] find a sign of biopolitical nationalism during the pandemic that citizens pride themselves on living in a country with the "best" and "most efficient" containment measures. In other words, the Chinese public did not care about how the government controls the pandemic; as long as it controls the pandemic well, they will be satisfied with their government and believe their political system is superior to other countries' political systems.

This is to be considered that the Chinese government faced several challenges from ordinary citizens at the early stage of the pandemic [78]. Doctor

Li Wenling's death also triggered intense confusion and anger. Li was first pronounced dead by the Global Times Twitter account, then its account deleted the previous post and claimed Li was alive and, finally, dead again [71]. Many Chinese started to question how the local Wuhan government handled the outbreak in the early stage of the pandemic, mourn Doctor Li and required the right of freedom of speech on the Internet. The situation was so grim that some scholars even described it as China's "Chernobyl moment" [58]. However, the popular Chinese public perception of China's government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic shifts from negative to positive since Western countries' higher infection and death rates are higher than in China [31]. The public still somehow remains nervous of the Chinese government and CCP [69]. Hence, some Chinese citizens remain skeptical about China's vaccine since vaccines lack public data. For instance, one Weibo users demonstrate that "I love China, but I will take the Western vaccines rather than Chinese vaccines since Western has more public data." However, the "free" vaccine policy enables to distract the public's attention from the reliability of vaccines to the efforts of CCP in benefiting citizens. Yin et al. [75] find that the affordances of the COVID-19 vaccine could play a complementary role in the public's negative perception of side effects. People's Daily argues that China is not the first country to develop vaccines since the Chinese government plans to expand the safest and reliable vaccines to many Chinese citizens. All Chinese are welcome to vaccinate for free. This article was reposted popular on Sina Weibo, and netizens celebrated on the digital platforms to share their happiness to be Chinese. The free charge of the COVID-19 vaccine causes the Chinese public to be proud of China's involvement with vaccine development [75]. Overall, the "free" vaccine policy triggers a sense of vaccine nationalism among the public to make them satisfied with the rule of CCP and successfully frame CCP and the Chinese government as a responsible authority.

The Chinese government and CCP successfully link its vaccines and nationalism. Combined with undermining confidence in non-China vaccines and promoting China's vaccines in the domestic market, it triggers a sense of vaccine nationalism [49]. The constructed "vaccine nationalism" [70] designed by the Chinese government and the CCP's narrative build a sense of collective identity to defend foreign criticism. In this regard, their narrative also features them as a Good Samaritan, an essential global power, and a responsible and reliable government [66] to legitimacy their rule and better situation of controlling COVID-19 [84].

It is evidence that CCP's constructed "vaccine nationalism" plays a significant role in stabilizing the internal political environment. China's Internet is full of nationalism, showing intensified support for the CCP and distrust of the Western system [78, 84, 51]. Chinese bottom-up nationalist expression reveals the feature of confidence [84]. Hence, the public's emotional tendency related to the COVID-19 epidemic was negative at the early stage of the pandemic, then changed from negative to neutral [85]. Finally, the trend was that negative emotions weakened, and positive emotions increased rapidly [85]. Overall, the public opinion of the Chinese government and CCP on handling COVID-19 was generally positive [24].

## Geopolitical Game-changer or Internal Political Stabilizer?

The COVID-19 pandemic as a global health crisis significantly impacts international and domestic politics [83, 61, 66]. China's COVID-19 vaccine policies have demonstrated its governance capacity and responsibility to be a great power. By China's vaccine diplomacy, China is an essential global power and the largest producer of medical equipment to aid other foreign countries [66]. The Chinese government could publicize its generosity through China's vaccine diplomacy, which also helps advance China's economic influence [61]. Zhao S. [83] further suggests that the CCP also proved the Chinese authoritarian system's superiority over Western democracy in effectively mobilizing vast resources during the crisis.

Despite China's vaccine, policies did not translate into an easy triumph abroad; China's ambitions for a global leader are based on the divide between democratic and authoritarian countries. China does not have sufficient resources to replace US global leadership in supplying the public good yet for two key reasons [83]. Firstly, China is not winning hearts and minds everywhere as China's claim to global leadership has been undermined by its failure to prevent the spread of the virus and questions over the Chinese vaccine's efficiency. People from various countries still cannot forget the expediency of China's response to the outbreak, and others critiqued some of the measures Beijing used to contain the virus within its borders [59]. Moreover, Chinese officials required the European public thanks for distributing masks, and protective equipment with shoddy quality also made people angry [59], which did not help create meaningful friendships with many international powers [61].

Secondly, although many developing countries depend on China's vaccines in short supply [27], China's vaccines are not the only source for these countries. China's vaccine is only an alternative for some developing countries to wait for the supply of American or European vaccines. China's vaccines efficiency is debatable; officials in Brazil and Turkey have complained about flight delays [47]. The YouGov conducted a survey in 17 countries and regions, showing that most of them distrusted the COVID-19 vaccine made in China [60]. Moreover, China's vaccine diplomacy was supposed to deliver a geopolitical win that showcased its scientific prowess and generosity but is plagued with doubts in reality [59]. The western media remain skeptical about China's strategic and political intention behind the generous offer of its vaccine [62]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government "has advanced its interests in a spate of incidents that constituted a strategic blunder in China's relations with neighbors" [83, pp. 7]. In the meantime, conflicts with Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia, and India has also been observed during pandemic which further eliminates its effort to increase geopolitical power. According to The Pew Research Center, China's image reached a historical low in 17 countries [59]. Although people in many countries believe China will strengthen its economy in the wake of the pandemic, a median of 78% says they have not too much or no confidence in China to do the right thing regarding world affairs [59].

On the contrary, China's vaccine diplomacy has played a more positive role in stabilizing the domestic political environment. The Chinese government and

the CCP successfully stabilize their rule by connecting vaccines and nationalism together. Tang, Chen, and Wu [64] note that although China is an authoritarian country, the Chinese government is more like a responding government of public opinion to the legitimacy of its rule. China's vaccine is a tool catering primarily to the domestic audience to construct a scientific and diplomatic powerhouse and maintain regime diplomacy [59, 66]. Blaming the impediments from Western interfering, the Chinese government and CCP use the foreign criticism of China's vaccine to construct solidarity and nationalist credentials [83]. The free charge of vaccines policy also triggers a sense of biopolitical nationalism [31] that enables the Chinese to be proud of living in the most efficient country to control COVID-19 in the world. It is evident that the Chinese government succeeded in making the Chinese forget their suffering happened a year ago and reinforced their dominant position through its vaccine policy. Han et al. [24] found that the Chinese perception of the Chinese government and CCP was generally positive since the outbreak.

As a whole, the COVID-19 vaccine indeed offers China an opportunity to "fill some vacuums by proposing Chinese vision for the world order and launching Beijing-led multilateral institutions to advance Beijing's priorities and values" [83, pp. 9]. However, China's vaccine policies could not bring global success to achieve its expected global goal of promoting China's geopolitical power and international image. Compared with global impacts, it is evidence that China's vaccine policies have played a more positive role in strengthening the CCP's rule and legitimacy.

The emergence of US and European vaccines in the developing world has severely undermined China version world order. This is due to the fact that the continuous supply on bilateral basis and positive study results in protection may weaken the China's vaccine diplomacy especially in the countries where China's vaccine arrived earlier than the USA such as Turkey, UAE, Indonesia, and Thailand. The Trump administration adopted a biased approach to develop vaccine without WHO-led framework and adopted for the US-led Operation Warp Speed (OWS) trigger nationalism without any substantial scientific justification against China's efforts to work together. The refusal from the former US President Trump and his administration to engage vaccine development and production through multilateral efforts weakened the WHO mechanisms. In response, the USA called WHO and China corrupt' and open criticism further anticipated for freezing the WHO funding [6]. This bring China's absence from the COVAX list provided more maneuvers for the US- and European-led vaccines to exploit the convenience of vaccine in mitigating challenges at the core by sidelining the devastating conditions and disparity in the Global South and developing countries.

It has been believed that, if China's vaccination were not at the disposal for the world at large, the whole globe would face with huge inequality posed from severe vaccine unfair distribution problems caused by the western developed countries. In this respect, President Xi highlighted that China would make its vaccine a global public good in his speech at World Health Assembly [50].

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 virus broke out in a Chinese city, Wuhan, where it spread to the rest of the country and the world. China's government initially received much criticism from both international and domestic regarding the data reported and its actions to remedy the situation [25]. Through its aggressive vaccine policies, the Chinese government restored its image and boost its geopolitical influence [69, 38, 27]. Many countries that have so far signed up for China's vaccine have acknowledged that they could not afford to wait months for those made by the Americans or Europeans [47]. The Chinese government also offers free COVID-19 vaccines, loans to many countries [52]. The success has positioned China well, economically and diplomatically, to push back against the USA and others worried about its seemingly inexorable rise [47]. Through its vaccine diplomacy, China's government increases its voice in international organizations, promoting its Chinese vision for the world order to advance Beijing's priorities and values. The Chinese government aims to quest more than these [66], or even take international order leadership [61].

Although the COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis can potentially leave a form a new international order [4], it is insufficient to demonstrate a sign of the emergence of a new China-led international order. We still live in the US-led constructed post-World War II international order, especially after Biden took office. There is increasingly more evidence, revealing that the COVID-19 will not significantly impact the geopolitical world order, like other global crises (SARS) witnessed in the past. Although the COVID-19 is still an ongoing pandemic that is hard to predict China's vaccine diplomacy's impact on the international order, the existing evidence shows limited implications of China's vaccine foreign policies and diplomatic strategies on promoting its geopolitical power and international image.

Hence, the study suggests that the best situation for the Chinese government is that the unipolar world will not suit the global world of the influence of COVID-19 and vaccines. It will not happen if a country reverses the decision limiting the export of vaccines needed by its population after receiving a threatening phone call from another powerful country [57]. Hence, it is insufficient to expect China's leading international role in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the Chinese government is already successful in mobilizing national sentiment through pandemics and its vaccines. The Chinese government and the CCP will continually solidarity nationalism, construct their heroic image, and stimulate hostility towards the West. This pronounces that the Chinese inhabitants will persistently have confidence in the supremacy of the Chinese political system and imagined perfect China.

## Declarations

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