

Evidence for and Implications of US vaccine Diplomacy during COVID-19

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Published June 3, 2023

Abstract

This article examines whether vaccines donated by the US to other countries constitute vaccine diplomacy within the context of US-China regional competition. There is some evidence that vaccine aid was used to increase American soft power in the Indo-Pacific and in Africa. Although many of the countries targeted were in need of the vaccines, doses donated to them were generally higher than COVID cases, vaccination rates and health crisis preparedness would predict. Therefore, vaccine distribution was somewhat inequitable because it reflected both public health and geopolitical concerns. However, the fact that donations being perceived as equitable was important to improving the US' global image suggests that public pressure and greater scrutiny of donation patterns could lead to greater equitability. Similarly, long term vaccine equity is perfectly compatible with strengthening ties with regional powers through aid intended to increase their capacity to produce vaccines themselves.

Keywords: Vaccine diplomacy, US-China regional competition, Vaccine equity

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has caused nearly 7 million deaths¹ and has led to unprecedented lockdowns and a global economic recession. The WHO has emphasised the importance of reaching herd immunity on a global scale to control the spread of the virus and has set a series of vaccination targets for all countries to achieve. However, progress has varied substantially between states. 90% of high-income countries were able to vaccinate 40% of their population by

December 2021². Given that 72.3% of people in low-income countries have not received a single dose as of February 28th, 2023³, it is safe to conclude that vulnerable populations are at risk of being left behind. High-income countries and emerging economies that successfully developed their own vaccines have made attempts to increase global vaccination rates through donations. However, patterns of donations must also be analysed through a geopolitical and political communications lens.

¹ [“WHO COVID-19 Dashboard”](#), WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, World Health Organization, 2020

² Israel Idris, Gabriel O. Ayeni, and Yusuff A. Adebisi, [“Why many African countries may not achieve the 2022 COVID-19 vaccination coverage target.”](#) *Tropical Medicine and Health* 50, no. 1, (February 2022): 1

³ Edouard Mathieu, Hannah Ritchie, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, Cameron Appel, Charlie Giattino, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, [“Coronavirus Pandemic \(COVID-19\).”](#) Our World in Data, 2020

Some scholars have argued that aid should be seen as “acts of public diplomacy...conducive to the source government’s power accumulation motive.” (Alexander 2020, p.407)⁴. It therefore stands to reason that vaccine aid may not have been distributed solely according to public health concerns, but also according to the power accumulation motives of donor countries.

This case-study will focus on the US as it is currently the largest donor of vaccines globally. The US has many geopolitical priorities, but this paper will primarily examine vaccine donation in the context of the US-China great power competition. This focus not only makes research more manageable, but it is also appropriate given statements made by high-ranking American officials. After announcing that the US had distributed 110 million doses of vaccines, President Biden stated⁵ (Herman 2021) that this was more than any other country, including China and Russia. Singling out these two countries suggests there may be a degree of competition between the US and other global powers in the realm of vaccine donations. Given that China’s economic power is closer to that of the US, vaccine aid competition is likely to be more significant between the US and China, as providing aid requires economic resources.

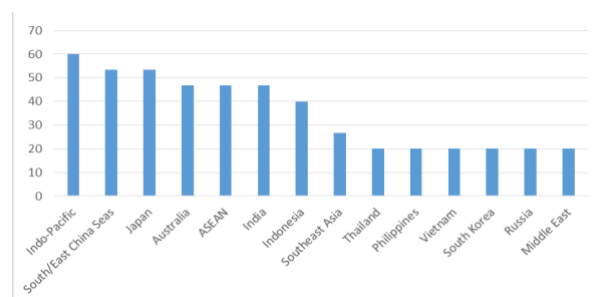
It stands to reason that if US donations of COVID vaccines were influenced by soft power competition with China, the regions most geopolitically contested between them should

have received the highest concentration of vaccine donations. The first part of this paper analyses which regions are considered the most geopolitically contested in regard to both the existing literature and public opinion, as both spheres would likely be taken into account by a state seeking to project its soft power. This paper then proceeds to analyse whether vaccine donations are concentrated in the contested regions identified and, if this is the case, whether the resulting distribution is in fact, inequitable. Finally, the paper will consider alternative vaccine donation policies and their potential implications for US soft power projection and equity.

2. Geopolitically contested regions

A superficial analysis of academic and news articles reveals that both sources analyse US-China regional competition in the context of the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region. 60% of research/academic articles sampled for this paper mentioned the region. Meanwhile, the Indo-Pacific was mentioned by 53.3% of news articles sampled.

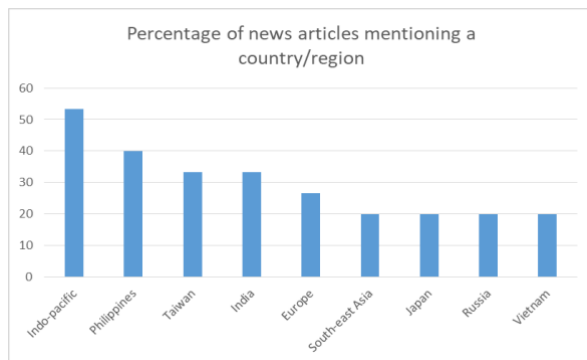
Figure 1: Percentage of research articles mentioning a country or region



⁴ Colin Alexander, *The Soft Power of Development: Aid and Assistance as Public Diplomacy Activities*. (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 407

⁵ Steve Herman, “US Has Shipped 110 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to 65 Countries,” *VOA News*, August 3, 2021

Figure 2: Percentage of news articles mentioning a country/region



However, there is also some discrepancy between academic and news articles. The South and East China Seas are frequently mentioned in academic articles on the topic of US-China regional competition but rarely mentioned in news articles. Furthermore, the countries most mentioned in academic articles were Japan, Australia, India and Indonesia. On the other hand, the most mentioned countries in news articles were the Philippines, Taiwan, India and Japan. It is also worth noting that although only the academic articles frequently mentioned ASEAN as a bloc, both tallies contain mentions of prominent ASEAN member states. Some mention was also made of regions and countries outside the Indo-Pacific, such as to Russia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Of course, a more in-depth analysis is needed to establish how these regions are contested. In the Asia-Pacific region, scholars have concluded that a significant part of the US-China great power competition involves attempting to win

the allegiance of regional middle powers, as these can increase the legitimacy of the great power in the region and act as swing states⁶. Middle powers are characterised by three factors⁷. Middle powers have control over resources, are militarily capable of inflicting significant costs on an invader, and are willing to become involved in regional affairs. According to this criteria, Fels identified several Asian-Pacific middle powers, including Australia, Japan, Indonesia and Thailand.

It is worth noting that India is not a part of the Asia-Pacific region, but is part of the Indo-Pacific region. Geographically, the former includes Asian states with access to the Pacific Ocean, whereas the latter includes Asian states with access to the Pacific or Indian ocean. However, the implications of analysing one region over another extend beyond geography⁸. China seems to reject the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a strategically important region, and has never used the term in official documents. Instead, it has chosen to refer only to the less geographically expansive Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, the US and its allies refer primarily to the Indo-Pacific, and seem to be gradually abandoning the concept of the Asia-Pacific region in favour of it.

This paper will analyse US-China competition primarily in the context of the Indo-Pacific. This is because virtually all middle powers (Australia, Japan, Indonesia) also accept the

⁶ Enrico Fels, *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific?* (Springer, 2018), 214

⁷ Fels, *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific?* 213

⁸ Kai He and Mingjiang Li, “[Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific](#),” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 2020): 1-2

concept, which has even been adopted by ASEAN⁹. If we analyse the Indo-Pacific, we must also include India as a middle power. Overall, scholars and reporters alike agree that the US has the support of most middle powers in the region, particularly in the security dimension (although China's economic and military influence is clearly rising)¹⁰. This can be seen in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the US, Australia, Japan and India. Both the US and China have stated or implied that this group aims to contain China's rise¹¹.

However, this does not mean that US power in the region is uncontested. Some research suggests that China has actually overtaken the US in terms of bilateral relational influence as measured by the FBIC index in the region¹². Although some countries remain strongly US-influenced, important players such as Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam remain contested by both great powers¹³. These countries have several options for handling US-China competition, such as openly aligning with one of them, avoiding taking a decision, or establishing diplomatic relationships with one or both great powers which are cooperative in some areas (e.g. trade) and combative in others (e.g. security)¹⁴.

While some countries are clearly aligned with one state, ASEAN middle powers such as Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines have adopted hedging strategies and "have been playing both sides"¹⁵. Perhaps as a result of not wanting to clearly side with one great power over another, these regional and middle powers have been attempting to strengthen the position of ASEAN and prevent excessive Chinese or American influence in regional affairs^{16 17}.

States such as Taiwan, which are mentioned frequently in news articles but not as frequently in academic articles, may nonetheless have significant implications for soft power. News articles on Taiwan frequently highlight the risk of open conflict emerging as a result. According to Sky News Future Wars series¹⁸, a visit by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi led to military posturing by both countries. China has also been sending more aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, while US President Joe Biden has suggested the US may be willing to defend Taiwan militarily. In another article¹⁹ (Day 2023), US officials were quoted as saying that there was intelligence suggesting China was preparing itself to invade Taiwan and that the officials quoted believed the US and China may be at war

⁹ He and Li, "[Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific](#)", 4

¹⁰ Fels, [Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific?](#), 72

¹¹ He and Li, "[Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific](#)", 3

¹² Jonathan Moyer, Collin J. Meisel, Austin S. Matthews, David K. Bohl, and Mathew J. Burrows, "[China-US competition: Measuring Global Influence](#)", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (December 2021): 1

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ Fels, [Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific?](#), 354-355

¹⁵ Ahmad Safril, "[Indonesia's double hedging strategy toward the United States-China competition: Shaping regional order in the Indo-Pacific?](#)", *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 55, no. 4 (December 2019): 5

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ He and Li, "[Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific](#)", 5

¹⁸ James Lillywhite, "[Clash of the superpowers - could China and the US go to war?](#)" *Sky News*, August 25, 2022.

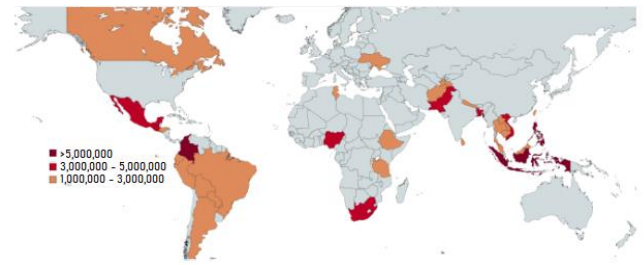
¹⁹ Michael Day, "[US-China rivalry will shape the world, and it's growing increasingly dangerous.](#)" *MSN*, February 4, 2023.

by 2025. It's clear that tensions over Taiwan indicate higher degrees of competition in the region and the possibility of conflict. As a result, the US stance on Taiwan arguably signals to other states in the region whether or not the US will take a hardline stance on China, and hence could possibly exert pressure on them indirectly to balance against China, or to temporarily hedge against it.

3. Vaccine distribution

To project soft power, it would stand to reason that the US would focus vaccine donations on the Indo-Pacific, as this is the most intensely contested region between itself and China, its most powerful geopolitical rival. Furthermore, we would expect that vaccines would be donated to middle powers, as these can turn into swing states. Particular attention would likely also be paid to states where American and Chinese influence is approximately equal. We would also expect donations to highly politicised and symbolically important regions, such as Taiwan, as they may reflect not only intensifying competition but signal the current US stance on China to regional players.

Figure 3: Countries receiving more than 1 million vaccines from the US, as of August 2021²⁰



3.1 The Indo-Pacific

The prediction that vaccine distribution would prioritise Indo-Pacific countries and ASEAN members, with particular emphasis on countries such as India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, Australia and Taiwan, is somewhat supported. The region has a high concentration of vaccines, with 31% of all US vaccines being delivered there. Furthermore, Indonesia received the greatest share and was the only country to receive more than 8 million doses. This could arguably reflect its status as a middle power receiving similar levels of Chinese and American bilateral influence, as well as its status as a bloc leader in ASEAN.

The Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan also received a significant number of vaccines (6.2 million, 5 million and 2.5 million, respectively). In the case of the first two, this could reflect the fact that both are closely contested between the US and China. Numerous news articles are worrying about the future alignment choices of the Philippines, particularly as Filipino attitudes to US-China

²⁰ Herman, "[US Has Shipped 110 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to 65 Countries.](#)"

rivalry shift depending on who is in power²¹. Despite historic US dominance, research suggests that American influence may steadily drop, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 when the Philippines received free vaccines from China (Moyer et al. 2021, p.24). Given this context, it is unsurprising that the US would want to strengthen its soft power in this state. Therefore, the fact that the Philippines received the second-highest quantity of doses is fully in line with geopolitical considerations, particularly as China appeared to have had some initial success in strengthening ties through its own vaccine diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Vietnam is also very closely contested between the US and China, although it has been theorised that the US may have the advantage given its traditional allies' bilateral influence on Vietnam²². Unlike the Philippines and Vietnam, there is no significant soft power competition between the US and China in Taiwan. It is clear that Taiwan's alignment is with the US. However, as a territory that China has refused to recognise and which some believe it may try to claim in the future, Taiwan has significant geopolitical importance in Sino-American soft power competition. A commitment towards Taiwan will generate

news articles for the US, and will implicitly reiterate its commitment to containing China.

On the other hand, other regional middle powers did not receive a significant number of doses. This could be due to two factors. Firstly, Australia, India and Japan are already fairly strongly aligned with the US as members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and can be considered coalition partners in its attempts to contain China²³. As a result, the need to win them over is not as great. Secondly, all three of these countries were highly successful in securing their own vaccine supply, with India even becoming an important regional donor itself, possibly as a result of its own regional containment strategy²⁴. This would suggest that the Quad members needed vaccine donations much less. As a result of both factors, donating a significant amount of doses to Quad members would likely have given the US lower returns in terms of soft power than donating to contested middle powers such as Indonesia. It is somewhat surprising that so few doses were delivered to Thailand, given its status as a middle power which, despite being more closely aligned with the US, is still contested²⁵ and which has so far tried to pursue a hedging strategy²⁶.

²¹ Justin Baquissal and Mercy A. Kuo, "[Flexible Enmeshment: The Philippines' New Approach to China-US Competition.](#)" *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2023.

²² Moyer, Meisel, Matthews, Bohl and Burrows, "[China-US competition: Measuring Global Influence.](#)" 20-21

²³ Sung C. Jung, Jaehyon Lee, and Ji-Yong Lee, "[The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region.](#)" *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (January 2021): 53.

²⁴ Rajesh Roy and Saeed Shah, "[India Starts Donating Covid-19 Vaccines to Neighboring Countries.](#)" *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2021

²⁵ Moyer, Meisel, Matthews, Bohl and Burrows, "[China-US competition: Measuring Global Influence.](#)" 24

²⁶ Han Enze, "[Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices.](#)" *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (February 2018): 100

3.2 Africa, Europe and South America

Donation patterns outside of the Indo-Pacific also follow the logic of Sino-American soft power competition to some extent. In Africa, the three countries which received a significant amount of doses were characterised by being subject to both American and Chinese influence and by being able to wield a significant degree of regional influence. South Africa is arguably a middle power itself and has been identified as a “regional great power” since the 90s²⁷. Meanwhile, Nigeria and Ethiopia are considered regional leaders. Furthermore, the US has a net influence capacity of less than 0.2 in South Africa and Nigeria. China has a net influence capacity between 0.2 and 0.4 in Ethiopia²⁸. It would therefore be reasonable to interpret US vaccine donations in Africa as an attempt to strengthen gradually weakening ties between itself and regional powers, as well as courting an influential state currently loosely aligned with China.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that US-China competition does not adequately explain all donation patterns. The only country in Europe to receive a significant number of US vaccines is Ukraine, which is likely better explained by considering a different geostrategic rivalry. Sino-American competition also does not explain donation patterns in South America. Although China has rapidly increased investment in the region²⁹, it remains firmly under

the influence of the United States³⁰. Despite this, South America received the second-highest concentration of doses. Whether this is due to geopolitical factors aside from US-China competition or whether it is due to public health priorities is beyond the scope of this paper.

4. Equitability of vaccine distribution

An equitable distribution of vaccines would prioritise delivery to countries that needed them most. This paper assesses this based on three factors. Firstly, it is important to consider the severity of the epidemic in each country at the time the US delivered its first round of 110 million vaccines. This paper approaches the issue by looking at new daily cases at the beginning of August 2021. If the distribution of doses was equitable, we would expect that, *ceteris paribus*, countries with a high number of cases would receive more doses. However, this analysis is complicated because different countries have different population sizes, making direct comparison between new cases problematic.

At the same time, comparing only proportions ignores the fact that the number of cases itself is an important factor in determining the amount of vaccines delivered. A city-state with a population of only a couple million would not receive the most vaccines even if it had the highest proportion of cases and distribution was completely equitable. In order to take into account both considerations, this paper compares proportion of cases to

²⁷ Iver B. Neumann, *Regional great powers in international politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 151

²⁸ Moyer, Meisel, Matthews, Bohl and Burrows, “China-US competition: Measuring Global Influence,” 12.

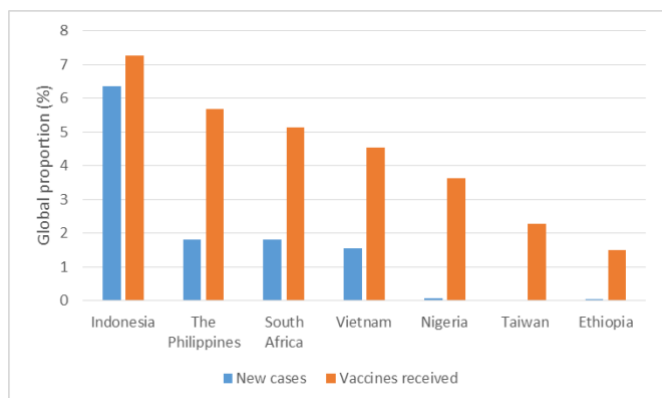
²⁹ Diana Roy and Shannon K. O'Neil, “China's Growing Influence in Latin America,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 12, 2022.

³⁰ Moyer, Meisel, Matthews, Bohl and Burrows, “China-US competition: Measuring Global Influence,” 12.

proportion of vaccines received. If distribution is perfectly fair (and COVID cases are the only relevant indicator) then we expect that the proportion of US-donated vaccines that a country received would be approximately equal to the proportion of new cases it accounted for.

Furthermore, this paper is primarily concerned with whether geopolitical considerations have led to inequitable vaccine distribution. As a result, this section will focus on the countries which have previously been identified as having possibly received donations based on soft power consolidation in the context of US-China great power competition. This includes four countries in the Indo-Pacific (Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan), as well as three countries in Africa (South Africa, Nigeria and Ethiopia).

Figure 4: Proportion of new cases vs proportion of vaccines received³¹



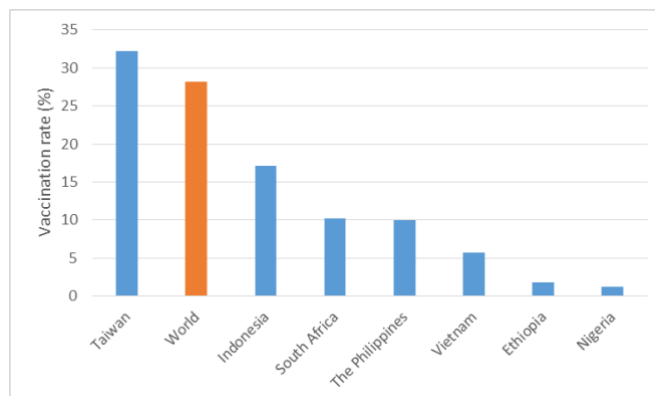
In all analysed countries, the proportion of US-donated vaccines received was higher than the proportion of global

³¹ Mathieu, Ritchie, Rodés-Guirao, Appel, Giattino, Hasell, Macdonald, “[Coronavirus Pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#).”

cases those countries accounted for. However, the discrepancy is smallest in the case of Indonesia. In fact, it could even be argued that the discrepancy is small enough that the high number of doses given to this state can be considered equitable on the basis of new COVID cases at the time. On the other hand, the discrepancy was largest in the cases of Nigeria and Taiwan.

However, new COVID cases cannot be considered the only relevant metric. Vaccination rates are also worth analysing. This is because a country with a very high vaccination rate would not need more vaccines and may have even already achieved herd immunity. Meanwhile, countries with very low rates may not even have managed to vaccinate vulnerable populations or healthcare workers and would be in particularly dire need of doses. This measure has not been adjusted because proportions are important for considerations other than population size (they also affect transmission rates).

Figure 5: Vaccination rates compared to global average³²

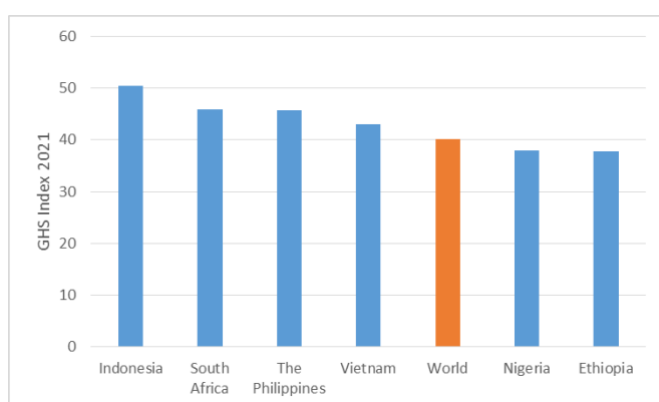


³² Mathieu, Ritchie, Rodés-Guirao, Appel, Giattino, Hasell, Macdonald, “[Coronavirus Pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#).”

There is a fairly strong argument to be made that high levels of donations to most countries being analysed were justified on the basis of low vaccination rates. Of the seven countries studied, only Taiwan had a vaccination rate above the global average. Meanwhile, both Ethiopia and Nigeria had vaccinated less than 2% of their populations. Even accounting for a disproportionately young population, vaccination rates are so low that it is inconceivable that Ethiopia and Nigeria would have enough doses even to inoculate vulnerable groups.

Countries that have more robust healthcare systems and are better prepared to manage health crises such as pandemics may need less aid, all other things being equal, than countries that were not prepared to manage health crises. This paper uses 2021 scores in the GHS Index to measure preparedness. Unfortunately, no data was available on Taiwan.

Figure 6: GHS Index compared compared to global average³³



Four of the six countries under consideration had GHS Index scores that were higher than the global average. This suggests that granting high quantities of vaccines to most of the countries under consideration cannot be justified based on pandemic preparedness or robustness of healthcare systems, given that they were better prepared than at least half the countries in the world. However, this is not true of Nigeria and Ethiopia, which both scored slightly lower than the world average.

Drawing conclusions on the equitability of vaccine distribution on the basis of this case study is problematic for many reasons. Firstly, although three highly significant variables have been identified, no weighting was performed. Furthermore, data was somewhat incomplete, given that not every country had associated observations for each indicator. Some tentative conclusions can nonetheless be drawn. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that the quantity of doses given to Taiwan was equitable. Despite recording only 14 new cases, it received more than 2% of vaccines donated by the US globally (2.5 million vaccines overall). Furthermore, this cannot be justified by pointing to low vaccination rates, given that Taiwan was performing better than the global average on this indicator. It is, therefore, very probable that geopolitical considerations led to more vaccines being donated to it than would have been justified based on public health.

³³ Jessica A. Bell and Jennifer B. Nuzzo, "[ADVANCING COLLECTIVE ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY AMID GLOBAL CRISIS](#)," GHS Index, published 2021.

The Philippines, Vietnam and South Africa may have also received more vaccines than was equitable. All three countries received a much higher proportion of US vaccines donated globally than they should have based on the proportions of new cases each country accounted for. Furthermore, all three countries were more prepared for a health crisis than the global average. However, all three countries also had lower-than-average vaccination rates. There were likely other countries that needed doses of vaccines more urgently and yet received less than the Philippines, Vietnam and South Africa. However, the distribution was not completely inequitable as all three countries were somewhat in need.

On the other hand, the quantity of vaccines donated to Indonesia was not necessarily inequitable. It also received a higher proportion of vaccines than would be predicted from new cases, but the discrepancy was fairly small. It was more prepared for a health crisis than the global average, but it also had lower vaccination rates than average (although its vaccination rate was still much higher than that of many countries, including others analysed in this paper). As a result, there is not enough evidence to conclude anything definitive about the equitability of vaccine donations to Indonesia.

At first glance, it would appear that the relatively high numbers of doses given to Nigeria and Ethiopia may be justified. Although there is a significant discrepancy between the proportions of vaccines received and the proportion of new cases accounted for by these countries,

both Ethiopia and Nigeria had low scores on the GHS Index and worryingly low vaccination rates. Since this paper does not evaluate whether vaccination rates or new cases should be given more weight, it is impossible to definitively conclude whether vaccine donations were distributed equitably in these cases.

Overall, it is very likely that geopolitical considerations have led to the inequitable distribution of US COVID-19 vaccine donations. However, the cases in which the aim of accumulating soft power has very clearly taken precedence over public health concerns are relatively small. This conclusion makes some intuitive sense. As previously mentioned, donating vaccines to countries that do not need them is not reasonable. The gains in soft power/bilateral influence should be greater than demand for the aid provided, which provides incentives to donate to contested countries that have some need for vaccines.

5. Increasing the equitability of vaccine distribution

In theory, the US could make vaccine donations more equitable by adhering to a set of criteria for distribution which was created taking into account only public health-related concerns and not geopolitical interests. However, it's worth bearing in mind that public health concerns are likely not the US' only priority. Pragmatically, it is unreasonable to expect that the US would deliberately implement a policy that would reduce its own soft power. On the other hand, some policies and circumstances could lead to both increased equity and increased soft power projection.

An example of this is the US' current policy of donating the majority of its vaccine doses through COVAX. This vaccine-sharing hub and procurement mechanism has advertised itself as being committed to vaccine equity. In theory, it delivers doses according to a carefully verified algorithm that considers only public health relevant criteria. Vaccine donations were also supposed to be timely and predictable, making public health planning simpler and more reliable for recipients. It could be argued that donating through COVAX should increase equity and the donor's public image. As statements made by the White House indicate³⁴ the US positioned itself not only as the leading donor of vaccines but also advertised the fact that its donations were more equitable than those of geopolitical rivals like China and Russia.

While donations through COVAX are likely more equitable than the bilateral donations of China and Russia, donors nonetheless ignored many of its guidelines in the pursuit of their geopolitical interests. Although countries promised a large quantity of doses, there were significant delays in actually delivering them. By the end of 2021, the US had only delivered 43% of the doses it had pledged³⁵. Since promising such large quantities enabled it to position itself as a global leader³⁶, it could be argued that this allowed

it to improve its global image without following through on its commitments.

Deliveries were also not delivered on a predictable basis and were instead ad hoc. This compromised the ability of recipient states to plan vaccination campaigns and successfully distribute doses. This was particularly the case as around 66% of vaccine doses had less than three months of shelf-life remaining by the time they reached their destination, leading to many expiring and being wasted³⁷. Ad hoc delivery also compromised COVAX's ability to help countries scale up cold chains in a timely manner. Even more damningly, there is some evidence that as many as three-quarters of vaccine donations to COVAX were earmarked for delivery to particular countries or regions³⁸. This could have undermined the program's ability to distribute vaccines solely on a public health basis.

Donating vaccines through COVAX helped the US and other countries advertise their policies as motivated by equity rather than geopolitical interests but did not achieve an equitable or optimal distribution in practice. However, the US' actions and statements, such as President Biden saying that there was "no favoritism and no strings attached"³⁹ to US vaccine donations, seem to indicate that its vaccine aid being seen as equitable was also a key

³⁴ Herman, "[US Has Shipped 110 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to 65 Countries.](#)"

³⁵ Antoine de Bengy Puyvallée, and Katerini T. Storeng, "[COVAX, vaccine donations and the politics of global vaccine inequity.](#)" *Global Health* 18, no. 26 (March 2022): 6

³⁶ Herman, "[US Has Shipped 110 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to 65 Countries.](#)"

³⁷ de Bengy Puyvallée and Storeng, "[COVAX, vaccine donations and the politics of global vaccine inequity.](#)" 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹ Herman, "[US Has Shipped 110 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to 65 Countries.](#)"

geopolitical goal. In the short run, making it more challenging for the US and other countries to achieve this geopolitical goal without also achieving an equitable distribution could lead to fairer outcomes.

Improvements could be made to COVAX's governance structure and communications policy. The complexity of the organisation, with three work streams each led by a different organisation with its own board and budget, arguably blurred lines of accountability. Given that decision-making boards were often dominated by representatives from donor countries and pharmaceutical companies⁴⁰ the lack of accountability arguably enabled them to shape policy in their own interests. There were also no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that pledges were followed, or that the principles of speed, predictability and no earmarking were actually respected.

Furthermore, even after donors failed to comply with their promises, external communications continued to thank donors for their efforts and to praise the contributions they had made⁴¹. This helps countries achieve the goal of raising their global public image while not fulfilling their pledges. More negative statements about countries delaying deliveries or delivering on an ad hoc basis could potentially incentivize them to rectify their shortcomings in the interest of protecting their global reputation. More media attention on unfulfilled promises could have a similar effect.

There is also a case to be made that increasing vaccine equity could be aligned with increasing soft power in geopolitically contested regions in the long run. One of the greatest hurdles to vaccine equity is the production and technological barriers to producing vaccines in low-income countries. In mid-2021, there wasn't a single complete COVID vaccine supply chain in Africa, and technology and expertise for producing the vaccines are still concentrated in high-income countries⁴².

Middle powers and regional powers have a degree of influence over international politics and are also more likely than other nearby countries to be able to develop the capacity to produce their own vaccines. Facilitating technology exchanges with middle and regional powers in contested regions, such as South Africa, Nigeria and Indonesia, could enable the US to strengthen its bilateral relationships with potential swing states while also increasing production capacity in underdeveloped regions.

The US' interest in projecting soft power into geopolitically contested regions is unlikely to change. Although there is evidence that this has led to vaccine inequity, this is not inevitable. The goals of equity and soft power projection can be reconciled in both the short run and long run.

Perceptions of the equitability of vaccine donations likely affect the degree to which such donations improve a

⁴⁰ de Bengy Puyvallée and Storeng, "[COVAX, vaccine donations and the politics of global vaccine inequity](#)," 10

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁴² Archana Asundi, Colin O'Leary, and Nahid Bhadelia, "[Global COVID-19 vaccine inequity: The scope, the impact, and the challenges](#)." *Cell Host and Microbe* 29, no. 7 (July): 1038

country's global image and hence the degree to which they increase a country's soft power. Criticism of failure to meet pledges by COVAX or the media could reduce the incentive to make commitments in the interest of enhancing global reputation only to fail to meet commitments. At the same time, changes in the governance structure of entities such as COVAX and the implementation of enforcement mechanisms could make it harder for countries to intentionally fail to meet these commitments.

In the long run, helping middle and regional powers increase vaccine production capacity could help the US meet multiple policy objectives. Firstly, it could increase the global vaccine supply and increase low and middle-income countries' ability to access vaccines. Secondly, it could help the US increase its diplomatic influence over powerful swing states while also increasing those states' potential influence in their regions.

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