



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Soft Power and Vaccine Diplomacy: An Analysis of China's Global Image Enhancement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Bilal Zubair ¹, Sibra Waseem ² & Khushbakht Shahid ³

¹ Assistant Professor, National Defence University, Islamabad

² Undergraduate Student, National Defense University, Islamabad.

³ Undergraduate Student, National Defence University, Islamabad.

Article Info	Abstract
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¹ Dr. Bilal Zubair is an Assistant Professor of Strategic Studies at the National Defence University, Islamabad. He is the author of the book *Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the United States*. He can be reached at bilalzubair@ndu.edu.pk

² Sibra Waseem is pursuing undergraduate studies in Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, Islamabad. Her areas of interests include geopolitics and military strategies. She can be reached at sibrataurus@gmail.com

³ Khushbakht Shahid is pursuing undergraduate studies in Strategic Studies at the National Defence University, Islamabad. Her areas of interests include great power politics and nuclear studies. She can be reached at khushbakhtshahid2002@gmail.com

Introduction

During the height of the Cold War, the world witnessed an unexpected collaboration when the US and Soviet Union jointly researched and manufactured a new oral polio vaccine. The tests were performed on a mass scale on children. The vaccine's safety and efficacy were shown in trials done on 20,000 children in the Soviet Union in 1958, more than 110000 children in Czechoslovakia between 1958 and 1959, and on 10 million children worldwide.¹ The World Health Organization's (WHO) independent review of the trials by American expert Dorothy Horstmann validated their results. This joint venture was instrumental in facilitating the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.² Contrary to the Cold War collaboration against pandemic, the outbreak of Covid 19 prompted a war of narratives between the US and China. The US initially blamed China for the outbreak of virus and later for the inadequate measure to stop the spread. Where, as China reprimanded the US for “Anything But China” (ABC) mindset on the Covid 19 outbreak.

The COVID-19 outbreak in China has been characterized as a cluster of unexplained pneumonia cases, many of which were linked to Wuhan's Huanan Seafood Market. It was originally reported to the local authorities on December 27, 2019, and subsequently published on December 31.³ On January 8, 2020, Chinese experts identified the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus as the source of the pneumonia. By January 29, the virus infiltrated across the Chinese mainland. The Chinese government first opposed the WHO assessment on a global health emergency, but officially declared the outbreak of Covid 19 on January 30.⁴ While the pandemic invoked global panic, it also ensued a global race to develop Covid 19 vaccines. Alongside the developed world, China

¹ Yana Demeshko et al., "The U.S. and Russia could join forces to get people vaccinated. They did before," *The Washington Post*, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/09/01/us-russia-could-join-forces-get-people-vaccinated-they-did-before/>.

² Ibid.

³ "The Outbreak of COVID-19: An Overview," *PubMed Central (PMC)*, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7153464/>.

⁴ Ibid.

saw it as an opportunity to not only develop vaccine but use its huge industrial potential to manufacture medical and health care equipment. Amidst the global crisis China's was on quest to boost its soft power through health diplomacy to enhance its global projection and a global health provider. Though this Chinese objective had its limitations, nevertheless it manifests how states can convert an adversity into an opportunity.

This study aims to build on the existing literature by providing a comprehensive inquiry into China's branding of its vaccines. It analyzes the success of China's vaccine and health diplomacy throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. It discusses how China has historically exercised health diplomacy to reinforce its global power status. China used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to practice its vaccine diplomacy and soft power to leverage its political and economic objectives. The research analyzes the effectiveness of China's crisis communication during the pandemic, including its use of propaganda, infodemics, and digital diplomacy to overcome global apprehensions vis-à-vis the coronavirus. It also seeks to identify the loopholes in this approach that undermined these efforts and how China simultaneously countered the rising criticism. The research indicates that China's COVID-19 vaccine and health diplomacy enhanced its global influence, but its effectiveness was shaped by communication strategies and challenges tied to global apprehensions and criticism. Utilizing primary and secondary sources is essential for enhancing this analysis by offering interpretations, commentary, and contextual information. These sources contribute to the depth and scope of the research, enriching our comprehension of China's vaccine diplomacy's efficacy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Soft Power and its Integration in China's Vaccine Diplomacy

In his work on international relations theory during the late 20th century, Joseph Nye developed the concept of Soft Power.⁵ Soft Power refers to a state's ability to have widespread influence by using a non-coercive apparatus that relies more on attraction than oppression. These methods can include actions like diplomatic

⁵ G. J. Ikenberry, "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, accessed January 30, 2023.

efforts at network-building, the use of compelling narratives for communication purposes, and prioritizing adherence by states worldwide. The three most important building blocks Joseph Nye identified for soft power were found in political beliefs, culture, and foreign policy practices.⁶ As per Nye, a nation's soft power is assembled upon three cornerstones: its cultural assets (where others find them attractive), its political ideals (as long as they are implemented both internally and externally), and its foreign policy decisions (when recognized as legitimate with moral bearings by other nations).⁷ Soft power is developed through diplomatic activities such as educational, scientific, public, and digital diplomacy.

The Chinese culture has been a major focus among officials and scholars since the 1990s and 2000s. During a Chinese National Congress held in 2007, soft power was officially recognized as an important tool for practical use throughout various aspects of government policymaking that would eventually affect all facets of society. Former President Hu Jintao also declared that promoting Chinese culture was essential to ensuring continued growth within his nation. This Congress marked the beginning of China's formal pursuit of cultural soft power.⁸ At the 2012 Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Hu Jintao declared that an essential tenet towards strengthening his nation within global dynamics was cultivating its soft power platform via enhanced cultural outreach programs. Echoing a deep-rooted respect for the traditional ethos that informs distinctive aspects of Chinese cultural practices - he aimed at leveraging existing international exchanges to bolster China's influence. Akin to the Chinese leadership's overarching ideology of peaceful coexistence, Xi Jinping's assertion emphasized the importance of cultural engagement in shaping a global narrative while contextualizing domestic aspirations. However, unlike the western percept of soft power, Chinese soft power has represented Chinese Characteristics. While culture is the cornerstone of Chinese soft power, China has augmented its global

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "China's Soft Power Campaign," Wilson Center, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/chinas-soft-power-campaign>.

influence through the developmental aid, humanitarian assistance, and scientific collaboration. Chinese health diplomacy during the Covid 19 is a strategic display of Chinese soft power engagement in a global health crisis.

Health Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Tool

Health diplomacy is a way of enhancing a state's soft power, as it enhances a state's influence on other states, through cooperation related to health issues. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, states have been particularly active in exerting soft power through various means, which has provided a way of enhancing states' position in the international system. Under President Xi Jinping, China has been moving steps ahead, seeking a more proactive role in the international system. China's health diplomacy has emerged as an important pillar of its foreign policy. The Chinese President expressed his aim of developing a Health Silk Road in January 2017, and the Covid-19 pandemic further paved the way for this health diplomacy.⁹ The Health Silk Road, an extension of the BRI project, helped reinforce China's geopolitical influence, particularly as a soft power. China has, therefore, provided medical aid and supplies to various states, especially to the developing states, throughout the crisis by building hospitals and clinics and providing medical personnel with appropriate training.¹⁰ This included donating millions of masks, fully furnished rooms, and a waste disposal facility that accounted for approximately 1 million Euros.¹¹ This shows China has been building its image as a humanitarian aid provider. Moreover, the projection of soft power was a consequence of the criticism by the West, labeling the virus as a Chinese virus.¹² This health diplomacy has been guided by China's political and strategic calculations and considerations.

⁹ Ibid, 323.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 325.

¹² Brad Bushman, "Calling the Coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus' Matters – Research Connects the Label with Racist Bias," *The Conversation*, accessed January 7, 2023,

<https://theconversation.com/calling-the-coronavirus-the-chinese-virus-matters-research-connects-the-label-with-racist-bias-176437>.

Health has been given much attention over the past five years since it was included on the BRI agenda. The March 2015 release of Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt plus the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road framework paper revealed collaboration plans aimed at preventing or managing diseases effectively. Amongst these strategies were plans for multiple bilateral agreements between China and other organizations, such as WHO along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, regarding healthcare partnerships amounting to a total sum of fifty-six deals so far. In addition, China aims to extend traditional Chinese medicine utilization globally via the BRI Development Plan for Promoting TCM (2016-2020).¹³

China initiated its research on the vaccine in January 2020. The Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology took the lead role and initiated emergency projects that facilitated them in research and enterprise, enabling it with the capability to manufacture the equipment required.¹⁴ The indigenous development of Sinopharm, SinoVac, Convidecia and CoronaVac branded China as the leading provider of Covid vaccine. The BBIBPCorV and ZF2001, created by Sinopharm and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Whereas the other two included Convidecia, made by CanSino BOP and the Academy of Military Medical Sciences, and CoronaVac from Sinovac-Biotec.¹⁵ The first Chinese vaccine trial took place in July 2020 in Brazil, which inaugurated its vaccine diplomacy.¹⁶ Following, in November, China signed deals with companies for the export of Chinese-manufactured vaccines. One of the first states to

¹³ Moritz Rudolf, *China's Health Diplomacy during Covid-19 The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Action*, (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2021 German Institute for International and Security Affairs, n.d), accessed May 11, 2023, https://www.swpberlin.org/publications/products/comments/2021_C09_ChinaHealthDiplomacy.pdf.

¹⁴ Shiming Yang, "Rising-Power Competition: The Covid-19 Vaccine Diplomacy of China and India," The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/rising-power-competition-the-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy-of-china-and-india/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Scott Tong, "China's Vaccine Diplomacy Begins Critical Test in Brazil," Marketplace, last modified January 22, 2021, <https://www.marketplace.org/2021/01/21/chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-begins-critical-test-in-brazil/>.

receive vaccines from Sinopharm, a Chinese state-owned vaccine maker, was Egypt, where China also constructed a factory to produce Chinese vaccines.¹⁷ This was aimed at increasing its exports to other nations as well. China accelerated its manufacturing and exports opportunistically following the spread of the pandemic. As per the statistics, China, up to March 17, 2021, manufactured 33% of doses worldwide. This accounted for 62% of exports to foreign countries.¹⁸ China had exported vaccines and aid to 102 countries in total, approximately 476.8 million dosages.¹⁹ Under the Health Silk Road agenda, Beijing exported millions of free doses to 69 countries, reinforcing its humanitarian aid.

Propaganda: Twitter Diplomacy and Infodemics

The year was off to a rocky start in early 2020 when the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11. Unfortunately, along with this devastating news came an increase in what the WHO calls "insidious epidemics" - false information surrounding the virus that puts public health and safety at risk. Considering these challenges, the then WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus wisely observed in February: We are not just battling against coronavirus; we are also combating misinformation.²⁰ China, too, used social media, state-sponsored media, and counter-infodemics as a white propaganda tool to respond to criticism and propagate stories regarding the pandemic. China's "wolf warrior" diplomats garnered attention globally due to their belligerent posturing and covert trolling to spread false information on social media and in news outlets. This name comes from a popular Chinese film series that glorifies jingoistic nationalism, which appears to have influenced China's diplomatic corps' assertive outlook in recent

¹⁷ "Egypt Signs Agreement with China to Manufacture Sinovac Vaccine Locally - Xinhua | *English.news.cn*," 新华网_让新闻离你更近, accessed January 7, 2023, https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/202104/23/c_139899433.htm.

¹⁸ Seow T. Lee, "Vaccine diplomacy: nation branding and China's COVID-19 soft power play," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, July 2021, 01, accessed January 7, 2023, doi:10.1057/s41254-021-00224-4.

¹⁹ Ibid, 2.

²⁰ Yan Leng et al., *Analysis of misinformation during the COVID-19 outbreak in China: cultural, social and political entanglements*, (Cornell University, n.d), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://arXiv:2005.10414v1>.

times. These officials are active online using various platforms and advanced technologies like big data to aid in tracking diseases while simultaneously promoting inconsistent and dubious conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus origin story.²¹ This has been aimed at defending China to avert dissidence and negative responses.

Debate on the Origins of the Virus

In certain cases, publishing blatantly conspiratorial propaganda created a rhetorical framing that allowed the state to shift blame or guilt for a specific circumstance by pointing to shady, strong outside forces. Early in the reportage about the pandemic's origins, it became clear that Wuhan was where it all started. But despite this initial clarity about its origin point, it was not clear which animal species played a role in spreading the virus further afield. Speculation surrounding foreign entities' potential involvement quickly grew louder among various media sources until one notion took hold: some alleged that US military personnel who attended Wuhan's Military World Games back in November 2019 could have served as carriers of this deadly pathogen into China itself. This official-sounding narrative augmented its appeal through verified social government media accounts and appearances by recognizable medical professionals during televised press releases or state-sponsored news programs.²² A notable example of Chinese state-linked accounts involves how Zhao Lijian took to Twitter to propagate false claims that attributed COVID-19's creation to Fort Detrick an alleged bio-weapons facility located in Maryland citing questionable sources from websites connected with Kremlin proxies, according to the US State Department reportage. Afterward, more than one hundred diplomatic and official media accounts from China have written about this Fort Detrick plot, with

²¹ Jessica Brandt and Bret Schafer, *How China's 'wolf Warrior' Diplomats Use and Abuse Twitter*, (Brookings), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter/>.

²² Vanessa Molter and Renee DiResta, "Pandemics & Propaganda: How Chinese State Media Creates and Propagates CCP Coronavirus Narratives," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (2020): 12, accessed May 11, 2023, doi:10.37016/mr-2020-025.

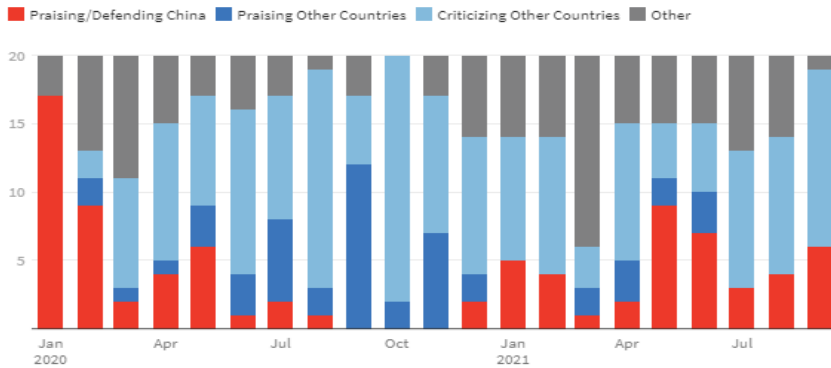
Zhao himself discussing it three times. Moreover, even China's English-language websites and Twitter accounts have amplified these unfounded claims.²³

China's Twitter Diplomacy and Crisis Communication

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, China lacked a significant diplomatic presence on Twitter. A handful of accounts, mainly representing far-off diplomatic missions, operated without any observable coordination or guidance from Beijing. There is no doubt that being entitled to titles such as "Sick Man of Asia" to "Chinese Virus," China's efforts to combat COVID-19 have been faced with constant slander and stigmatization. The activities of Chinese diplomats on Twitter looked to be considerably different as the COVID-19 outbreak spread. More than 170 of them fought with Western nations, spread conspiracy theories about the coronavirus, and ridiculed Americans on racial problems.²⁴ A representation by CSIS China Power Project below illustrates how China used Twitter strategically to address varying objectives throughout the pandemic.

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Monthly Breakdown of Top 20 Tweets about Covid-19 by Chinese State-linked Twitter Accounts



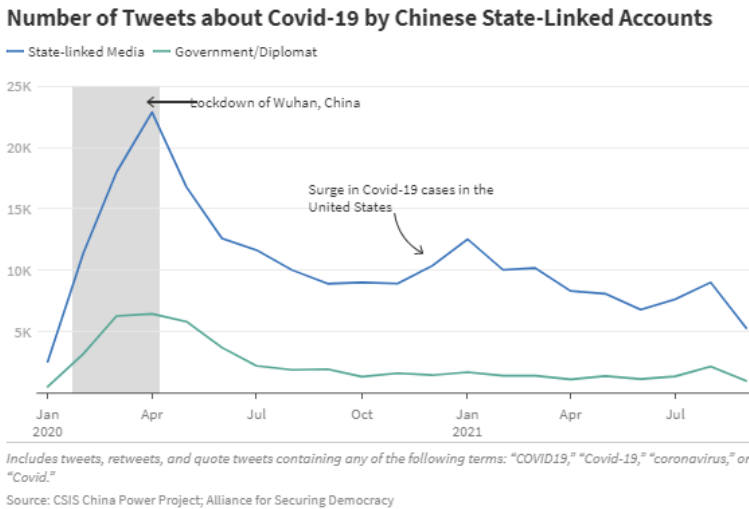
Includes the most retweeted tweets containing any of the following terms: "COVID19," "Covid-19," "coronavirus," or "Covid."
Source: CSIS China Power Project; Alliance for Securing Democracy

*Source: China Power Team. "Is China Succeeding at Shaping Global Narratives about Covid-19?" China Power. October 22, 2021

²³ Brandt and Schafer, "How China's 'wolf Warrior' Diplomats Use and Abuse Twitter."

²⁴ Ibid.

China's Twitter warriors have mastered the art of using Twitter to connect with Western audiences by strategically blending informative content with relatable material. This comes from the understanding that provocative messaging attracts more attention than standard diplomacy techniques. During the pandemic, Chinese embassy employees' hostile or conspiratorial tweets garnered the highest level of interaction on social media platforms while creating aggressive tagged accounts for high popularity levels among followers and online traffic visibility. Twitter terminated 566 accounts retweeted by Beijing's officials in the last six months.²⁵ Another graph by CSIS, from the same source below presents the variations in the number of tweets about COVID-19 by Chinese state-linked media and government officials during the pandemic. *



*Source: China Power Team. "Is China Succeeding at Shaping Global Narratives about Covid-19?" China Power. October 22, 2021,

Moreover, since March 2020 alone, China's diplomatic social media accounts have accumulated four times as many new followers. Notably, two top government officials, Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying, each witnessed follower increases of 42% and

²⁵ Brandt and Schafer, "How China's 'wolf Warrior' Diplomats Use and Abuse Twitter."

121%, respectively.²⁶ China's ex-ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, a skilled soldier in the party's burgeoning cyber arena, joined Twitter in October 2019. State-linked Twitter accounts explain how Twitter had been used as a tool to build on to counter the negative narratives. Liu has carefully enhanced his public image since then, garnering a fan base of almost 119,000. From June to February, his posts — principled and brave retweets to Western anti-Chinese prejudice to his followers, were shared up to 50,000 times as a model of “Twiplomacy.”²⁷ China's diplomats commonly employ social media accounts with handles suggestive of artificial intelligence, profile images sourced externally, or not reflecting the user's actual identity. Such accounts are typically created within a short or specific time range.

The Chinese embassy in Manila, for example, was quite active on Twitter. It emphasized that as the world battled against COVID-19, China stood out among nations as a reliable source of aid for countries like the Philippines and Thailand. This was acknowledged by President Duterte who appealed for priority access to vaccines developed by China. Additionally, China's commitment towards aiding these nations was further emphasized when they announced on Facebook their plan to send additional essential supplies such as personal protective equipment and medical gear throughout May and June.²⁸ The Chinese government officials vehemently opposed any form of criticism regarding their provision of medical aid. When the Philippines pointed out inaccuracies in some test kits, the Chinese embassy labeled such remarks as reckless and contrary to collaboration efforts, resulting in Manila apologizing.

China's Expanding Media Influence and Misinformation Challenges

Journalists acknowledged that more Chinese content was entering the news ecosystem, particularly one story per day in the Serbian

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Erika Kinetz, "Army of Fake Fans Boosts China's Messaging on Twitter," *AP NEWS*, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-china-europe-middle-east-government-and-politics>.

²⁸ Ibid.

press and fifty Xinhua stories carried on the news wire of the Ansa news agency in Italy. The story was subsequently pushed via social media by an army of “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy practitioners.²⁹ Twitter and Facebook remain prohibited in China. As one of the first victims of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy was the subject of a ferocious Chinese misinformation effort in 2020. Social media videos reported to show Italians on their balconies praising Chinese COVID-19 help while the Chinese national song is played in the background. The video was doctored and initially showed Italians applauding their medical personnel. The COVID-19 epidemic was described as an “infodemic” by Italy’s parliamentary security committee, with misleading news and rumors spreading faster than true information on the virus. Some of it was dangerously wrong.³⁰ Hence, China’s influence on global media information dissemination and propaganda continued to raise concerns in the face of an evolving “infodemic” landscape.

Drafting Laws and Media Censorship

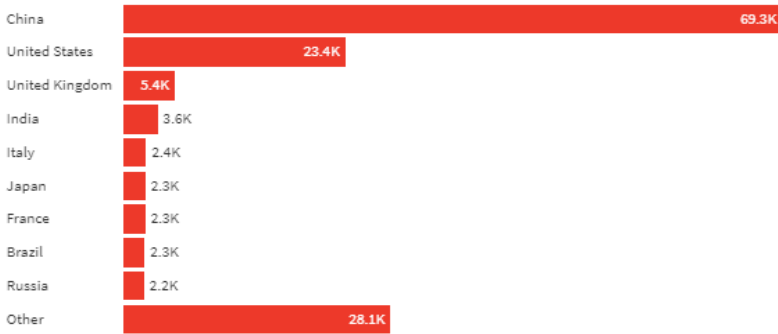
The Chinese authorities placed a special emphasis on rumor control. On January 25, WeChat, China’s largest social media platform with over a billion monthly active users, published a statement calling for the Criminal Code to be strengthened regarding online lies. It stated that it would “remove unlawful information and intensify account holders’ punishment according to the severity of the infraction.” On February 6, 2020, the Chinese administration announced that disseminating falsehoods about the epidemic might result in libel charges.³¹ A CSIS graph depicting the number of tweets about COVID-19 from Chinese state-linked accounts, according to countries, is illustrated below. *

²⁹ Brandt and Schafer, “How China’s ‘wolf Warrior’ Diplomats Use and Abuse Twitter.”

³⁰ Rudolf, “China’s Health Diplomacy during Covid-19.”

³¹ Wenxue Zou and Lu Tang, “What do we believe in? Rumors and processing strategies during the COVID-19 outbreak in China,” *Public Understanding of Science* 30, no. 2 (2020): 156, accessed May 11, 2023, doi:10.1177/0963662520979459.

Number of Tweets about Covid-19 from Chinese State-Linked Accounts by Country Mentioned



Includes tweets, retweets, and quote tweets from Jan. 2020 - Sept. 2021 containing any of the following terms: "COVID19," "Covid-19," "coronavirus," or "Covid."

Source: CSIS China Power Project; Alliance for Securing Democracy

*Source: China Power Team. "Is China Succeeding at Shaping Global Narratives about Covid-19 -narratives.

Furthermore, the CCP has built a massive propaganda and censorship infrastructure in recent years, suppressing the deadliest challenge to Party unity and authority—truth. The Chinese Communist Party has created a highly intricate web of internet censorship tools called the Great Firewall or Golden Shield Project. These powerful mechanisms are intended to filter out any digital content produced within China itself quickly. The Ministry of Public Security heads up this effort, which aims at restricting what information Chinese citizens can access while also tracking their whereabouts and providing top-level officials with immediate entry into personal records.³² For instance, BBC reported China deactivating over a thousand internet profiles, some of which had many supporters who disapproved of the CCP's coronavirus regulations. Weibo, a social media network, claimed it had terminated or banned accounts for what it called personal assaults on Chinese COVID-19 professionals. Weibo did not say which posts triggered the action. Hence, some scholars have defined Weibo as the "Chinese Twitter."³³ Hence, the intricate web of

³² "China's Great Firewall," *Stanford CS*, accessed May 11, 2023, https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/201011/FreeExpressionVsSocialCohesion/china_policy.html.

³³ George Wright, "China Suspends Social Media Accounts of Covid Policy Critics," *BBC News*, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-64198313>.

internet censorship tools serve not only to control the flow of information within China, but also to stifle dissent and dissenting voices, making it a critical component of the Chinese government's strategy for maintaining control and suppressing unfavorable narratives. China's diplomacy and anti-West rhetoric have caused a narrative battleground that involves several nations, including the European Union. The French government summoned Chinese Ambassador Lu Shaye to their foreign ministry in April 2020 due to misinformation on the website of the embassy regarding COVID-19 patients' care in French hospitals.³⁴

Moreover, 2021 saw the CEPA unveil two papers tackling Russian and Chinese information operations as the world struggled with COVID-19: "Jabbed in the Back" and "Information Bedlam." The reports delve into methods used by these nations to propagate false narratives, create confusion, and destabilize societies at a time when unity was most crucial. These papers discussed how Russia and China used information operations related to the pandemic, its origins, and vaccine effectiveness to manipulate populations around the world. The infodemic was weaponized as a means of diplomacy and geopolitics by these nations.³⁵ As per a Pew Research Center survey, over two-thirds of Americans believe they have seen fake news and opinions on the virus, validating the CCP's use of infodemics.³⁶ Such reports shed light on the increasingly sophisticated and impactful role played by state actors like Russia and China in manipulating global narratives and exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic for diplomatic and geopolitical ends, revealing the potent and pervasive nature of the infodemic as a tool for advancing strategic interests on the world stage.

³⁴ Jean-Pierre, "The COVID-19 Health Crisis and Its Impact on China's International Relations," *Journal of Risk Management* 15, no. 3 (2022): 05, accessed May 11, 2023, doi:10.3390/jrfm15030123.

³⁵ Vera Zakem, Edward Lucas, and James Lamond, *Owning the Conversation*, (CEPA), 2022), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CEPA-Owning-the-Conversation-3.31.22.pdf>.

³⁶ Audrye Wong, *COVID-19 and Beijing's Diplomacy in Southeast Asia*, (Southeast Asia: Brookings), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/09/03/covid-19-and-chinas-information-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia/>.

Ensuring Widespread Circulation and Propagation of the Chinese Governance Model

Here are certain cases where numerous English-language Facebook posts by Chinese official media communicated information about the coronavirus pandemic to the global audience. Since 2013, China has established numerous regionalized and English-based official media pages on Facebook and other sites. This provides the CCP with reporting for at least nearly 100 million networks of followers worldwide. More than 33% of communication from these pages was also on COVID-19 from January 2020. The recurring activities seen included crafting positive narratives to promote the CCP's pandemic response, rewriting recent history to help the CCP as the coronavirus outbreak developed, and using targeted marketing to spread favored messages. Further, it included praising China in its dealing with the crisis by sharing pictures of healthcare professionals treating their patients and China's efforts of building new hospitals at a fast pace.³⁷

Chinese state media repeatedly portrayed their governments' response as praiseworthy. From January 2020 onwards, news outlets celebrated China for taking decisive action against COVID-19 and purportedly saving global citizens from this new disease. State-run publications expressed admiration for China's ability to conquer coronavirus on a local level and commended its hard work underpinned by an upgraded governance structure. On February 20, a China Daily editorial asserted, "If it were not for the unique institutional advantages of the Chinese system, the globe may be fighting a deadly epidemic."³⁸ Amidst a global pandemic outbreak spreading rapidly through nations like wildfire, the focus shifted towards what actions China was taking not only for themselves but also for others. This concept arose once Xi ordered Chinese media outlets on February 3rd to depict their response as heroic efforts during this crisis. By February 4th, Xinhua presented an article entitled "Swift Responses from China:

³⁷ Molter and DiResta, "Pandemics & Propaganda," 1.

³⁸ Natasha Kassam, *China is Rewriting Coronavirus History and Nobody Will Stop It*, (The Lowy Institute, n.d), <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/china-rewriting-coronavirus-history-nobody-will-stop-it>.

Buying Time for World Cooperation against Coronavirus Epidemic."

Chinese efforts aimed at propagating the idea that its accomplishments were due to the Chinese model of governance and the efforts made by the Chinese Communist Party while also depicting the failures of the US in dealing with the crisis as weaknesses of democracies.³⁹ A few examples in this regard would include the article by Global Times, a Chinese Communist Party-run newspaper, which argued that the US needed to "learn from China" to handle the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁰ Another report published by the Chinese State Council in March 2021 stated that the incompetent response by the US to the pandemic intensified the human rights violations in the country and that the pandemic was supplemented by political disorder, social divisions, and inter-ethnic conflicts in the state.⁴¹ Data estimates show that Chinese official media outlets have aired a total of 146 advertisements since January 2019, paying between US\$29,000 and US\$63 thousand and garnering around 81.48 million and 92.60 million page views.⁴² The majority of these advertisements promoted generic stories about Chinese culture. Over 50% of the promotion in their data gathering (65/146 commercials, or 45 percent) were created between Jan 1, 2020, and Mar 29, 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic.⁴³ The coronavirus commercials focused on Xi's leadership, with his name appearing in 32 of 50 (64 percent) of the advertisements.⁴⁴ The advertising proclaimed him to Beijing leader in the "battle" with COVID-19, referencing his remarks ("People's safety and health always come first for the Chinese government") and detailing his visits to Wuhan and Huoshenshan facilities.⁴⁵ Hence, deliberate Chinese government efforts strategically used media advertising, particularly during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, to

³⁹ China Power Team, "Is China Succeeding at Shaping Global Narratives About Covid-19?," *China Power*, accessed February 15, 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-covid-disinformation-global-narratives/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Molter and DiResta, "Pandemics & Propaganda," 15.

⁴³ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

promote Chinese culture, emphasize Xi Jinping's leadership, and control the narrative, underscoring the importance of image projection and narrative management in international diplomacy.

A comparative assessment was done on news stories linked to the Leishenshan and Huoshenshan hospitals, which were built very quickly to provide an emergency response to the crisis, in January 2020.⁴⁶ This response effort was an important event for promoting the Chinese narrative during COVID-19, where many people watched the construction sites live online, hosted by the Chinese broadcaster CCTV 17. The Chinese official media circulated reports about how the world community was pleased by China's quick-building capabilities. Therefore, the narratives propagated by the Chinese government were that China was the ultimate champion in the international system because, its crisis management approach was resolute and effective and was based on multilateralism and in aiding other countries internationally. The responsibility for politicizing and stigmatizing fell upon the United States, according to Chinese sources. The harmful impact of spreading conspiracies like the Wuhan lab theory was even worse than that of Covid-19. It is viewed as a squandering of precious time when China has already made such great sacrifices.

How China's Vaccine Diplomacy Enhanced its Image?

China actively engaged in using means such as propaganda, soft power, and vaccine aid to enhance its worldwide reputation. According to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China donated 1.2 billion vaccine doses to more than a hundred nations during the pandemic through September 2021.⁴⁷ Despite having disputes, various states signed deals with China, willing to purchase its vaccines. This was due to the lack of widespread availability of vaccines, and states saw the presence of little immunity to be better than having no immunity at all.⁴⁸ Even if the vaccines were less effective, China's vaccine diplomacy was capable of building

⁴⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁴⁷ Ralph Jennings, "China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy Reaches 100-Plus Countries," *Voice of America*, last modified September 18, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy-reaches-100-plus-countries/6233766.html>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

China's image as a "reliable partner, willing to help."⁴⁹ The Western states were often criticized for hoarding vaccines for their populations by organizations such as Amnesty International. Several developed states were also accused of "Vaccine Nationalism" as several wealthy nations confined vaccine supply for their populations.⁵⁰ According to Xinhua, China developed vaccine plants in 15 countries.⁵¹ This led to low-cost distribution and greater economic development in states.

Leveraging Soft Power and Economic Aid through COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution

Beijing's health and vaccine diplomacy has been instrumental in reinforcing its Belt and Road Initiative strategically. For instance, most of the states that China exported its vaccines to, particularly in Asia and Africa, were its partners in the BRI. China has promised to give one billion COVID-19 vaccine doses to African nations. Beijing used soft power to develop its brand on the continent by connecting its public diplomacy programming with aid projects, grants, and low-interest loans to aid African countries in establishing stronger economic connections. In Zimbabwe, President Emmerson Mnangagwa described Chinese vaccinations as being more successful in South America, where all countries except Suriname and French Guyana chose Chinese vaccines. China's first shipment of 200,000 Sinopharm shots was remarked as "a light at the end of a dark tunnel."⁵² Collaborating with various states in Africa and Latin America, China not only worked as a global aid provider, working for the health security of states, but also aided the economic and industrial development of these states

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Pinak R. Chakravarti, "Vaccine Nationalism Exacerbates Global Faultlines," *ORF*, last modified February 8, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/vaccine-nationalism-exacerbates-global-faultlines/>.

⁵¹ Jennings, "China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy Reaches 100-Plus Countries."

⁵² Reuters Staff, "Zimbabwe to Get 200,000 COVID-19 Doses from China's Sinopharm," *Reuters*, last modified February 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-zimbabwe-china-idUSKBN2A50QI>.

by creating local manufacturing and distribution hubs for vaccines there.

Moreover, China also sent 143 million vaccine shots to Southeast Asia, making it one of the most important Chinese vaccine recipient regions.⁵³ Along with gaining political clout in the region, Beijing is seizing the chance to leverage its pharmaceutical and economic might through vaccine distribution. China-ASEAN Public Health Co-operation Initiative (under the ASEAN-China Dialogue for the periods of 2005–2010, 2011–2015, and 2016–2020)) set up the COVID-19 Regional Fund in April 2020 to respond to the pandemic and donated US\$ 1 million to this fund.⁵⁴ In August 2020, China set up a laboratory in Baghdad to confirm COVID cases.⁵⁵ Yemen, Palestine, and Algeria have also greatly benefitted from the massive donations of medical equipment from Beijing. These multifaceted efforts are not solely motivated by humanitarian concerns but are driven by a calculated strategy to secure geopolitical and economic advantages during a global crisis. Hence, all these measures have significantly boosted China's positive image by projecting it as a responsible state undertaking an effective crisis management approach to tackle not only health security but also the economic security of developing states.

Accusations Against the United States and Narratives of China as the International Champion

Chinese officials have defended their approach to the pandemic and criticized the response of other nations, particularly the United States. According to a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson

⁵³ Mamdouh M. Ridwan, "China and US Vaccine Diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa," *The Diplomat* accessed January 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/china-and-us-vaccine-diplomacy-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

⁵⁴ Edward and Tom, "China's Xi Pledges Another 1 Bln COVID-19 Vaccine Doses for Africa," *Reuters*, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chinas-xi-pledges-10-blm-credit-line-african-financial-institutions-2021-11-29/>.

⁵⁵ "Feature: New Chinese-built PCR Lab Relieves COVID-19 Testing Pressure in Iraq - Xinhua | English.news.cn," 新华网_让新闻离你更近, accessed January 7, 2023, https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/202003/31/c_138932451.htm.

(2023), China had been very actively involved in the international efforts to counter the pandemic and had also been very transparent and clear in sharing information regarding the virus.⁵⁶ He also viewed that the response to COVID-19 should be science-based and without any discrimination against specific states, without impacting normal travel and cooperation between people.⁵⁷ China's defense of its pandemic response and criticism of the United States reflects the complex interplay of geopolitics, public image, and transparency concerns in the global response

Similarly, Zhao Lijian remarked that despite having the world's best healthcare system, the US failed to tackle the pandemic, which reflects the lack of concern and action of the US government regarding the lives of people.⁵⁸ China's foreign ministry spokesperson, Mao Ning, informed reporters during a press conference that several countries have imposed entry restrictions on Chinese citizens without sound scientific reasoning. Furthermore, she argued that some prohibitions aimed toward travelers from China were deemed particularly unreasonable.⁵⁹ In response to the difficulties associated with trade-in and delivering mRNA vaccines, such as Pfizer as well as Moderna, which required sub-zero temperatures, Chinese officials expressed their views that despite the low efficacy of Chinese vaccines, states prioritized them owing to the other advantages they possessed, such as comparatively lower costs, and easier logistics that suited the geographical features of certain regions. Indonesia is a prime example in this case that expressed the logistical challenges associated with the Pfizer vaccine, which it had to face. China responded spontaneously by providing the state with four million

⁵⁶ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: the Competent Chinese Authorities Had a Virtual Meeting with the WHO," 中华人民共和国驻大不列颠及北爱尔兰联合王国, last modified January 3, 2023, https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/PressandMedia/Spokepersons/202301/t20230103_11000359.htm.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 11, 2022," 中华人民共和国外交部, last modified May 11, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202205/t20220511_10684604.html.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Sinovac vaccinations to begin its immunization campaign.⁶⁰ China's adept adaptation to the practical challenges of vaccine logistics underscored its agility in utilizing the strengths of its vaccine offerings to gain influence in regions with distinct immunization needs.

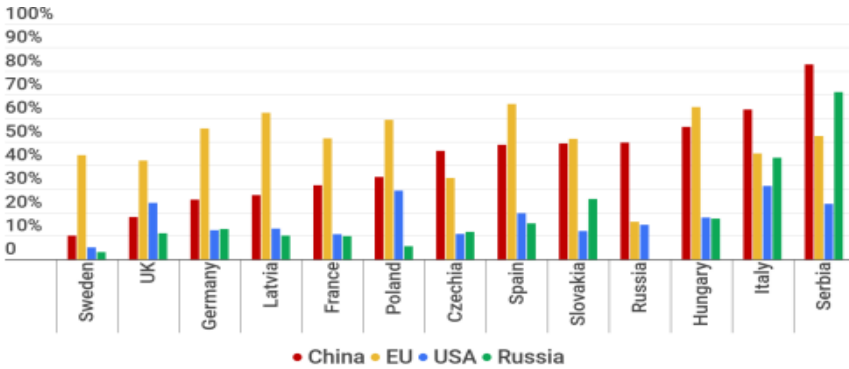
Leveraging Political Objectives

During the pandemic, when the entire European continent was in lockdown, China massively donated personal protective equipment to them. In some countries, the allocation of vaccines helped Beijing to achieve its foreign policy goals. For example, Hungary blocked the European Union's statements criticizing China in April 2021, following the purchase of millions of Chinese vaccines.⁶¹ In Serbia, an early receiver of Chinese vaccinations, Beijing constructed Europe's largest Confucius Institute. The institute was built on the location of the former Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which was attacked by NATO in 1999. This illustrates how China used vaccine diplomacy to project its political leverage throughout Europe. The CEIAS chart below shows the positive perception of China for its vaccine donation among the European people, which was significantly higher compared to that of the US.^{62*}

⁶⁰ *South-East Asia Study Finds China's Sinovac Vaccine Effective in Medical Staff*, (Reuters, 2021), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/indonesia-study-finds-chinas-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-effective-medical-staff-2021-05-12/>.

⁶¹ Bonny Lin et al., "China Is Exploiting the Pandemic to Advance Its Interests, with Mixed Results," *CSIS* |, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-exploiting-pandemic-advance-its-interests-mixed-results>.

⁶² Richard Q. Turcsányi et al., *European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19 Differences and common ground across the continent*, (The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), 2020).



***Source:** Richard Q. Turcsányi et al., European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19 Differences and common ground across the continent, (The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), 2020).

Aiming to gain friends and make deals in the Global South, China used vaccines as a diplomatic tool. Latin America was one such area, which was not prepared to deal with the crisis. Owing to the negligence of the US on various occasions, despite the region being nearby, China had to do little to grow its influence there.⁶³ Hence, the messages by Xi Jinping, aspiring for a community of common destiny for mankind and showcasing China’s generosity, were a soft power tool.⁶⁴ Chinese diplomats led airport ceremonies to celebrate the arrival of millions of vaccines, which served a similar purpose as those in South America. Paraguay, one of only 15 countries recognizing Taiwan, offers insight into vaccination politics. As Paraguay battled COVID-19 in April 2020, the communist bloc in the Senate proposed legislation establishing relations with Beijing and breaking ties with Taiwan. Supporters argued this would open access to critical Chinese aid and potentially a vaccine. Though the bill failed (25-16), opposition politicians promised to recognize China if power shifts.⁶⁵ President Xi Jinping pledged to provide Chinese vaccinations as a worldwide public

⁶³ Álvaro Mendez, "China’s Vaccine Diplomacy: Soft Power Lessons from Latin America," China Global South Project, last modified September 17, 2021, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-latin-america/>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Lee, "Vaccine diplomacy: nation branding and China’s COVID-19 soft power play,"72.

good, and China has joined the COVAX project to ensure governments have global equitable access to vaccines.⁶⁶ The vaccine diplomacy followed after the successful mask diplomacy, as the state exported 224 billion face masks between March and December 2020.⁶⁷ This significantly reinforced the PRC's efforts to craft positive narratives and its agenda.

Drawbacks of Vaccine Diplomacy as a Soft Power Instrument

The lack of openness in China makes it difficult to quantify China's funding for its soft power effort. However, some analysts have estimated them to be billions of dollars. As per estimates, China spends around \$10 billion every year to project its influence through the means of soft power tools.⁶⁸ When addressing the necessities or the trinity of soft power articulated by Nye—culture, values, and policies—China is frequently viewed skeptically. Disinformation, domestic censorship, and cyber-attacks by China may not draw Europeans to Chinese regimes. If certain countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans appear to prefer Chinese vaccine, this is owing to delivery delays by Western suppliers, not geopolitical motives.⁶⁹

The rapid development of Chinese vaccinations caused an uproar throughout time. Some speculate that Chinese officials were involved in disseminating false information concerning vaccinations offered by other countries while censoring the captious information about Chinese-made vaccines. This campaign was led by the state-owned media questioning the effectiveness of the Western vaccines. Chinese intentions over its vaccines were

⁶⁶ Maddalena Procopio, Hannah Bretherton, and Chris Alden, "Ask the Experts: Has China Successfully Employed 'health Diplomacy' to Promote Its Leadership Role As a Purveyor of Global Public Goods?," *China Dialogues*, March 18, 2021, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/cff/2021/03/18/ask-the-experts-has-china-successfully-employed-health-diplomacy-to-promote-its-leadership-role-as-a-purveyor-of-global-public-goods/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "China's Big Bet on Soft Power," CFR, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>.

⁶⁹ Michael Leigh, *Soft power lessons*, (Geopolitical Intelligence Services Reports, 2021), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/eu-vaccination-rollout/>.

questioned when, in February 2021, Singapore ordered 200,000 Sinovac doses and, before vaccinating its citizens, requested ancillary details, to which the Chinese company did not respond. This illustrated its unwillingness to share critical information related to its vaccines.⁷⁰ As far as the MENA region is concerned, there is a widespread impression that Chinese products lack standards, and applying the same logic to the vaccine it raised skepticism over Sinopharm and Sinovac. Even Egypt showed its inclination to Western vaccine-AstraZeneca since the Chinese lacked apparent transparency of scientific research.⁷¹ In 2021, with the availability of diverse vaccine options, the Saudi Kingdom prioritized Western-made vaccines.⁷²

In the second half of 2021, removing restrictions on Indian vaccines and new entries in the vaccine arsenal, such as Moderna and Pfizer, contributed to undermining Chinese health diplomacy. The US, though late, entered the competition and, in 2021, became the world's largest donor of vaccines. As per the UNICEF, Washington gave more than 114 million vaccine dosages to 80 poor countries in Africa, Eurasia, and South America, with China coming in second with 34 million doses.⁷³ Moreover, Chinese vaccines witnessed a major decline in the international arena since mid-2021. Countries like Brazil and Indonesia did not renew their orders, underscoring the limitations of vaccine diplomacy as a soft power strategy. This signified that China's soft power efforts may require greater transparency and alignment with global standards to regain trust and effectiveness on the international stage.

Released in February 2021, the Global Soft Power Index showed that the Chinese position declined by three points from fifth place to eighth between 2020 and 2021 due to lack of transparency and ineffective initial management of the crisis.⁷⁴ Further, the

⁷⁰ Lee, "Vaccine diplomacy," 13.

⁷¹ Ridwan, "China and US Vaccine Diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Daniele Carminati, "The Ups and Downs of Soft Power in the Asia-Pacific," *The Diplomat*, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/the-ups-and-downs-of-soft-power-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

ineffectiveness of Chinese vaccinations, especially when given as a booster injection, against the highly transmissible characteristics of the later Omicron versions BA.4 and BA.5 also served as a major setback to Chinese vaccine efficiency.⁷⁵ On the other hand, designed based on the newer mRNA technology, Western vaccines such as Pfizer and Moderna, even in single doses, were far more effective in countering the virus as compared to the Chinese vaccines.⁷⁶ Consequently, the Sinopharm and Sinovac doses which, in April, accounted for 6.78 million doses, in September 2021, saw a 97% decline.⁷⁷ This illustrates how the decline in a country's global soft power ranking due to initial pandemic mismanagement and vaccine inefficacy highlights the critical role of transparent and effective crisis response in shaping a nation's international reputation, especially in the face of competition from advanced vaccine technologies.

Further, it is alleged that Beijing has allocated vaccines to most middle-income countries rather than to the poor states.⁷⁸ This has limited China's attempt to portray itself as an ambassador of global public health. Critics blame that around 96% of China's vaccines and more than 99% of its PPEs that were exported were sold and not donated as China portrayed.⁷⁹ China denies the claims, stating that China even provided free samples before and then the equipment. Another criticism is that Beijing allocated the supplies on bilateral relationships, whereas many wealthy countries,

⁷⁵ Nina Cosdon, "A High Transmission Rate of Omicron BA.5 in China, Despite High Vaccine Coverage," *ContagionLive*, last modified April 5, 2023, <https://www.contagionlive.com/view/a-high-transmission-rate-of-omicron-ba-5-in-china-despite-high-vaccine-coverage>.

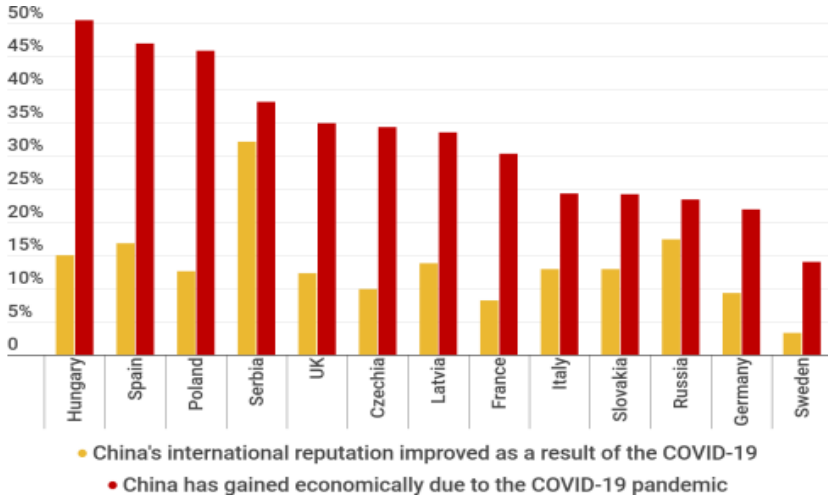
⁷⁶ Rachel Pannett, "Moderna vaccines the best — and Sinovac least effective — at stopping covid deaths, Singapore data suggests," *The Washington Post*, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/11/singapore-coronavirus-vaccine-moderna-sinovac-pfizer/>.

⁷⁷ Ridwan, "China and US Vaccine Diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa"

⁷⁸ Akanksha Chopra, *the us alomacy in Southeast Asia*, (Observer Research Foundation(ORF), n.d), accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-chinese-vaccine-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia/>.

⁷⁹ Lin, "China Is Exploiting the Pandemic to Advance Its Interests, with Mixed Results."

including the United States, provided substantial vaccine supply to COVAX. It claims that only 16 percent of the Chinese vaccine export quota was reserved for COVAX, and much of this was in the form of sales.⁸⁰ China also denies this claim. The public opinion that the vaccine exports helped China build its economic clout, simultaneously affecting its reputation during the pandemic, is evident from the CEIAS graph below.^{81*}



Source: Richard Q. Turcsányi et al., European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19 Differences and common ground across the continent.

Hence, China's vaccine diplomacy, while showcasing its efforts to bolster its global image during the COVID-19 pandemic, carried a mixed bag of outcomes. While it has succeeded in strengthening ties with some countries and regions, the lack of transparency, issues with vaccine efficacy, and perceptions of commercial motivations raised skepticism and posed challenges. As we navigate future global health challenges, it becomes evident that transparency, cooperation, and adherence to international standards are essential for shaping a nation's image and influence. The true

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Turcsányi, "European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19 Differences and common ground across the continent."

impact of China's soft power and vaccine diplomacy remains a dynamic and evolving landscape.

Conclusion

States today more often influence others not through force, but by influencing their hearts and minds. The use of soft power is, therefore, used very often by states to propagate their narratives and ideas. This approach is particularly effective for a state to build a positive image in the world and to strengthen its relations with other states to improve its international position and standing. China demonstrated a great example of this approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its vaccine diplomacy may have faced questions on the effectiveness of its vaccine, nevertheless, it reflects China's efforts to take a lead role as global health provider amidst the Covid 19 pandemic. Arguably, vaccine diplomacy as an instrument of soft power added value to China's engagement with the global South and improved its credibility as a great power in the international system. China's global initiatives to produce vaccinations have helped make vaccines more widely available and reasonably priced in underdeveloped nations. Adding to its efforts, the outbreak has tested China's resilience to domestically control the Covid 19 outbreak and contribute as a global health provider.

Beijing used global mainstream and social media to strengthen perceptions of China as a kind and trustworthy state as part of its vaccine diplomacy. Vaccine diplomacy, dubbed the "Health Silk Road," has given a footing to China's pharmaceutical sector despite widespread doubts on its efficacy. Various factors like lack of transparency in testing, donations with strings attached, quality, and efficacy problems did question the impact of China's health diplomacy. Chinese vaccines lost further charm with the provision of Western manufactured vaccine that had better efficacy and results. China's vaccine and health diplomacy would have been more effective had the Chinese make vaccines would have been more approved by the West. Alternative and more effective development in vaccines, coupled with the evolving global response to the crisis, weakened Chinese efforts to truly reap the benefits of its health diplomacy.