

# CHINA'S VACCINE DIPLOMACY, THE HEALTH SILK ROAD AND A GLOBAL PLEDGE

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Published in June 2021 by Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

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# China's vaccine diplomacy, the Health Silk Road and a global pledge

China has been severely criticised for being the origin of the corona virus and for not informing the world about the development of such a virus, that quickly metamorphosed into a pandemic that has gripped the world for over a year now. It has brought with it death, economic losses and immense uncertainty that looms even today.

Ever since vaccines to fight the pandemic were introduced in the initial months of 2021, there has been a persistent struggle to meet the global demand. Vaccine roll outs are gripped with issues like low production capacity and lack of raw materials. With the objective of reinstating its lost credibility, China began to supply large scale doses of its unapproved and untried vaccines to the developing world. Posing as the saviour of the world, this has been China's attempt to build its global image as a provider of solutions to fight the pandemic rather than being its source.

Since late 2020, China has promised vaccines to more than 80 countries under the Health Silk Road<sup>1</sup> initiative, an emerging diplomatic initiative by China for promoting health cooperation in a world gripped by public health emergencies. These roll outs have faced scepticism, since the data on clinical trials have not been released for scientists to assess efficacy. Critics of China's vaccine diplomacy have not viewed its efforts as act of goodness. While China has donated vaccines to a few countries, majority of them had to purchase them or were offered a loan by China to buy them.

Its goody two shoes image is in fact laden with geopolitical motives. Among the recipients of Chinese vaccines are the participants of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that receive preferential access. According to an April 2021 report by Think Global Health<sup>2</sup>, of the 56 countries to which China pledged doses, 55 were participants of the BRI. This is China's way of ensuring that these countries, in need of vaccines will remain indebted to China and will continue to support and allow Chinese infrastructure and connectivity projects on their territories.

By making an effort to contribute to global health as part of the Health Silk Road Initiative, China is now trying to bring legitimacy to its pharmaceutical industry that has been criticised for having low efficacy rates and poor credibility in the past as well. China wishes to take its vaccines, Sinovac and Sinopharm to households around the world and change these perceptions.

To achieve its geopolitical objectives and to get back its global position, China has made inroads with its vaccine diplomacy in almost every continent. A study of China's vaccine outreach shows how wide and deep it has managed to penetrate the world despite doubts of efficacy and opaqueness of data on clinical trials. Chinese COVID-19 vaccines have been shipped to more than 60<sup>3</sup> countries for market or emergency use according to an official of the Chinese Commerce Ministry. It has supplied to 5 countries in India's neighbourhood, to 27 African countries, 12 countries in Western and Central Asia, 12 countries in South East Asia and the Pacific and 15 countries in South America. *(Please see table below for all available details on Chinese vaccine roll outs. Some quantities and costs are undisclosed so numbers often do not match)*. Agreements to supply to over 20 more countries have been made. On June 2, 2021, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>4</sup> stated that China has provided 'more than 350 million doses' of vaccines to the international community so far.

China has promised vaccines in the form of donations to Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Philippines and Myanmar and has sold to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. In countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh, China has clashed with India and there is a preference for Indian vaccines. However, many countries in the region are turning to China now that India has halted its global vaccine supply due to critical shortages at home.

China has also concentrated its efforts in African countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, Chinese vaccines<sup>5</sup> are predominantly distributed through the COVAX initiative. Yet, India is a bigger vaccine supplier in the region than China. China has by far donated Sinopharm doses to Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Namibia.

China's Sinopharm is a popular choice in Argentina and Bolivia. In Mexico, almost all the currently distributed Chinese vaccines are available. They are being used along with the AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Sputnik V vaccines. India has supplied Mexico with 870,000 doses and is still due to deliver the full order.

While Chinese vaccines have largely been missing in Western Europe, some Central and Eastern European countries like Serbia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Ukraine have reached out to China to receive vaccines.

Chinese pharmaceutical companies are keener than their western counterparts to strike licensing deals for other countries to produce the China made vaccines. For instance, Indonesia is producing Sinovac's CoronaVac through its company, Bio Farma<sup>6</sup>. The UAE has conducted phase three clinical trials of Sinopharm and has built inhouse vaccine manufacturing capabilities, producing the vaccine under the name of Hayat-Vax<sup>7</sup>, a joint collaboration between Sinopharm CNBG and Abu Dhabi's G42. It was the first country (after China) to approve Sinopharm's vaccine.

China's 'all weather' friend, Pakistan plans to manufacture CanSino vaccine through technology transfer. Brazil conducted clinical trials for Sinovac and began producing the vaccine. However, production was halted in May 2021 due to a reported interruption of raw materials coming from China.

Here is a full list of countries that have negotiated with China to produce Chinese vaccines on their shores.

Region	Destination	Manufacturer	Partner(s)	Estimated annual production capacity (mn)	Total doses of vaccines produced (mn)
Africa	Egypt	Sinovac	Vacsera	80	0
Asia	Indonesia	Sinovac (Coronavac)	Bio Farma	154	-
Asia	Malaysia	Sinovac	Pharmangia	2	2
Asia	UAE	Sinopharm (Hayat-vax)	Gulf Pharmaceutical Industries & Group 42	200	0
Asia	Pakistan	CanSino	National Institute of Health	3	0
Asia	Bangladesh	Sinopharm	-	-	-
Europe	Serbia	Sinopharm	-	24	0
Europe	Turkey	Sinovac	-	-	0
Latin America	Argentina	Sinopharm	-	-	0
Latin America	Brazil	Sinovac	Butantan Institute	-	21
Latin America	Brazil	Sinovac	Butantan Institute	100	0
Latin America	Mexico	CanSino	Drugmex	35	-

Source: Bridge Beijing<sup>8</sup>

China has no plans to domestically manufacture vaccines developed by other countries due to the state's strong control on its pharmaceutical sector. Its domestic production policy for pharmaceuticals was developed during a period when the state controlled much of the economy and when the country was isolated from international trade. It still follows a model of self-sufficiency<sup>9</sup> for the sector. When

China acceded to the WTO in 2001, it converted some of its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating in the pharmaceutical sector into privately-owned and managed enterprises. Despite this, the largest and most important pharmaceutical companies in China remain majority state-owned. The China National Pharmaceutical Group, commonly known as Sinopharm, an SOE, is responsible for developing and manufacturing the most widely used and exported Chinese covid19 vaccine. (See table below).

A question often arises, what has China gained from this vaccine diplomacy? The gains can be evaluated in tangible and non-tangible ways. The vaccines and medical supplies have been supplied in the form of commercial deals. The vaccine roll outs have caused countries in Latin America, West and South East Asian countries and parts of Africa, to align more closely with China and have become further indebted towards China. These countries have in the past, relied on China for developmental and humanitarian aid as well as for infrastructure development. Some countries' support to BRI has been solid and their geostrategic objectives are aligned with China under the auspices of South South Cooperation. *(A full list is available in the table below)*

With vaccine diplomacy, China has strengthened its foothold in these regions. China has also chosen to leave out countries like South Korea, Japan, the US, Australia and European countries, which either have their own capacity or have global allies that can provide their needs.

Although Chinese vaccine makers were among the earliest in the world to begin clinical trials for their vaccines, scepticism about their safety and effectiveness still exists. In fact, Gao Fu, Director, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>10</sup>, China said in April 2021 that the efficacy of Chinese vaccines was low and scientists were considering mixing them as an attempt to boost their effectiveness.

Fortunately for China, there has been some respite. Finally in May this year, the WHO has declared the vaccine made by Sinopharm<sup>11</sup>, 'safe for emergency use'. This declaration came after China released some data on vaccine clinical trials and after the WHO conducted an onsite inspection of the production facility<sup>12</sup>.

For China, WHO's approval can be seen as a step towards fulfilling Chinese President Xi Jinping's pledge from May 2020 of making COVID-19 vaccines a "global public good". China pledged an additional \$3 billion<sup>13</sup> in aid to developing countries and suggested setting up a global forum on vaccines to ensure equitable distribution at Global Health Summit on May 2021.

With this declaration, Sinopharm can now be included in the COVAX, a global initiative to provide free vaccines to countries in need. Developing countries, vulnerable and in the pursuit of vaccines, now have another option to look at. The WHO is also considering the reliability of the Sinovac as well.

US President Joe Biden has recently announced<sup>14</sup> that the US will share 80 million doses of its vaccines with the world. The US along with the other countries of the Quad has agreed in March 2021 to provide 100 million doses of the vaccine developed by Johnson & Johnson to Asian countries by the end of 2022 to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine and Russia's Sputnik V are making their way across the globe.

China will now be faced with a new challenge – to gauge what proportion of these Western vaccines will go to the regions it has already tapped and strengthen its capacity to be able to successfully hold its position as a dominant supplier in those countries. China's vaccine diplomacy, its Health Silk Road Initiative and its global pledge are crucial for rebuilding its international image, especially as an intensive investigation of the labs at Wuhan, epicentre of the virus' outbreak, is underway.

### Global COVID-19 Vaccine supply by People's Republic of China (in lakhs)

Region - India's Neighbourhood					
No.	Country	Grant	Commercial	Total Supplies	Manufacturers
1	Nepal	18	0	18	Sinopharm, Undisclosed
2	Bangladesh	5	0	5	Sinopharm
3	Sri Lanka	11	0	11	Sinopharm
4	Pakistan	108.8	10	118.8	CanSino, Sinopharm, Sinovac
5	Afghanistan	4 (pending)	0	0	Sinopharm
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 countries</b>	<b>139.8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>139.8</b>	<b>Major provider - Sinopharm</b>

\*Collated from various sources by Shweta Kushe, IR Intern at CPPR - \* Numbers as on June 7, 2021

### Region - Africa

No.	Country	Grant	Commercial	Total Supplies	Manufacturers
1	Morocco	0	85	85	Sinopharm
2	Algeria	2	0	2	Sinopharm
3	Mauritania	33	0	0	Sinopharm
4	Senegal	3	2	5	Sinopharm
5	Guinea	4	3	7	Sinopharm, Sinovac
6	Sierra Leone	2	0	2	Sinopharm
7	Togo	2	0	2	Sinovac
8	Benin	1	1.03	2.03	Sinovac
9	Niger	4	0	4	Sinopharm
10	Libya	15	0	15	Sinovac
11	Egypt	6.5	30	36.5	Sinopharm
12	Tunisia	2	0	2	Sinovac
13	Sudan	2.5	0	2.5	Sinopharm
14	Ethiopia	3	0	3	Sinopharm
15	Somalia	2	0	2	Sinopharm
16	Uganda	3 (pending)	0	0	Sinovac
17	Cameroon	2	0	2	Sinopharm
18	Gabon	1	0	1	Sinopharm
19	Congo	1	0	1	Sinopharm



20	Equatorial Guinea	1	0	1	Sinopharm
21	Angola	2	0	2	Sinopharm
22	Namibia	1	0	1	Sinopharm
23	South Africa	10 (pending)	0	0	Sinopharm
24	Mozambique	2	0	2	Sinopharm
25	Zimbabwe	5	13.44	18.44	Sinopharm, Sinovac
26	Botswana	2	0	2	Sinovac
27	Zambia	0.136	0	0.136	Sinopharm
<b>Total</b>	<b>27 countries</b>	<b>99.136</b>	<b>134.47</b>	<b>233.6</b>	<b>Major provider - Sinopharm</b>

\*Collated from various sources by Shweta Kushe, IR Intern at CPPR - \* Numbers as on June 7, 2021

Region - West and Central Asia					
No.	Country	Grant	Commercial	Total Supplies	Manufacturers
1	Turkey	0	200	200	Sinovac
2	Lebanon	0	0.9	0.9	Sinopharm
3	Syria	1.5	0	1.5	Sinopharm
4	Jordan	0	1.96	1.96	Sinopharm
5	Iraq	2.5	0	2.5	Sinopharm
6	Georgia	1	1	2	Sinovac, Sinopharm
7	Armenia	1	0	1	Sinopharm
8	Azerbaijan	0	45	45	Sinovac
9	Iran	2.5	1	12.5	Sinopharm, Undisclosed
10	Uzbekistan	0	1	0	Zhifei Longcom
11	Kyrgyz Republic	1.5	0	0	Sinopharm
12	Mongolia	3	12	15	Sinopharm
13	United Arab Emirates	0	30	30	Sinopharm
14	Oman	1	0	1	Sinovac
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 countries</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>262.86</b>	<b>275.86</b>	<b>Major provider - Sinopharm</b>

\*Collated from various sources by Shweta Kushe, IR Intern at CPPR - \* Numbers as on June 7, 2021

Region - South East Asia and Pacific					
No.	Country	Grant	Commercial	Total Supplies	Manufacturers
1	Myanmar	5	0	5	Sinopharm
2	Thailand	5	55	60	Sinovac
3	Malaysia	0	5	5	Sinopharm
4	Laos	14.02	0	14.02	Sinopharm
5	Cambodia	17	40	57	Sinovac, Sinopharm
6	Malaysia	0	5	5	Sinovac
7	Singapore	0	2	2	Sinovac
8	Indonesia	770	5	775	Sinovac, Sinopharm
9	Philippines	10	45	55	Sinovac
10	Timor Leste	15	0	0	Sinovac
11	Papua New Guinea	2	0	0	Undisclosed
12	Solomon Islands	0.5	0	0.5	Sinopharm
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 countries</b>	<b>838.52</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>995.52</b>	<b>Major provider - Sinovac</b>

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Region – Americas					
No.	Country	Grant	Commercial	Total Supplies	Manufacturers
1	Dominican Republic	0.5	47.68	48.18	Sinovac, Sinopharm
2	El Salvador	1.5	20	21.5	Sinovac
3	Mexico	0	98.25	98.25	CanSino, Sinovac, Sinopharm
4	Argentina	0	30	30	Sinopharm
5	Chile	0	174.72	174.72	CanSino, Sinovac
6	Uruguay	0	17.5	17.5	Sinovac
7	Paraguay	0	2.7	2.7	Sinovac, Sinopharm
8	Brazil	0	292	292	Sinovac
9	Bolivia	2	8.35	10.35	Sinopharm
10	Peru	0	13	13	Sinopharm
11	Ecuador	2.2	15	17.2	Sinovac
12	Colombia	0	29.72	29.72	Sinovac

13	Trinidad and Tobago	1	0	1	Sinopharm
14	Venezuela	5	13	18	Sinopharm, Undisclosed
15	Guyana	0.2	0	0.2	Sinopharm
<b>Total</b>	<b>15 countries</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>761.92</b>	<b>774.32</b>	<b>Major provider - Sinopharm</b>

\*Collated from various sources by Shweta Kushe, IR Intern at CPPR - \* Numbers as on June 7, 2021

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