



## New Great Power Competition And Covid-19

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### Abstract

*The competition among great powers in the COVID-19 is the prime focus of this paper. As the great powers China, Russia and United States instead of cooperating in the crisis situation and generating global response towards pandemic they started accusing each other for the spread of virus. These great powers adopted vaccine nationalism and went for vaccine diplomacy. Moreover these great powers manufactured their own vaccines and promoted self-manufactured vaccines instead of generating collectively response towards the crisis resultantly which created more challenges for world.*

**Key Words:** New Great Power Competition, China, Russia, United States, Covid-19

### Introduction

SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is a major shock as it impacted the international politics and global economy and had across the board impacts. The pandemic of coronavirus revealed numerable shortcomings and deficiencies in the governance of international system. Further the pandemic worsen the human security and moreover it has intensified the great power competition as it has deepened the conflict between United States and China.

Selino Ho, assistant professor in international affairs at National University of Singapore states that the corona pandemic has given rise to unstable bipolarity and it can pave way for multipolarity if left to deteriorate as in the light of historical context it is clear that the great crises have tendency to create impacts at global level and hence causing change in the balance of power. For instance the 2008 financial crisis exposed the weakness of the western economic system consequently leading to shift in balance of power as state like China remained unscarred. The incident of

9/11 change the way the states perceived threats previously and states realize that the non-state actors can play major threat in emanating the threats consequently resulting in reapportionment of resources in order to mitigate the threat. (Joel B. 2021)

### Deeping of US and China strategic Competition in Covid Time

In the times of COVID-19 the great powers did not effectively cooperate and lack coordinated response to pandemic. The SARS CoV- 2 has intensified the competition between the two great powers China and U.S. and has deteriorated the bilateral relations between two states. Two great powers instead of cooperating in the crisis so as to attenuate the disastrous outcomes of pandemic got involved in the scuffle of from where the virus has emerged and hence involved in the blame game. Both sates inculpate each other for the pandemic and hence mutual scapegoating continued for months or years. The reason was

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that the states were hit hard band were focused internally only. But the major or profound reason due to which states were not able to cooperate was the feature of global politics. ([Barras, V. 2014](#))

## Conspiracy Theories

### US Accusing China Regarding the Spread of Virus

As the virus spread across the globe American president Donald Trump stated that he has high confidence that the outbreak of virus was from China without stating the evidence. He said that he had high confidence that the coronavirus pandemic outbreak from the China laboratory, Wuhan institute of virology. When Trump was asked by reporter regarding the origin of virus he responded that “We should have the answer to that in the not so distant future and that will determine a lot how I feel about China.” Regarding the evidence he stated that he was not allowed to tell that. New York Times delineated that those officials of Trump administration have pushed spy agencies to hunt for evidence to support unsubstantiated theory” that the origin of the pandemic was Wuhan laboratory. Hence ‘The times’ affirmed that “The effort comes as President Trump escalates a public campaign to blame China for pandemic”. ([Barnaby, F. 1988](#))

Moreover The American president Donald Trump called the virus as Chinese virus. According to Factbase website the expression of Chinese virus was used by President nearly 20 times. This deliberate use of expression explicit the growing rivalry between both sates. Moreover he was criticized by many people for using such expression as they considered Trump act as racist and anti-Chinese. According to some experts it could result in xenophobia. ([Harris, E. D. 2016](#)) But Trump defended his act by responding that “It was not racist at all” , moreover saying that “it comes from China that is why he is calling it so.” This act angered the Chinese and some of the Chines experts believe that labeling it as Chinese virus will only increase tensions between two great powers. According to Scott Kennedy who is China expert at Center for Strategic and International Studies this act is fueling hatred against American among Chinese. The enhanced competition and lack of

cooperation in Covid times among great powers was evident by the U.S act when it announced that U.S would halt the funding to WHO as it believes that WHO does not filled it basic duty in response to pandemic . He incriminated WHO by saying that it not only mismanage but also hide the fact of origin of virus. Trump stated that the agency was covering up for China. ([Report. 2006](#)) He stated that America grants 500 million dollar per year to China while China gives 38 million dollars a year but the America generosity had been neglected and moreover he added that if we are unable to trust the health agency then “our country will be forced to find other ways to work with other nations to achieve public health goals.”

Trump was widely criticized for the act and even the secretary general of UN stated that it this was not time to cut down the resources but rather the international community should work together in order to mitigate the challenges posed by the pandemic.

### China Accusing Us Regarding The Spread Of Virus

In response to U.S accusation regarding the spread of virus from Wuhan the Chinese diplomats accused U.S for spreading the infectious virus. As Washington sent 17 teams of nearly 280 players and other staff members to CSIM Military world games in Wuhan in 2019 which was the origin and from where the pandemic spread hence Chinese spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that “It is possible that the U.S military brought virus to Wuhan.” He further added that “U.S has to be transparent and make public its figures. The U.S owes us an explanation.” ([Fischer, J. E. 2004](#))

President Trump on viewing the Chinese accusation stated that he was calling the virus as Chinese virus so as to counter the erroneous and disinformation campaign which was being developed by the officials of China that US armed forces were responsible for pandemic. Trump responded that he did not like that the Chinese accused US military and even stated that American forces gave it to them. Further he added that “I think saying

that our military gave it to them creates a stigma” ([Hoyt, K. 2003](#))

### **Non-Cooperative Attitude**

The competition phenomenon does not allow great powers to cooperate even. Great power like U.S and China due to this competition instead of cooperating in crucial times when whole world was under deadly pandemic and people were losing their lives they got involved in accusation and condemning each other for spread of Virus.

Moreover the non-cooperative attitude was also evident by initial unwillingness of China to allow WHO team to visit Wuhan (the origin of virus) and later not allowing in next stage to audit the laboratories where virus was identified. The Chinese health minister considered it as “disrespect for common sense and arrogance towards science”. ([Riedel, S. 2004](#)) The one of the microbiologists Dwyer told that WHO team asked for raw patient data but they only got summary. As the team seeks primary data of the recognized 174 cases of Covid-19 which appeared from Wuhan but according to WHO team only half of cases were uncovered to the market of seafood from where the case of first Covid patient was initially identified. Moreover the director of UN Ghebreyesus stated that he was “very disappointed” as China has not yet completed the permission for the arrival of WHO team and further added that “the two members had already began their journeys and other were not able to travel at the last minute.” ([Smithson, A. E. 2020](#))

United States accused China of obscuring the outbreak of virus in initial phase and besides also criticizing on maintaining terms on the WHO team which is against the freedom. As the team was not allowed to interview the people who were present there and even the members of community. The members of investigation team even told that dissent over the records of sufferers of Covid “were so tense that they sometimes erupted into shouting matches.” ([Henriksen, T. 1995](#))

Moreover the lack cooperation was also exhibited when members of G-7 states sparred over whether to consider as the origin of pandemic and what named should be given to virus.

The contention between both states existed even before the emergence of pandemic but now has outstretched in various domains like technological advancements and public health sector. “Biotechnology and vaccine development have become new areas of competition.” These states do not allow use of other vaccines hence does not recognize other vaccine and not even approve use of it. The foreigners are required to get vaccinated by specific vaccine which the state has allowed.

China allows only those foreigners to enter in its territory “who have had Chinese made vaccine.” China has opened its borders for many states including Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, and Australia and US but foreigners from these states can only enter China if they are vaccinated and vaccine dose must be China produced shots. Hence China does not accept the use of other vaccine even if they are approved by World Health Organization. This increasing rivalry will aggravate the mistrust between two states. Moreover this non-cooperation and resentment of both states influence the policies in various issue areas. ([IPI. 2021](#))

China also uses vaccine for its political benefits and hence received condemnation over its acts. As people republic of China has announced that any state who seek to build diplomatic ties must end its relations with Taiwan. Taiwan hence accused China for using vaccine as a tool to build diplomatic ties with allies of Taiwan. Nicaragua was able to received vaccine from China after cutting its ties with Taiwan. The state of Nicaragua collected one million Chinese vaccines after it ended its diplomatic ties with Taiwan and exhibited its allegiance with Beijing. Taiwan was dismayed by Nicaragua action and even the authorities stated that Taiwan was “deeply saddened” as Nicaragua had “disregarded many years of friendship.”

Moreover Honduras, Central American country who previously maintains its ties with Taiwan and does not possess formal relations with China also seeks to establish ties with Beijing in order to have access to China vaccine. President of Honduras Julian Orlando even stated that “they could open a trade office in China so as to acquire coronavirus vaccines.” Honduran president believe that it is in best

interest of people of his state and even said that in order to have access to vaccine he would do as the China has suggested and would look for “diplomatic bridge.” Orlando moreover stated that developed states have “hoarded” the global supply of vaccines which the poor states need and hence in order to help its people during an outbreak he would do whatever he deemed necessary.

U.S as a result has denounced China acts and criticized the “cynical use” of COVID vaccine in the pandemic time and seeking political purposes. The United States being wary of Chinese presence on continent responded that U.S stand with Honduras in Covid times. In response to this, Chinese government repudiates the use of vaccine to attain political power in region and in return accused America for its hypocrisy and stockpiling of vaccines. Beijing believes that those could be used to assist the developing states. (News. R. 2002)

The Two states instead of working together in crisis so as to combat the situation effectively have moved to next level in competition and rivalry. Moreover the impotence of institutes and states in West to overcome the disaster has generated a feeling of triumphalism in China as it views it as a proof that US is declining.

In 2020 World Health Organization, EU and France set up an initiative COVAX whose aim was to develop, produce and provide equitable access of Covid-19 vaccine. The focus of initiative was to draw together states, global organizations and civil societies and provide “innovative and equitable access to Covid-19 diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines” Further the platform was to provide support to research and manufacture wide range of vaccines. Moreover all the participating nations will have equal access to vaccine.

The great powers including U.S, China and Russia declined to join the initiative. Although severe pressure at international level was to join the initiative but these major powers immediately decline the idea and decided not to work together. Their main aim was to first serve their own citizens and bring out their own state out of crisis. These major powers assisted the developing states in crisis and give out vaccines to them only after their own

populations were served. Hence these great powers were not thinking to overcome global crisis and pandemic collectively rather responded individually towards pandemic. These states wanted to possess complete control over process instead of adhering to global rules. (Clark, J. 2008)

Great powers in the pandemic were prompted by ‘vaccine nationalism’. Vaccines were even stockpiled while the developing states were struggling hard to overcome the crisis. Even Great power like United States turned up as vaccine nationalist that previously always used to play the role of global leader. As in the pandemic of swine flu (2009) and Ebola outbreak (2014) U.S played role of world leader while containing the spread of disease. But in the Covid outbreak U.S does not play role of global leader rather it tried to evade from its obligation and was even skeptical regarding role of World Health Organization. American President even halted WHO funds as he believed that WHO was biased towards China. Moreover he condemns that United Nations agency not only mismanages but also covers up the outbreak of pandemic from where it initially emerged. The administration of Donald Trump also reduced staff members more than two thirds in the health agency of America which operates in China. The reductions were mostly in the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which operates in Beijing.

## Vaccine Diplomacy

China besides requirement of using Chinese vaccine for its foreigners China is also distributing its vaccine to other states. This supplying of vaccines to other states has been termed as ‘vaccine diplomacy’ and is being consider as a China’s drive to improve its position as a benefactor who contributes to improve global health standards. As the great power or world leader always take responsibility like U.S played role as a global leader in the outbreak of Ebola and Swine flu. It is considered that China is also trying to carve its identity as world leader; one who tries to pulls out developing states from crisis as this production and distribution of vaccines allow nations to build soft power. (Hoyt, K. & Brooks, S. G. 2003)

Moreover China besides focusing on strengthening technological advancement capabilities it also focuses on extending its values in international system. For instance Serbia was the first to acquire vaccines from China as currently it is laying foundation of Europe largest Confucius institute which will focus on culture and history of China. Although spokesperson of foreign affairs ministry says that the purpose of granting vaccine aid to other states was not to pressurize other states to recognize the Chinese vaccine.

In addition to vaccine diplomacy maneuver certain China's actions show coercive tactic while granting vaccine donations to other states. For instance China pressurized Ukraine for raising its voice for Uighurs Muslims which are being ill-treated in the Xinjiang region of China. Additionally China accuses Japan of political manipulation and also criticizes the U.S for interfering in internal affairs of China on the Taiwan issue. Beijing states that the two states are "ganging up to form cliques and fanning bloc confrontation." (Riedal, S. 2004)

Besides China, EU has sent vaccines to Balkan states so as to counter the rising influence of Russia in region.

Russia also during the Covid duration promoted its vaccine 'Sputnik V'. Russia like China also donated vaccine so as to "form a more visible presence and reclaim some relevancy in the region." Russian purpose of granting donations is same as of China as it seeks influence in region and profit. Russia initially donated 80,000 Sputnik V to Philippines, 1000 to Vietnam but later it sold vaccine to states like Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam as all these states announced to purchase Sputnik V from Russia. This vaccine diplomacy of Russia focus on broader strategic goals as the region of Southeast Asia holds high precedence for Russia as for other great

powers like China and USA. The donation of vaccines allows Russia to project itself as great power and play active role in the health sector. Russia even in the last year highlighted its vision for Asia Pacific and even Russian foreign minister Lavrov stated that "Russia's relief aid and vaccine sales contribute to the health and safety of the human beings" across the region and will "[restore] normal post-Covid life."

China and Russia not only went for vaccine diplomacy rather took hold of opportunity as a result of slow distribution of vaccine by EU hence sowing division within European Union members. As Hungary overtly denounces the distribution process of vaccine by EU and moreover decided to vaccinate its citizen with Chinese and Russian vaccine.

## **Conclusion**

Hence we can say that in the outbreak of corona virus and deadly pandemic the great powers of the world instead of cooperating and generating collective response towards the catastrophe these powers looked for personal motives and manipulate the global politics like Nicaragua was able to attain aid by China only after cutting of its relations by Taiwan. Moreover these states involved themselves in stockpiling of vaccines instead of realizing the fact the poor states are going through worst pandemic of all times. As these great powers are in the competition thus even in the crisis they look for opportunities to fulfill their personal vested interests. These great powers due to competition do not cooperate and hence are unable to generate collective response towards pandemic. As a result of this competition this increasing challenges for other states to face the pandemic situation and moreover the threats and vulnerabilities also increase at global level also.



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