

# CHINA'S POLITICIZED VACCINE DIPLOMACY

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China's rhetoric and behaviour contradict each other when it comes to vaccines.

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China is using vaccines as a pressure tool in the service of its foreign and security policy goals.

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The success of Western vaccines has reduced the leverage of Chinese vaccines.

In 2021, China constantly reiterated that life-saving vaccines should not be “contaminated with the political virus”. However, China's behaviour throughout the year showed the opposite.

When Western countries began to mass vaccinate their populations at the beginning of the year, the Chinese state-controlled media disproportionately spotlighted the first deaths and the public's hesitations about the new vaccine. Conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus having escaped from a United States military laboratory in Fort Detrick, Maryland, were actively disseminated.

There is a widespread perception among Chinese foreign ministry press officials that media is not necessarily there to spread facts, but rather to use little tricks to distort the picture, advance the Chinese narrative, and direct media coverage towards topics suitable for China. The goal is to get people talking and find like-minded people in the West who agree with China's eccentric views.

**Chinese Foreign Ministry press officials consider the press as a tool to advance the Chinese narrative and use tricks to distort the picture.**

Western social media channels are helping to spread the Chinese narrative, with Chinese diplomats, journalists and foreign missions actively creating new accounts over the past year. At the same time, Western accounts on Chinese social media are being deleted more and more vigorously since these, according to the Chinese leadership, are spreading lies and disinformation. China is also repeatedly reciting the claims that it is being bullied and mistreated.

According to massive media coverage in China, the West has also been unfair towards the health of humankind as a whole by distributing coronavirus vaccines only to its own citizens. China, on the other hand, began distributing its vaccine around the world in early 2021. Chinese foreign missions were instructed that both local and international media must cover the arrival of Chinese vaccines.

At the same time, the Chinese prime minister's office was well aware that the Chinese vaccine may not be particularly effective. This knowledge reached the prime minister's office as early as October 2020, when masses of vaccinated Chinese workers fell ill at a facility with 2,000 workers in Vladivostok. China started vaccinating its citizens working at foreign sites against COVID-19 as early as June 2020. It made vaccination

against COVID-19 a requirement for employees of state enterprises to work abroad. Over time, however, it became apparent that many did not develop antibodies after vaccination, and as in Vladivostok, masses of people caught the virus. This information was relayed to the prime minister's office.

**The Chinese prime minister's office became aware of the vaccine's possible inefficacy in October of 2020, when a large number of Chinese workers at a factory in Vladivostok became ill.**

However, a few months later, China supplied its vaccines to other countries. While doing so, it insisted on a liability waiver, meaning that the responsibility for the efficacy and any possible consequences of using the Chinese vaccines lay with the country of destination rather than the manufacturer or the Chinese government. China was thus free from any accountability.

At the same time, the world was uncertain about the efficacy of the Chinese vaccines, as the manufacturers did not publish the relevant data for a long time. The Chinese state instructed vaccine manufacturers to share data selectively and on the principle that the manufacturer should send the information directly to Western media outlets, which the Chinese media would then in turn be obligated to quote for their own audiences.

Having drawn a lot of attention to vaccines with its vast production capacity and mass media coverage, China decided to exploit this. For example, Chinese vaccines were delivered as a "reward" to countries that, in accordance with the wishes of the Chinese leadership, changed their position in international organisations on the cultural genocide perpetrated against minorities in Xinjiang.

When cajoling did not work, China began to work aggressively with the Islamic member states in the UN Human Rights Council to get them to change their positions. This was done by Chinese ambassadors in the target countries, mainly through the local foreign ministries and by Chinese foreign ministry officials in Beijing.

When it became clear to China in mid-2021 that its vaccine triumph had run its course and countries' interest to buy Chinese vaccines was waning, Beijing opted for blackmail.



The assistance provided by the Communist Party of China under its vaccine diplomacy tagline "For Shared Future" stems from China's hegemonic desire to restore a community of vassal states led by Beijing.

Source: imago images/Xinhua

For example, citizens of some countries were required to get a Chinese vaccine in order to obtain a Chinese visa. The Chinese foreign ministry has publicly denied this. Still, when Ukrainian citizens, for example, applied for a Chinese visa, they were required to present a certificate of immunisation with a Chinese vaccine. Of course, the vaccine could only be administered in Ukraine, forcing the Ukrainian government to approve and purchase the Chinese vaccine. There are more examples like this from other countries. Blackmail was a method used for the distribution of the vaccine worldwide.

However, the principle of “a Chinese vaccine for a Chinese visa” was not applied universally. No such requirement was imposed on EU citizens, for example. However, China looked for an EU member state through which to obtain approval for its vaccine from the European Medicines Agency. Hungary and Austria were selected as states through which China could try to reach the European Medicines Agency.

**Chinese workers involved in overseas projects began to demand the BioNTech vaccine through Fosun Pharma; this led to the vaccine being banned.**

China itself was strongly opposed to Western vaccines. For example, when Chinese workers involved in overseas projects began to demand the BioNTech vaccine through Fosun Pharma due to dissatisfaction with Chinese vaccines among state enterprise employees and diplomats, China banned the vaccine. Despite this, Chinese diplomats and employees of state enterprises living abroad eventually began to seek Western vaccines.

While Chinese vaccines have undoubtedly saved and will continue to save millions of lives, alongside this positive aspect China is aggressively trying to strengthen its influence by any means possible, including through politicised vaccine diplomacy. Considering its so-called mask diplomacy in 2020 saw Chinese state media claim that personal protective equipment should be supplied only to countries that are not critical of China, it is very likely that with a highly effective vaccine, China would have used it to exert pressure on other countries. However, thanks to the success of Western science, this effort failed, and the countries that initially bought Chinese vaccines switched to Western ones in quick succession. Kuwait even banned anyone vaccinated with the Chinese vaccine from entering the country without an additional injection with a Western vaccine.

It is our assessment that China’s behaviour throughout 2021 confirms its desire to use strong-armed, underhanded, and politicised vaccine diplomacy to undermine Western positions.