

Vaccines as a geopolitical tool

Text: Walter Feichtinger

At the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus spread so rapidly that on 11 March the WHO declared the outbreak a global pandemic. In the process, the development of effective vaccines turned into a global race.



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By the end of April 2021, more than 3 million people had died as a result and nearly 150 million people across 190 countries had become infected. In the end, it was Russia's President Putin who on 11 September 2020 announced the (emergency) approval of the Sputnik V vaccine to the media. China, the US as well as European companies followed suit. While demand is huge, it takes time to ramp up production, so vaccines are still in short supply in many places as of mid-2021. And when it comes to the export of vaccines, it becomes clear that next to humanitarian aspects, geopolitical considerations are playing an important role as well.

In short, there are three phenomena that appear to be especially significant.

Firstly, both the fight against the pandemic as well as the distribution of vaccines are taking place against the backdrop of an increasingly contentious rivalry between China and the USA. Soon after the outbreak of the pandemic, a dispute arose about its origin. Despite Wuhan clearly being the first coronavirus hotspot, Beijing made the bold claim that US military athletes had first introduced the pathogen back in October 2019. Washington fired back immediately with the catchword "China virus". In the fight against COVID-19, the central government based in Beijing preceded extremely rigorously and successfully, accompanied by propagandistic images of, for example, the construction of a hospital within a span of only a few days, while US President Trump played down the danger of the virus. China was keen to demonstrate to the whole world its ability to act and thereby the apparent superiority of its own political system over "incompetent democracies".

Both sides developed vaccines very quickly, but when it came to the distribution to other countries the US pursued an "America First" policy, while China early on decided to sell or give away millions of doses to friendly states. This helped Beijing strengthen its "community of common destiny" narrative in which it ascribes to itself a moral leadership role. The image of the "helper in need" can also be well contrasted with the image of the egoistic West and its factual and moral "failure". China is more than happy to accept the

role of the saviour, especially from European nations such as Serbia or Hungary. The newly elected US President Joe Biden, on the other hand, has focused on domestic policy. He increased the number of daily vaccinations to two million while keeping the export ban.

Secondly, it is worth noting that priority is being given to those countries where China, Russia and India are also pursuing their own strategic interests. Vaccines are an ideal means for the deployment of soft power, where aid and support are used for the purpose of persuasion. This improves one's own standing while weakening that of one's competitors. The USA successfully employed this tried and tested foreign policy strategy after WW2 – now, China has adopted it in the context of the fight against the pandemic. In the course, political relations can be deepened, new contacts forged, and cooperation intensified. However, it can also lead to dependencies, which can then be taken advantage of both politically as well as economically.

For example, we can see India and China practically courting Seychelles with vaccines. The situation is similar in Mexico, where Russia is a third supplier. India wants to counter China's growing influence in its neighbours Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal or Sri Lanka by supplying the coronavirus vaccine free of charge. However, following the rapidly rising infection figures in April 2021, all available doses will probably be more urgently needed at home for the time being. It is also notable that Indonesia is receiving a considerable number of the vaccines being exported by China. In this context, it is worth mentioning that a fierce geopolitical tug-of-war has been taking place in the Indo-Pacific in recent years between China, the USA and India. India fears China's rising influence in the region, while Beijing is systematically buying up or leasing ports and forging both civil and military use contracts (the "string of pearls") as part of its maritime Silk Road along the sea routes to Africa and Europe. The US is concerned about freedom of navigation if China is able to increasingly control sea routes.

In the Western Balkans, too, it is unlikely that Chinese and Russian vaccines were deployed for humani-

tarian purposes only. Both China and Russia are trying to expand their influence in individual countries in order to undermine EU ambitions. EU members Hungary and accession candidate Serbia are praising Russian and Chinese aid, while accusing the EU of failure – contrary to the real facts and figures. EU Council President Michel accuses China and Russia of "vaccine propaganda". What is clear is that a divided EU weakens Brussels' position against Beijing and Moscow.

And thirdly, a geopolitical effect can also be observed within the EU. For as a result of the pandemic and the vaccine procurement efforts, we are seeing a further deepening of cooperation. However, there were also enormous teething problems in getting the fight against the coronavirus and the vaccine supply on track. After the rapid increase in infections and many deaths in Bergamo, Italy, national reflexes such as border closures and export bans briefly dominated. This was followed by the quick recognition that only a joint and concerted effort could lead to long-term success. Coordination measures, mutual support when it comes to patient care as well as a joint vaccine procurement programme, but above all the extraordinary agreement on a 750-billion-euro reconstruction fund, led to a quick turnaround. Even if individual member states granted emergency approvals to Chinese or Russian vaccines – in the end, it is clear to everyone that it will take EU-wide solutions in the health sector in the medium term. The development of production capacities in Europe to reduce dependencies and prevent supply chain interruptions can likewise only be achieved in the context of a united EU. The importance of the much-cited strategic autonomy of the EU, which, next to healthcare, is also relevant to the economy and the energy sector, is now universally understood.

At this point, it should also be mentioned that the EU together with the WHO and France had already initiated an international mechanism (known as ACT) in April 2020 in order to make diagnostics and treatments, as well as the development of vaccines, accessible to all countries. COVAX, the global vaccination programme, is also being largely funded by the EU.



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The pandemic and the measures taken to combat it can thus be seen as reinforcing existing trends. Propagandistic statements and images are confirming the thesis of a "system rivalry" between authoritarian China and liberal-democratic nations. Vaccines, on the other hand, have become a powerful means of showing solidarity on one hand and pursuing one's own interests abroad on the other. Vaccines have become a kind of geopolitical currency. Of course, this raises the question of how resilient and durable treaties and links can be that were forged in a time of crisis. This remains to be seen. The situation is similar in the EU, where the pandemic has strengthened EU-wide cooperation. Whether this will also lead to a substantial push towards greater autonomy will however depend on the political conviction and enthusiasm on all EU levels. ●

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