



How Chinese COVID-19 Vaccines Will Impact China-Indonesia Vaccine Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This research will discuss how Indonesia’s final-stage Sinovac clinical trial results will play a leading role in determining China’s diplomatic power amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper analyzes how vaccine diplomacy will impact China-Indonesia relations: if Sinovac proves inefficacious, Jakarta is unlikely to cut ties with Beijing but may consolidate relations with Washington. However, as the United States faces its own COVID-19 struggles, this paper examines how Beijing can continue to use vaccine diplomacy as leverage to strengthen and expand its influence in South China Sea (SCS) disputes with minimal interference from Washington. Additionally, the paper will evaluate how the reliability of China’s Sinovac vaccine—especially after Beijing’s supply of health care products to Europe were found to be of unsatisfactory quality—will affect the outcomes of vaccine diplomacy, determining whether Beijing can restore its reputation globally in order to facilitate bilateral or multilateral cooperation. Finally, the paper will assess how the outcome of China-Indonesia vaccine diplomacy will help determine China’s opportunities to compete with major Western powers in the global vaccine market in the long-term.

List of Abbreviations

BPOM: Food and Drug Supervisory Agency

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

COVID-19: Coronavirus

HSRI: Health Silk Road Initiative

SCS: South China Sea

WHO: World Health Organization

Overview

The major outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in China has largely been contained. As a result, China now endeavors to mass produce COVID-19 vaccines for sale overseas. In 2021, China aims to produce 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine shots.¹ As of the end of 2020, Indonesia had recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases among Southeast Asian countries² and a death toll of greater than 20,000.³ Despite this, the testing rate has been low. If mass COVID-19 testing were implemented, then it is plausible that the recorded nationwide COVID-19 infection rate would increase significantly. Under the consistently high recorded infection numbers, economic activity and performance in major and most populated regions, including Jakarta and Java, would likely be further restricted and compounded.⁴ As a result, Indonesia has had no choice but to order COVID-19 vaccines from overseas suppliers, despite the risk that the final-stage clinical trial data of some vaccines have yet to be released. So far, Indonesia has ordered more than 350 million vaccine doses from multiple Western and Chinese suppliers, including Western suppliers such as AstraZeneca and Chinese suppliers such as Sinovac and Sinopharm.⁵ For Sinovac, Indonesia received 1.2 million doses on Dec. 6, 2020.⁶ An additional 1.8 million⁷ and 15 million⁸ doses of Sinovac arrived at Indonesia on Dec. 31, 2020 and Jan. 12, 2021 respectively. Indonesia's procurement of Chinese COVID-19 vaccines cost the equivalent of about \$45 million.⁹ Indonesia spent another approximately \$19.68 million on the procurement of syringes, safety boxes, and swab alcohol. Additionally, \$13.48 million was used to purchase vaccine refrigerators and vaccine carriers.¹⁰

As of Dec. 10, 2020, Indonesia was by far the primary importer of Sinovac and Chinese vaccines (see Table 1). Indonesia's role as a recipient of Chinese vaccine procurement indicates that

¹ *The Japan Times* (2020). China's "Vaccine Diplomacy": A Global Charm Offensive. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/12/10/asia-pacific/china-vaccine-diplomacy/>

² *The Jakarta Post* (2020a). Indonesia's Latest Official COVID-19 Figures. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/23/indonesias-latest-covid-19-figures.html>

³ Centre for Strategic and International Studies (2020). Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0>

⁴ Indonesia has already experienced shortages of healthcare workers (*The Star* (2020). Indonesia: Doctor tells Jokowi about Shortage of Healthcare Workers in Video Call. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2020/09/27/indonesia-doctor-tells-jokowi-about-shortage-of-healthcare-workers-in-video-call>)

⁵ France24 (2020). Indonesia Places Risky Bet on Chinese Coronavirus Vaccines. Retrieved from <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201210-indonesia-places-risky-bet-on-chinese-coronavirus-vaccines>

⁶ *QUARTZ* (2020). China's Coronavirus Vaccine Diplomacy Has Already Begun. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1942494/indonesia-is-a-major-front-in-chinas-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy/>

⁷ *The Jakarta Post* (2020). More Sinovac Candidate Vaccine Doses Arrive. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/12/31/more-sinovac-candidate-vaccine-doses-arrive.html>

⁸ *The Jakarta Post* (2021). More Sinovac Vaccine Arrives in Indonesia ahead of Vaccination Drive. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/01/12/more-sinovac-vaccine-arrives-in-indonesia-ahead-of-vaccination-drive.html>

⁹ *The Jakarta Post* (2020b). Indonesia Spends \$45 million to Procure Millions of Vaccine Doses from China This Year. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/12/07/indonesia-spends-45-million-to-procure-millions-of-vaccine-doses-from-china-this-year.html>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

China and Indonesia may take the opportunity of the public health crisis to strengthen diplomatic ties. However, if Sinovac fails to provide efficacy in preventing COVID-19 infection, then it is plausible that China-Indonesia relations, or China's relationship with developing countries in general, will be damaged. For Indonesia, Jakarta has taken a risk-mitigating decision in importing a number of different Chinese vaccines. In doing so, Jakarta is diversifying the risks, as Chinese vaccines have all yet to show promising results from final-stage clinical trials.

Table 1: Pre-Orders of China's COVID-19 Vaccines as of Dec. 10, 2020

	CanSino Biologics	Sinopharm	Sinovac
Bangladesh			100,000
Brazil			46,000,000
Chile			60,000,000
Indonesia	20,000,000	74,000,000	128,000,000
Mexico	35,000,000		
Turkey	50,000,000		

Quartz | qz.com | Data: Duke University Global Health Innovation Center | Note: Data as of Dec. 10, 2020

China has attempted to take advantage of the pandemic to strengthen its diplomatic influence. Yet, China's employment of mask diplomacy in the first half of 2020 by shipping masks and other health care goods—which were found to be in poor quality—to Europe significantly damaged China's reputation overseas and contributed to rising anti-China sentiment.¹¹ Chinese health officials also restricted and delayed the disclosure of COVID-19 information to the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020, at the critical nascent period of COVID-19 growth, further outraging the international community¹² and downgrading Beijing's diplomatic standing.

Within this context, this paper will examine how Indonesia's final-stage Sinovac clinical trial results will play a leading part in determining China's diplomatic power amid the pandemic and how the employment of vaccine diplomacy will impact China-Indonesia relations. Vaccine diplomacy is known as the use of vaccines to promote diplomatic relations between countries.¹³ If Sinovac is proven inefficacious, Jakarta is unlikely to cut ties with Beijing, but this may factor into a consolidation of relations between Washington and Jakarta. However, since the United States has had its own struggles in combating rising domestic COVID-19 rates, this paper

¹¹ *Newsweek* (2020). China's Mask Diplomacy Fails to Improve Europe's Opinion of Beijing. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/china-mask-diplomacy-fails-improve-european-opinion-beijing-1514129>

¹² *The Diplomat* (2020). China Delayed Releasing Coronavirus Info, Frustrating WHO. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/china-delayed-releasing-coronavirus-info-frustrating-who/>

¹³ *iNews* (2020). Vaccine Diplomacy: China and the West Take Different Strategies to Covid Vaccines for Poor Nations. Retrieved from <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/vaccine-diplomacy-covid-china-west-different-strategies-poor-nations-788553>

examines how Beijing can continue to use vaccine diplomacy as leverage to strengthen and expand its influence on South China Sea (SCS) disputes with minimal interference from Washington. Additionally, this paper will evaluate how the reliability of China's Sinovac vaccines, especially after Beijing's supply of health care products to Europe were found to be of unsatisfactory quality, will affect the outcomes of vaccine diplomacy. This paper will thereby decide whether Beijing can restore its reputation globally and facilitate bilateral or multilateral cooperation in this area. Finally, this paper will assess how the outcomes of China-Indonesia vaccine diplomacy will help determine China's opportunities to compete with major Western powers in the global vaccine market in the long-term.

Plans of the Distribution of Sinovac in Indonesia

The availability of final-stage clinical trial results of Sinovac in Indonesia is supposed to be the prerequisite for deciding whether Indonesia's Food and Drug Supervisory Agency (BPOM) will approve the mass vaccination of the Chinese drug nationwide.¹⁴ Once approval is granted, Balinese residents will be among the first to be vaccinated.¹⁵ Bali was ranked as the 19th most visited city or province in the world in 2019, with a total of 8.26 million international visitors.¹⁶ The plan to prioritize mass vaccination in Bali will likely boost revenues from international tourism regionwide and mitigate the problems of unemployment and underemployment in tourism-related industries in the province as soon as in 2021. In Indonesia, it is noteworthy that the biggest economic contraction was recorded in Bali, with a negative growth of 10.98% by the end of August 2020.¹⁷ This was primarily due to the fact that Bali's tourism revenues contributed between 54 and 58% of the province's economy.¹⁸ Although Indonesia reopened Bali for domestic tourism at the end of July 2020, Bali has continued to experience a substantial economic contraction.¹⁹ This indicates that international tourism plays a much bigger role than domestic tourism in supporting Bali's economy. To minimize the financial relief program required to sustain Bali's economy, it is urgent for Indonesia to implement a mass vaccination campaign for the local population to ensure the province can be made safe for tourism-activities as soon as possible.

Moreover, the Indonesian government has prioritized the delivery of Chinese vaccines to residents of Jakarta, Java, and Bali as the most populated and urbanized regions in Indonesia. This prioritization is influenced by the documented "urbanization" of the COVID pandemic and its rapid spread in areas of high population density.²⁰ Additionally, Indonesia's Disease

¹⁴ *ABC News* (2020), *ibid.*

¹⁵ *TTR Weekly* (2021). Bali Lines Up Its Tourism Workers for COVID Jobs. Retrieved from <https://www.ttrweekly.com/site/2021/03/bali-lines-up-its-tourism-workers-for-covid-jobs/>

¹⁶ Travel Medium (2020). What Are The 20 Most Visited Cities in the World? Retrieved from <https://travelmedium.com/blog/most-visited-cities-in-the-world>

¹⁷ *Coconuts* (2020). Bali Is the Hardest Hit Economy in Indonesia: Jokowi. Retrieved from <https://coconuts.co/bali/news/bali-is-the-hardest-hit-economy-in-indonesia-jokowi/>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Waktunya Merevolusi Pemberitaan (VOI)*. Bali's Economy Minus 12 Percent, Governor Wayan: The Pandemic Impact Is More Powerful than The Bali Bombings I And II. Retrieved from <https://voi.id/en/berita/36332/ekonomi-bali-minus-12-persen-gubernur-wayan-dampak-pandemi-lebih-dahsyat-dari-bom-bali-i-dan-ii>

²⁰ Marketplace (2020). COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout in Indonesia Faces Multiple Challenges. Retrieved from <https://www.marketplace.org/2020/12/21/covid-19-vaccine-rollout-in-indonesia-faces-multiple-challenges/>

Control and Prevention Director-General Achmad Yurianto stated that COVID-19 vaccines would only be distributed to citizens aged between 18 and 59.²¹ On one hand, the younger age groups are more likely to be hidden or asymptomatic spreaders. Immunization of this age group thereby provides protection to other demographic age groups by reducing transmission.²² Additionally, vaccinating the working age groups can help restore the country's economic activities, minimizing Indonesia's financial loss from the pandemic and the burdens of COVID-19 relief schemes. However, the elderly and children are among the most vulnerable groups that suffer from COVID-19 nationwide.²³ Overlooking the need to vaccinate these vulnerable groups could plausibly increase the death toll. While citizens at working ages can be vaccinated free of charge, Jakarta should allow Indonesian citizens at premature or retired ages to pre-order COVID-19 vaccines on a self-funded basis. In doing so, Indonesia would have the finances to purchase more Chinese vaccines, where Indonesian citizens, rather than Jakarta, would be bound by the additional procurement costs. Such a suggested policy would ease Jakarta's financial responsibilities, while enabling financially secure households to purchase Chinese vaccines for their non-working age members.

Final-Stage Clinical Trials of Sinovac

By December 2020, at least three Chinese COVID-19 vaccines had undergone or were undergoing final-stage clinical trials in at least 16 countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²⁴ These countries include Indonesia, Brazil, Chile, Turkey, and the Philippines. China's endeavors to carry out overseas clinical trials played a crucial role in testing how Chinese drugs react to different demographics.²⁵ Moreover, if clinical trial data are promising, Beijing could then give assurances to the developing, or even developed, countries that Sinovac and other leading Chinese vaccines are efficacious and reliable, insofar as China can maintain transparency and accuracy when disclosing clinical trial data. Any further restrictive or delayed delivery of relevant COVID-19 data will cost Beijing by further damaging its reputation and diplomatic power globally as well as negatively impacting its competitiveness in the global vaccine market in the long-term.

In Indonesia, 1,620 volunteers undertook the final-stage clinical trials for Sinovac in Bandung, West Java.²⁶ In the final-stage trials, volunteers were chosen on a random basis. Therefore, any results from final-stage testing will be more indicative than the first and second-stage trials—where randomized clinical trials were not applied. Therefore, it is important to wait until Indonesia's final-stage clinical trial results are published for Jakarta to make a decision on whether it should continue to rely primarily on Chinese rather than leading Western COVID-

²¹ ASEAN Briefing (2020). COVID-19 Vaccine Roll Outs in ASEAN & Asia – Live Updates by Country. Retrieved from <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/covid-19-vaccine-roll-outs-in-asean-asia-live-updates-by-country/>

²² Marketplace (2020), *ibid*.

²³ *The Jakarta Post* (2020). Indonesia Children Vulnerable to Secondary Risks from COVID-19 Crisis: Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/05/29/indonesian-children-vulnerable-to-secondary-risks-from-covid-19-crisis-survey.html>

²⁴ *ABC News* (2020), *ibid*.

²⁵ *QUARTZ* (2020), *ibid*.

²⁶ *The Jakarta Post* (2020c). Government, Bio Farma Secure Vaccine Bulk Supply from China's Sinovac. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/21/retno-bio-farma-secure-vaccine-bulk-supply-from-chinas-sinovac.html>

19 vaccines. However, prior to the announcement of final-stage outcomes, Jakarta and Beijing have already signed an agreement where Indonesia's state-owned vaccine producer, PT Bio Farma, is provided approval to produce 50 million-plus doses of Sinovac.²⁷ If promising results cannot be found, or fatal side effects are revealed, for the use of Sinovac, Jakarta will be financially impacted to a large extent due to significantly high numbers of pre-ordered Chinese COVID-19 vaccines. Moreover, Jakarta would also need to spend significant additional financial resources to increase procurement of major western COVID-19 vaccines to compensate. Because Bali and other major regions of Indonesia have recorded economic contractions due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the significant downturn in international tourism, Indonesia's economy may likely suffer further until the re-design and re-implementation of COVID-19 plans are applied, if Sinovac proves to be unreliable.

Vaccine Diplomacy

Despite the uncertainty of Chinese vaccine' efficacy, Indonesia is the leading country in forming vaccine-related diplomatic relations with China. On one side, Jakarta may prefer maintaining good relations with Beijing to boost bilateral economic cooperation in the post-pandemic epoch. On the other hand, amid the outbreak of the pandemic, Jakarta is desperate to employ mass vaccination as soon as possible to mitigate the financial loss due to economic inactivity and restrictions on international mobility.

In the first quarter of 2020, Beijing endeavored to send medical experts and equipment to overseas countries, including Italy and France. China also joined COVAX, a global initiative run by the WHO that aims to ensure the fair distribution of vaccines.²⁸ These moves reflected that Beijing was attempting to repair its reputation and conceptualize itself a major force in containing the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak.²⁹ As poorer, developing countries experience substantial financial barriers to Pfizer and Moderna vaccine—two Western drugs proven highly efficacious in preventing COVID-19 infection, China's distribution of Sinovac and other COVID-19 vaccines at particularly affordable prices can be seen as a necessary driver for combatting the pandemic in these less financially secure countries.³⁰ If Chinese vaccines prove efficacious, it is likely that China can form tighter ties with the developing world, benefitting China's development of economic partnerships in the long-term. In the midst of the United States-China trade war, the world may be further divided over diplomatic and economic issues, with the United States and its allies on one side and China and developing countries on the other. Here, it can be argued that the efficacy of Sinovac and other leading Chinese vaccines will significantly influence whether China can expand its international profile against the United States in terms of global leadership.

Although China joined COVAX, it is likely that Beijing will be able to exert more significant diplomatic and economic pressure on developing countries, including Indonesia, which has

²⁷ *The New York Times* (2020). From Asia to Africa, China Promotes Its Vaccines to Win Friends. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/business/china-vaccine-diplomacy.html>

²⁸ *The Guardian* (2020). China Hopes "Vaccine Diplomacy" Will Restore Its Image and Boost Its Influence. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/29/china-hopes-vaccine-diplomacy-will-restore-its-image-and-boost-its-influence>

²⁹ *QUARTZ* (2020), *ibid.*

³⁰ *ABC News* (2020), *ibid.*

procured Chinese vaccines.³¹ Such pressure can support Chinese political and military claims such as its disputed position on the SCS as well as setting up military bases overseas.³² Geographical and military expansion in critical and contested areas by China is a prominent battlefield between China and the United States, which will be briefly discussed later.

If Chinese vaccines are efficacious, then China may be able to change the narrative of COVID-19, from being the origin to the savior of the pandemic.³³ Even if China is not deemed the savior of pandemic-stricken countries due to their notorious failings in transparency in this area, Beijing can at least reduce diplomatic tensions with developing nations should its vaccines be proven efficacious.³⁴ A changing COVID-19 narrative in favor of China will minimize its barriers to expanding its diplomatic and economic influences overseas. China will be able to continue to economically exploit developing countries, including African and Southeast Asian countries, through unequal bilateral or multilateral trade deals. Developing countries, such as Indonesia, may be increasingly diplomatically and financially weakened in comparison to China, insofar as developing countries are asked to sign unequal terms in favor of China as a prerequisite to acquiring Chinese vaccines to overcome their public health crisis and long-term economic contractions. China's delivery of humanitarian aid overseas and, in return, request for aid-receiving countries' public applause is nothing new. When China employed its mask diplomacy in the first half of 2020, it required aid-receiving countries to praise China's public health transparency and humanitarian measures.³⁵

Beijing may continue to use approaches in its vaccine diplomacy, where China may conditionally send Chinese vaccines and health care products to developing countries.³⁶ In the long-term, it is very likely that Indonesia and among other developing countries will accrue high-interest diplomatic debt to China.³⁷ However, with high COVID-19 infection rates and death toll and limited financial capacities, Indonesia and other developing countries have limited options other than to pre-order Chinese vaccines in the hope that mass vaccinations will save lives and, eventually, recover economic performance in coming years. In the worst-case scenario, if new variants of COVID-19 continue to emerge and the public health crisis takes a much longer course, with more efforts at containment than expected, Jakarta may be highly dependent on Chinese supplies over the long-run. Such circumstances would further undermine Jakarta's diplomatic power and independence from Chinese influence.

Health Silk Road Initiative

³¹ *ABC News* (2020), *ibid.*

³² *Fance24* (2020), *ibid.*

³³ *The New York Times* (2020).

³⁴ *South China Morning Post* (2020). Coronavirus: China's Firms "Set to Export 400 Million Vaccine Doses." Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3114837/coronavirus-chinas-firms-set-export-400-million-vaccine-doses>

³⁵ Stanford University (2020). Mask Diplomacy: Chinese Narratives in the COVID Era. Retrieved from <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/covid-mask-diplomacy>

³⁶ Business Insider (2020). China Is Attempting to Win Political Points from the Coronavirus with "Mask Diplomacy" - But It Mostly Isn't Working. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/analysis-china-coronavirus-political-points-mostly-not-working-2020-4>

³⁷ *france24* (2020), *ibid.*

From the application of mask diplomacy to vaccine diplomacy, China has developed its HSRI as an alternative to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³⁸ Between 2016 and 2019, Beijing's funding for BRI decreased from \$75 billion to \$4 billion. The significant cut in funding has slowed China's economic cooperation with overseas countries, but the implementation of Health Silk Road Initiative (HSRI) offers China the opportunity to shore up its diplomatic and economic influences on other states, especially developing countries.

China-Indonesia vaccine diplomacy is seen as one of the core drivers of HSRI. As the biggest trading partner of Indonesia, China has invested in infrastructure and economic projects in Indonesia, including the construction of a high-speed trainline.³⁹ As China has nearly contained the outbreak of COVID-19 nationwide, Indonesia, other developing countries and major western powers have been struggling to overcome the pandemic. Beijing has therefore capitalized on its public health advantages to deliver the HSRI and send masks, protective gear, medical teams, and Chinese vaccines to Indonesia and other developing countries.⁴⁰ As the United States arguably distracted with handling its severe local COVID-19 outbreak, it is less likely that the western leader can spend significant efforts and resources to defy China's implementation of HSRI.

Not only does HSRI strengthen China-Indonesia diplomatic relations and economic partnerships, but the initiative also helps China to earn substantial direct profits of \$2.8 billion while capturing 15% of the vaccine market in developing countries.⁴¹ While developing countries have relatively limited financial capacity, especially when they experience economic downturns amid the pandemic, China takes this crucial opportunity to further financially exploit developing countries through the application of HSRI. An example of China's financial exploitation would be Beijing's decision to issue \$1 billion of loans to Latin American and Caribbean countries for procuring China's vaccines and health care products.⁴² Therefore, Latin American and Caribbean countries will be largely in China's debt, leading to an increase in Beijing's diplomatic influence on these developing countries. The pandemic and the associated impacts of China's implementation of HSRI have increased financial opportunities and diplomatic links between China and the rest of the world, or at least with the rest of the developing world.

South China Sea Disputes

The United States views Indonesia as one of the prominent strategic partners who has been defying China's increasing influence and military development in the South China Sea.⁴³ China has been escorted fishing vessels into Indonesia's Natuna Island territorial waters and proposing joint development in the SC South China Sea with a range of Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. In response, Jakarta has denied the joint development proposals

³⁸ *Nikkei Asia* (2020). China Forges on with Vaccine Diplomacy amid Pfizer Fanfare. Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/China-forges-on-with-vaccine-diplomacy-amid-Pfizer-fanfare>

³⁹ *Channel News Asia* (CNA) (2020). Indonesia Places Risky Bet on Chinese COVID-19 Vaccines. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/indonesia-risky-bet-chinese-covid-19-vaccines-sinovac-13741260>

⁴⁰ *The Guardian* (2020).

⁴¹ *The Japan Times* (2020).

⁴² *The Japan Times* (2020).

⁴³ *France24* (2020).

and sought to safeguard the sovereignty of Natuna Island.⁴⁴ The United States has been capitalizing on Jakarta's oppositional position to Beijing regarding the South China Sea dispute to maintain positive diplomatic relations with Indonesia, thereby minimizing China's increasing military power regionwide. For Indonesia, Jakarta has been maintaining diplomatic relationships with both Beijing and Washington rather than befriending one superpower over another.⁴⁵ In this instance, the outcomes of the tug of war between Beijing and Washington on continuing to build a positive diplomatic relation with Jakarta will impact China's military influence in the region.

In the midst of the pandemic, Beijing's vaccine diplomacy with Jakarta is likely to heighten ties between China and Indonesia, especially as China rather than the United States has the leverage to help Indonesia contain COVID-19. Additionally, the United States has been encountering problems of considerably high domestic COVID-19 infection rates alongside nationwide social and racial unrest. Therefore, the United States may not be available to intervene in combatting China's vaccine diplomacy to the same extent as the pre-pandemic epoch. China-Indonesia relations are likely to be further reinforced if Chinese vaccines are efficacious, indicating the potential increase in China's influence with regional states involved with the SCS dispute.

The Edge to China's Vaccines

Unlike most major Western COVID-19 vaccines, which require ultra-cold chain storage (Pfizer needs to be stored at -70 degree Celsius and Moderna needs to be stored at -20 degrees Celsius), Sinovac can be stored in standard refrigerators at between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius.⁴⁶ As the procurements of COVID-19 vaccines are already expensive, spending additional costs on purchasing ultra-cold storage equipment difficult for developing countries, especially when economic inactivity or underactivity can be seen in many countries amid the pandemic. Therefore, Indonesia, as a relatively poor developing country with the fourth-highest population in the world, faces sizable barriers to mass vaccination, if Pfizer or Moderna is primarily used. Sinovac, or other Chinese vaccines in the final-stage of clinical trials (such as Sinopharm) however are arguably therefore the best alternative for Indonesia's population to use.

If Chinese vaccines are efficacious to prevent COVID-19 infection and straightforward to manufacture, then it is crucial for China to transfer technology and enable local manufacturers in Indonesia and other developing countries to produce such COVID-19 vaccines, minimizing the transportation costs as well as procurement and distribution of vaccines locally. Therefore, technology transfer is one of the key strategies for hastening mass vaccination campaigns, especially in poor, developing countries.

Questionable Reliability of Chinese Vaccines

⁴⁴ *The Maritime Executive* (2020). Indonesia Should be Wary of Beijing's South China Sea Proposals. Retrieved from <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/indonesia-should-be-wary-of-beijing-s-south-china-sea-proposals>

⁴⁵ *Channel News Asia* (CNA) (2020), *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *BBC News* (2020). Covid: What Do We Know about China's Coronavirus Vaccines? Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55212787>

In China, over 1 million health care workers and other groups deemed to be high risk of COVID-19 infection have been vaccinated under emergency use of Chinese vaccines despite the fact that China has delayed the disclosure of the efficacy of the use of Chinese vaccines locally.⁴⁷ Additionally, as not until June 1, 2021 did WHO validate Sinovac for emergency use⁴⁸ and low efficacy rate of the Chinese vaccine, revealed by final-stage clinical data, against any diseases caused by COVID-19 (at 50.65%),⁴⁹ there has been significant skepticism regarding whether these Chinese vaccines are reliable.

To change the narrative of the pandemic and restore China's global standing, it is necessary for the global scientific community to review all phase three data and reach a decision that the vaccine is safe and efficacious. The pharmaceutical firm Sinovac Biotech Ltd. announced that the final-stage clinical trial data would be released in January 2021, as the company needed time to manage the clinical data from Indonesia, Brazil, and Turkey.⁵⁰ Sinovac Biotech Ltd eventually postponed the release of the clinical trial data to Feb. 5, 2021.⁵¹ The postponement of the release of phase three clinical trial data, the delay of validation by WHO and the less satisfactory efficacy rate have all been the factors for the international community to cast doubts on whether Sinovac is trustable.

The lack of Chinese transparency and arguable obfuscation of data regarding the COVID-19 outbreak combined with the failure of mass diplomacy have significantly lowered global trust in China. Even as the results of phase three data are not as promising as initially aimed or expected, it is needed for China to authentically publish these details. Otherwise, additional cover-up or fabrication of clinical trial data would reinforce the damage to Beijing's credibility, putting both HSRI and BRI at stake and potentially leading to an all-time high level of anti-China sentiments. Only by maintaining authenticity and transparency when unveiling phase three data of Chinese vaccines could China satisfy public scrutiny—a necessary stage for China to earn the trust from overseas countries for the development of healthier diplomatic, economic, and public health relations multilaterally.

For Indonesia, PT Bio Farma stated that the interim data show that Sinovac has 97% efficacy. It is necessary for Indonesia to wait until the publication of the finalized data in order to decide whether Sinovac should be used for mass vaccination by the approval of emergency-use authorization. However, Jakarta commenced the nationwide mass Sinovac inoculation from Jan. 14, 2021, much earlier than the release of phase three clinical data of the Chinese vaccine. As the concluding data fail to show as promising results as demonstrated in the interim data,

⁴⁷ *Associated Press* (2020). Concern among Muslims over Halal Status of COVID-19 Vaccine. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/immunizations-jakarta-indonesia-coronavirus-pandemic-china-fca994ba765735d277f736d9badb397c>

⁴⁸ World Health Organization (WHO). WHO Validates Sinovac COVID-19 Vaccine for Emergency Use and Issues Interim Policy Recommendations. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news/item/01-06-2021-who-validates-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-for-emergency-use-and-issues-interim-policy-recommendations>

⁴⁹ Precision Vaccinations (2021). CoronaVac COVID-19 Vaccine. Retrieved from <https://www.precisionvaccinations.com/vaccines/coronavac-covid-19-vaccine>

⁵⁰ *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) (2020). China's Sinovac Delays Covid-19 Vaccine Trial Results. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-sinovac-delays-covid-19-vaccine-trial-results-11608757865>

⁵¹ *Bloomberg* (2021). Sinovac Announces Phase III Results of Its COVID-19 Vaccine. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/press-releases/2021-02-05/sinovac-announces-phase-iii-results-of-its-covid-19-vaccine>

Indonesia has the responsibility to consider the workability and possibility of fatal side-effects linked to the Sinovac vaccination. With the lack of full consideration of these factors prior to releasing Sinovac to the market, it can be argued that Indonesia could be blamed for underreporting the risks and thereby potentially triggering both public resentment, and unrest against the government.

Competitions in the Global Vaccine Market

In developed Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, Pfizer and Moderna—where the final-stage clinical trial data reveal the shots are over 90% efficacious—have been primarily used for mass vaccinations. The United States’ Food and Drug Administration notes that Pfizer confers protection soon after the first shot.⁵² With the support of promising data obtained from rigorous, transparent final-stage clinical trials, leading non-Chinese COVID-19 vaccines are largely seen to be the most efficacious pharmaceutical products that are available in the market.

Contrastingly, China is relatively inexperienced in the global vaccine market.⁵³ In comparison to Pfizer and Moderna, Sinovac is by far financially affordable and logistically convenient COVID-19 vaccine. So far as Sinovac can be proven to be safe and efficacious, the Chinese vaccine can be seen as one of, if not the, most preferable COVID-19 vaccine. Not only will the final-stage clinical data of Chinese COVID-19 vaccines affect the narrative of the pandemic and the diplomatic influence of China, such data will also determine whether China can compete with leading western powers to invent more vaccines in order to prevent the infection of a range of global, fatal diseases within and beyond COVID-19 in the long-run. As the pharmaceutical industry is an extremely lucrative sector, it has the potential to be a significant revenue source and reinforce China’s diplomatic influence and global standing if it can establish itself one of the leading competitors in the global vaccine market.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after final-stage clinical trial data of Sinovac from Indonesia, Brazil, and Turkey are made available, publishing journal articles in leading academic journals that examine the efficacy and side-effects of Sinovac intake shall be prioritized. In doing so, China can transparently allow the global community of medical experts to review and criticize Sinovac, including how the Chinese drug affected the demographically varied Indonesian volunteers. Critical analysis of the use of Sinovac will be necessary in order for Indonesia and other developing countries to definitively decide whether emergency use authorization nationwide shall be granted. Moreover, such rigorous analysis may increase developed countries’ trust in Sinovac, if the Chinese vaccine shows promising results. Eventually, more countries may decide to procure Sinovac, given its relatively cheap cost compared to Pfizer and Moderna.

Even if promising results for China’s vaccines are not uncovered, it is China’s responsibility to transparently and honestly disclose all final-stage clinical trial data of Sinovac. Such data shall be helpful as a reference for other Chinese pharmaceutical firms to review and make adjustments on their invention, as well as clinical trial process, of COVID-19 vaccines, if

⁵² *QUARTZ* (2020a), *ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

necessary. In sum, changing the narrative of the pandemic cannot happen overnight. China shall maintain the highest level of scientific integrity in order to gradually earn the globe's trust.

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