

# COVID-19 and Superpower Competition:

## An Effective American Response

By Amit Gupta

Before COVID-19 became a global pandemic, the growing consensus among analysts was that we were entering a period of deglobalization. According to the economic analyst Mohammed el-Erian deglobalization was taking place because by the 2000s the adverse economic impact of globalization had become apparent to the Western middle class. Secondly, the U.S.-China trade war saw rising tariffs and a call for rebuilding national manufacturing capabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic was the last nail in the coffin as countries adopted highly individualistic and nationalistic policies that put national interest above any global concerns.<sup>1</sup> Coupled with the perceived drive to deglobalization is the fact that we have re-entered an era of great power competition with the 2017 National Security Strategy clearly stating that both Russia and China are revisionist powers that challenge American primacy and that, "... want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor."<sup>2</sup> What this article argues is that true security in the emerging international system will require precisely those aspects of globalization that the critics decry because no single country can effectively tackle such a complex and deadly threat as the COVID-19 pandemic



"U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue and Senator John Cornyn tour McLane Global, one of USDA's partners in feeding rural kids in Texas and across America who have been impacted by school closures as a result of COVID-19." (U.S. Department of Agriculture/Lance Cheung, July 16, 2020)

---

Dr. Amit Gupta is an Associate Professor at the Department of International Security Studies, U.S. Air War College.

through strictly national measures. Further, the emerging great power competition is one not just of military and economic rivalry but, much in the same way as during the Cold War, it is a struggle between different ways to organize societies and particularly to deliver goods and services efficiently and justly. With the latter in mind, how the United States and its allies and partners lead the response to COVID-19 will have an impact on the outcome of global power relationships. If China provides better solutions on dealing with the pandemic, then it will be able to undercut the American-created liberal international order. To discuss this issue, we need to first explain what globalization is and why, in a COVID-19 world, it provides the security solutions to the challenge posed by the disease.

### What is Globalization?

There is no single definition of globalization; descriptions include terms as diverse as “Americanization,” “Westernization,” “modernization,” and “sameness.” Globalization is also generally seen solely through the lens of economic interactions like trade, investment, and the flow of wealth around the world. In that context trade wars and attempts to block Chinese investments are the principal focus of anti-globalists. In fact, globalization is much more than economic interactions as it includes not only the global flow of wealth, but also of technology, ideas, and labor.<sup>3</sup> While analysts focus primarily on wealth and technology, they forget how the emergence of the internet, satellites, and now social media have rapidly connected the world in ways that were not possible thirty years ago. With data moving at high speeds and in unprecedented quantities around the world, we have seen populations link up in communities ranging from digital diasporas to people linked by common interests and fandom—witness the global community of Real Madrid or Barcelona fans. What has emerged is a global community where ideas and

social phenomena in any nation are closely watched around the world and can provide the impetus for social and political changes elsewhere—the Arab Spring is a good example of this phenomenon.

As Benjamin Barber argued in his seminal 1992 article “Jihad vs. McWorld,” the world was coming together because of a scientific imperative and an environmental imperative. The scientific imperative lay in the fact that with the ease of communication scientific efforts had now become collaborative endeavors across nations; and the environmental imperative was the result of the fact that environmental problems could no longer be managed within the borders of a nation and, instead, required greater collaboration between nations.<sup>4</sup> When applied to the current COVID-19 pandemic Barber’s drivers of globalization make complete sense. The development and transfer of vaccines has been an international effort and a globally choreographed effort is required to contain and eliminate the virus. So how will globalization impact the efforts of nations to contain the disease? The answer lies in addressing the failures of nations to stop the rapid spread of the disease in the first place.

### The National Security Response to COVID-19

Faced with the rapid spread of the virus, countries adopted unilateral measures to try and suppress the contagion. Nations closed borders and airports; Japan essentially quarantined passengers aboard a cruise ship to prevent the spread of the disease, although this only resulted in the rapid fire spread of the virus aboard the ship.<sup>5</sup> Other crews were stranded on the high seas; and the calls for assistance from the nations first hit hard by the virus were met with deaf ears from those who were in the best position to help. Thus, the Italian and Spanish governments’ pleas for help were not met by anyone in Europe and it was Cuba that provided assistance to them.

Nor did the two international organizations that could have made a difference respond in a manner that was needed by the international community. The World Health Organization (WHO) has a good record of working to eradicate infectious diseases—after all it was the WHO that had led the crusade for the global eradication of smallpox. Yet in this case, the WHO was relatively inefficient and unwilling to press Beijing to release data on the COVID-19 virus even though Taiwan had sent a warning to the organization about the potential danger from the virus: The fact that Taiwan was not permitted to be a member of the WHO further complicated Taipei's attempts to get its message across.<sup>6</sup> The Trump Administration responded to

claims that the WHO was being manipulated by the Chinese by withdrawing from the organization and adding to the problems of seeking a concerted international response to the pandemic.

The other organization that badly failed its members in their most dire hours of need was the European Union (EU). As one commentary pointed out, “They failed to hear the warnings that containment would prove ineffective. They failed to heed experts who said no country could fight the virus on its own, failed to perceive that the world’s most advanced health care systems were at grave risk of being overwhelmed. They failed to understand that drastic measures would be needed until Italy—patient zero among EU member



Members of the West Virginia National Guard's Task Force assist staff of St. Francis Hospital, Charleston, West Virginia, to unload beds and additional medical equipment delivered to the hospital in an effort to build statewide medical surge capacity during on-going COVID-19 pandemic response. (Photo by West Virginia National Guard, April 9, 2020)

countries—frantically imposed travel restrictions that impeded European leaders' own movements.”<sup>7</sup> A report by the HERoS Project outlined the deficiencies in the response of individual nations as well as the failure of the EU as a common crisis management entity. Within Italy, for example, while there were enough intensive care unit beds in the country the government was unable to move infected people to available hospitals and they were also not allowed to move patients to available beds across borders in neighboring countries.<sup>8</sup>

Countries also started buying up personal protective equipment (PPE) and restricting the export of equipment and medical supplies to neighboring countries.<sup>9</sup> Learning from the chaotic and uncoordinated response, the recommendation has been made that there be a “greater sharing of resources like hospital capacity, medical equipment and even healthcare staff between EU countries” and that an agency be established to coordinate EU level preparations for future pandemics.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did the EU come in for harsh criticism but the two superpowers—the United States and China—also saw a loss of public support from the European nations. The loss of support for China in Europe arose from, “the aggressive way that China has treated other countries in its response to the crisis—with disinformation, bullying, and threats to withhold medical supplies.”<sup>11</sup> The United States, more alarmingly, also saw a drop in public support in Europe: “Over 70 percent of Danes and Portuguese say that their perceptions have worsened, while 68 percent of French, 65 percent of Germans, and 64 percent of Spaniards say the same thing. This is not, in our view, simply one more indication of how strongly Europeans oppose Trump’s way of doing foreign policy. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed a United States divided in its response to the present crisis and haunted by its history. If Trump’s America struggles so much to help itself, how can it be expected to help anyone else?”<sup>12</sup> While

this drop in positive feelings was a blow to U.S. diplomacy, it was also reflective of the problems caused by the Trump Administration to the Trans-Atlantic relationship—something that the Biden Administration is working hard to correct much to the relief of the Europeans. At the same time, however, the fact that the Trump Administration did not provide global leadership to counter the virus was duly noted by the Europeans. In Italy, 25 percent of the public thought China was a useful ally while only 4 percent thought similarly of the EU.<sup>13</sup>

From a national security perspective, the U.S. policy of go-it-alone was also ineffective because global supply chains meant that the bulk of PPE and drug supplies were to be imported from India and China and once the global economy ground to a halt such shipments could not be made easily as they are usually carried in the belly of aircraft which were by and large grounded due to the collapse of global air traffic.<sup>14</sup>

## Global Trends?

It has been argued that COVID-19 will lead to three major trends that will further accelerate deglobalization: First, we will move from physical to increasingly virtual interactions; second, nations will eschew the efficiency of globalization to, instead, achieve resiliency; and third, we will focus more on the national sphere as opposed to the international sphere. Each of these trends, however, is heavily skewed toward the richer and more powerful nations in the world as they have the resources, the talent, and the resilient economies that can survive and even take advantage of the shifts caused by COVID-19. For the bulk of nations such an approach provides little joy.

While technologically advanced, knowledge economies could move into the virtual world fairly seamlessly, the same could not be said for nations that lacked the technology to allow their citizens to function in a virtual world. Around the world



the digital divide became apparent as, for example, school children were unable to make use of the virtual tools offered to them—if any were offered at all. A UNICEF report brought out the stark reality of this digital gap: “But at least 31 percent of school children worldwide cannot be reached by remote learning programs, mainly due to a lack of necessary household assets or policies geared toward their needs. And 40 percent of countries did not provide remote learning opportunities at the pre-primary level of education.”<sup>15</sup> For nations with young populations, like those in Africa and South Asia, this was a deadly blow to their attempts to educate their children, and if we are going to see more pandemics the educational gap both within such societies and between them and other nations will only widen.

Such a digital divide in predominantly young societies can only have catastrophic consequences as their demographic dividend will become a demographic disaster with youth in these nations unable to achieve their economic expectations. Being connected to a globalized world, they will experience growing discontent as they see progress in other parts of their country or in other countries. If anything, the virtual versus physical divide that has split the planet is one of the major concerns that world leaders will have to address in the future.

Resiliency was a victim of the onset of globalization as many of the items required to fight a pandemic had been outsourced to other nations. Thus, PPE and vaccines were being manufactured elsewhere in the world—mainly India and China—and as the Indians found out, the critical raw material for manufacturing vaccines were produced in the West, most notably the United States.<sup>16</sup> Since there was an American ban on exporting critical materials, the production of vaccines in India faced bottlenecks and this has happened in the middle of a steep spike in COVID-19 cases.

Resiliency, however, is not an option for the bulk of the 193 nations of the United Nations many

of which depend on global goodwill in their quest to vaccinate their populations and to even build up stockpiles of PPE. These nations depend on a global coalition to achieve human security and that is why 183 countries joined the Coalition for Epidemic Prevention Innovations (CEPI) Covax initiative that was assembled by Norway, India, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to counter the pandemic. Covax is an initiative that will give countries that would otherwise not be able to afford the vaccine the ability to access it; this goes against the idea that countries will be able to actually build up resiliency through their individual efforts.

The third argument in favor of the world returning to national over international preoccupation is also flawed since the only way to control future pandemics is not through closing borders or adopting protectionist policies. Instead, it will require high levels of coordination in the international realm. For instance, what we are witnessing at the time of writing is the international attempt to help India resolve the new crisis it faces from the spiking number of cases in the country. New Delhi, therefore, has accelerated the production of foreign



May 2020, a time when India seemed to have the pandemic under control. Sadly, the government was one of many that relaxed too quickly. (Photo by: Gwydion M. Williams, June 7, 2020)

vaccines like the Pfizer and Russian Sputnik V vaccines to try and tackle what has become a catastrophic situation.

## Vaccines and Great Power Politics

As mentioned above, the battle against COVID-19 has become a part of great power competition as both Russia and China are accelerating efforts to supply their vaccines across the world thus increasing their influence and advancing their commercial interests. For America, in an age of globalization, the ability to mount a successful global effort against pandemics has helped enhance its status in world affairs; implementing an international plan against COVID-19 would not only boost American soft power but also check Russian and Chinese efforts at gaining global influence. Moreover, the pandemic has become a competition of competing narratives as the great powers push their respective agendas and cast suspicion on the efforts of their rivals.

In the past, the United States was the leader in global pandemic response as it worked to eradicate ravaging diseases that were curable with the correct treatments and universally administered inoculations. U.S. assistance to the WHO was one of the factors leading to universal vaccination against smallpox, and the world has not seen a case of smallpox since 1976.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the United States took the lead against Ebola sending medical supplies, doctors, and military personnel to control its spread, and working with partner African nations to help control the disease while contributing one billion dollars for the effort.<sup>18</sup>

Also noteworthy is the role of the George W. Bush Administration in combating the spread of AIDS in Africa which will go down as one of the most effective policies pursued by that administration.<sup>19</sup> The Bush Administration established the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a major foreign aid program that provided antiretroviral treatment for millions of people on the African

continent and may be one of the most important international security measures taken by the United States in the past two decades because of the effect it had on containing the disease.

If one goes back even further, the United States took a major step to tackle global hunger and increase the income of farmers in developing nations through the creation of a Green Revolution in farming techniques (although this process did lead to environmental degradation and income disparities between upper and lower class farmers).<sup>20</sup> America's policies to influence nations across the world, therefore, have not been solely based on military and economic policy tools but also on creating a healthier world order. It is this commitment that has given the country some of the soft power it uses to achieve its foreign policy goals. Yet, on COVID-19, the United States has fallen behind other nations that have usurped its role of global health propagator.

At the outset of the global COVID-19 pandemic two countries were notably reticent regarding the need to create an international counter-pandemic consensus—China and the United States. The Chinese took time to release the DNA of the virus to national and international scientific bodies thus delaying attempts to develop an effective vaccine. The United States, which was caught up in an election year, was pursuing an America-first policy with competing rhetoric emphasizing deglobalization, and the need to make a political statement against China. Neither power stepped up to bring the major nations of the world together in a dialogue on a coordinated response to the crisis. Moreover, the Trump Administration, correctly banking on the rapid development of American vaccines, had no plan on how to utilize the vaccines made in other parts of the world like in Britain and India.

In contrast, the Russians and the Chinese were able to start early global delivery of their indigenously produced vaccines thereby earning gratitude

from the publics of receiving countries. While the Russian Sputnik V was originally dismissed as being ineffective it is now recognized as having 91 percent efficacy, leading to high demand worldwide. Under an agreement with India, six Indian companies will be producing the Russian vaccine and once production gears up, it is expected that 50 million doses will be available every month in the country (and that by the end of 2021 more than 450 million doses will be produced in India).<sup>21</sup>

As Sputnik V inoculates populations around the world it will ease some of the negative views toward Moscow resulting from the policies of Vladimir Putin and, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban pointed out, the people of the former communist countries of Eastern Europe have confidence in Sputnik V because of historical precedents: “Under Communism we were vaccinated with Soviet vaccines as children; and, as you can see, we’re fine.”<sup>22</sup> The Russian vaccine has made inroads in Eastern Europe for historical reasons and also because of the tardiness of the European Medicines Association in approving alternative vaccines for distribution. One has to be cautious about stating just how much Russian diplomacy will benefit from its international vaccine distribution, but Moscow has signed agreements to sell 388.1 million doses to 20 countries, and the deal with India may be a game changer as the Russians will be able to harness India’s large vaccine manufacturing capability to increase the number of country customers.<sup>23</sup>

Both Russia and China are thinking strategically about how the transfer and distribution of vaccines will support their economic and foreign policies while helping them accrue soft power. Russia and China are establishing vaccine facilities across the world as well as training local workers from emerging countries, and it is believed this will strengthen their presence in these countries for decades. As the Economist Intelligence Unit points out, both countries seek entry into regions where

the United States and Western Europe have influence—Latin America and Eastern Europe—with the goal of sowing discord within Western alliances. In the case of China, it is clear that much of the vaccine produced both by state and private companies is being sold or given as gifts to countries that participate in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>24</sup>

The Economist Intelligence Unit summed up the consequences of Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy:

*“Assistance in the form of vaccines will often come with economic or political strings attached. For instance, Russia started discussions with Bolivia about access to mines producing rare earth minerals and nuclear projects shortly after delivering a consignment of its Sputnik V vaccine. Vaccines may also prove to be a reward for countries that have proved to be reliable partners in the past. For example, China may seek to reward Cambodia and Laos with vaccines for their support on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Pakistan may be getting shots in return for its approval of projects linked to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).”<sup>25</sup>*

The report therefore suggests that such efforts will reinforce the global standing and leverage of Russia and China in emerging countries, helping both countries to gain influence and pursue their interests around the world. The longer-term consequence of today’s vaccine diplomacy may be a further fragmentation of the global order.<sup>26</sup>

## Chinese Vaccine diplomacy

The China case is somewhat different than Russia because unlike Moscow, Beijing successfully combines vision, ambition, and resources. Russia would like greater influence along its own borders and to exert influence in other parts of the world—its

ambition, however, is not matched by its capabilities—but the Chinese are actively working to supplant the United States as the primary economic power in different parts of the world and vaccine diplomacy can help advance that objective. Thus, China has the ambition to surpass the United States, they have a vision and strategy on how to do so—ranging from the BRI and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership to the recent Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with the EU—and most importantly, Beijing has the economic resources to make this happen.

With respect to vaccine distribution China is pursuing both a commercial and grant approach to providing vaccines to various countries. Vaccines manufactured by the private companies are being sold at commercial rates while those manufactured by state companies—currently the Sinopharm vaccine—are being donated to other countries.

The Chinese have several advantages in their vaccine diplomacy: they were able to bring their vaccines to the market earlier than those produced by the West; they are providing large numbers of doses to countries like Brazil and Indonesia which helped with clinical trials of the drugs; and they have the manufacturing capability, unlike the Russians, to produce vaccines in large volumes. Russia, in fact, has signed deals with Chinese companies to produce 260 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine since Russia does not have the productive capacity to bring out the drug in such large quantities.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the Chinese have the resources to donate the vaccine to target nations around the world. They have also benefitted from the ineptness of the West to make inroads into territories where they previously had only a minimal presence.

While the pandemic may have originated in China, the ineptness of organizations like the EU gave Beijing a reprieve as blame shifted to the poor response of national and supranational administrations. Italy, for example, asked the EU for help but

little was sent so, by March 2020, China dispatched healthcare workers and medicines to Italy,<sup>28</sup> as well as to countries ranging from Serbia and the Czech Republic to the Philippines.<sup>29</sup> What could give China an advantage is its distribution of vaccines to developing nations. While the United States has not joined the Coalition of Epidemic Preparedness Innovators (CEPI) COVAX alliance, China and 182 other countries have, and their goal is to provide vaccines globally with a substantial number of countries in Asia and Africa getting vaccines at subsidized rates.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, the entire range of Chinese vaccines have been clinically tested in countries in Latin America, Central Asia, South East Asia, and the Middle East. Thus when they are approved by national health authorities—as some Arab nations already have—they can be easily distributed in these regions, especially since the Chinese goal is to produce 4 billion doses in 2021.<sup>31</sup> If China is able to produce even half the number of vaccines that they propose in 2021, it will have a significant impact on halting the spread of the pandemic across the world and give a major boost to China's international standing which has been hurt in recent years by its aggressive “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy and other aggressive behavior (a note of caution here though as most countries have not yet validated the efficacy of Chinese vaccines through their tests).

In this context, China's President Xi Jinping has announced that China will supply vaccines worldwide as a global public good thus distributing the doses equitably and at presumably subsidized rates. It is expected that internationally China will first supply the vaccine to the countries where it was initially tested—Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico signed up to test vaccines from different Chinese companies.<sup>32</sup> More recently, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have approved the Sinopharm vaccine for delivery. The advantage for China's vaccine diplomacy is that its large pharmaceutical industry





Slum people receive a dose of Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine at a makeshift vaccination center at Korail Slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Photo by By Mamunur Rashid, September 28, 2021)

could produce billions of vaccines at reduced costs<sup>33</sup> while those in the West have been commandeered for the domestic public (rich countries with 14 percent of the world's population have acquired 53 percent of the most promising vaccines).<sup>34</sup> Vaccine inequity may, therefore, give Beijing the chance to revive its international status while painting the United States as a nation that is increasingly unilateralist and unwilling to think of global public welfare or of the global commons.

Along with its supply of vaccines, China has once again become the global supplier of masks and PPE as its factories have reopened and its global supply chains have begun to function again, albeit not at their pre-pandemic pace. Even at the height of the pandemic, however, Chinese companies were able to export masks in large quantities and,

according to the Global Times, "From March to December last year (2020), China exported 224.2 billion face masks worth 340 billion yuan (\$53.38 billion), equivalent to nearly 40 face masks for every foreigner..."<sup>35</sup> Such a supply of protective equipment has two consequences; it fit into the Chinese narrative as a benevolent actor in the international system seeking to protect global health; but it also is starting to impact on the preparedness and resilience of other countries. American mask and PPE companies, which increased capacity in response to the needs of the American population in 2020, now face an inflow of cheap Chinese equipment with the possible result that these companies will be driven out of business thus adversely impacting American attempts to establish a resilient and reliable supply chain.<sup>36</sup>

## An American Response

The United States has arrived late at the table to create a Washington-led international initiative to deal with the pandemic. The Trump Administration was caught in its America First rhetoric when it should have, at the very least, been bringing together the world's democracies to initiate a concerted international response to the COVID-19 challenge. The American response was further complicated by the fact that pandemic response—like everything else in Washington—was politicized, pitting those arguing in favor of a science-based approach against those emphasizing the economy at the expense of strict health precautions.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, small nations like Taiwan, Israel, and New Zealand were proactive in taking steps to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and their efforts met with considerable success. Even China, after imposing draconian restrictions in Wuhan, has been able to keep the number of daily cases to under 200 thereby allowing it to export vaccine doses in its vaccine diplomacy campaign. The U.S. vaccine rollout started slowly in December 2020 and only gained momentum in February of 2021; by then the Chinese and Russians had started dispatching vaccines around the world.

The Biden Administration, unlike its predecessor, recognized the vital role of vaccine diplomacy and the need for an international response to the pandemic. It rejoined the WHO and one of the important outcomes from the first virtual meeting of the Quad nations—Japan, Australia, India, and the United States—was the American decision, along with other Quad members, to facilitate the manufacture of vaccines in India.

At the summit the Quad members decided to subsidize India's impressive vaccine production efforts accelerating global vaccination efforts. Before the second wave of COVID-19 crippled India, the country's Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) program saw India, by the middle of March 2021, transfer over 58 million vaccines globally (as a

combination of grants, commercial sales, and as part of the Covax initiative) to countries as varied as Bangladesh, Barbados, and Rwanda.<sup>38</sup> The U.S. government partnership with the Indian firm Biological E. will help address the criticism of U.S. policy since the plan is to have India manufacture and distribute one billion doses around the world by the end of 2022. Of course, a spanner has been thrown into these plans by the advent of the second wave in India that has halted Indian exports of the vaccine. Problems have also arisen in the supply of the raw materials from the United States required to manufacture the vaccine in India. India did by October 2021, however, vaccinate one billion of its citizens and this could potentially clearly the way for large scale exports in 2022.

Since China has sent its vaccines around the world, and started to gain soft power from such efforts, it is imperative that the Quad partnership counter this Chinese effort, and India, as the largest vaccine manufacturer in the world, is uniquely placed to not only vaccinate the world and create a safer global environment but also to counter the Chinese narrative. Vaccine diplomacy may, in fact, be the most significant short-term achievement of the Quad and may allow it to play a crucial role in improving global health.

In June 2021, the Biden Administration forged an agreement in the G7 to fund the supply of a billion vaccine doses; this is the kind of proactive measure toward achieving global herd immunity. The question, however, is whether one billion doses is sufficient; the WHO believes that 11 billion vaccines are needed to bring coverage to 70 percent of the world's population and thus achieve herd immunity.<sup>39</sup>

What more can the Biden Administration do to provide leadership in the COVID-19 world that we will live in for the near future? First and foremost, as Osterholm and Olshaker argue, the country must engage in systematic planning for this and future

pandemics. Such planning would include convening actors at the national level to develop a coherent strategy, to fully fund the National Strategic Stockpile of medicines and supplies, and to recognize that the government and not market forces must take the lead role in such efforts.<sup>40</sup>

Internationally, the Biden Administration's first steps have been promising but we need to remember that the large majority of people in the world are not going to get vaccinated in 2021 and may well have to wait years to attain some kind of immunity. The United States, therefore, should engage in short as well as long term planning since the conventional wisdom is that the world will not only witness additional waves of the virus but that we will require an international institutional response to future pandemics.

In the short term, in response to the outbreaks across the world, the Biden Administration has taken multiple steps to provide relief to other nations. Following a request from the Indian authorities, the Biden Administration decided to remove the embargo on the export of the raw materials required to produce the vaccine. The United States has sufficient vaccine supplies to fully inoculate 750 million people having purchased 100 million doses each from Johnson & Johnson, Novovax, and Sanofi, and 300 million doses each from Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca.<sup>41</sup> This is a large surplus that will have a limited shelf life; to hoard it is an inefficient use of this vital resource. The United States is now seeking to loan 4 million doses to Canada and to Mexico although both the Canadian and Mexican governments had to separately negotiate to indemnify AstraZeneca.<sup>42</sup> As American surpluses grow, they should be distributed as quickly and effectively around the world as possible. The United States, under Operation Warp Speed, contracted for six vaccines and while not all have been approved for emergency use, they will eventually come online

providing an embarrassment of riches in vaccine supply.

An interesting development in the Biden Administration vaccine strategy has been to call for a waiver of patent protections on the new vaccines in order to allow less developed nations to manufacture the vaccine at affordable rates. There are compelling reasons for such a waiver since it will be the fastest way to check the spread of the pandemic and because the development of the vaccines was made possible by taxpayer dollars. Additionally, China is giving away the vaccines developed by its state pharmaceutical companies or offering at subsidized rates to the non-Western world, and the United States cannot afford to lose more influence to Beijing than it already has in South America or Africa where the next major outbreak is likely to occur.<sup>43</sup>



Supplies and personnel are loaded aboard the Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort at Naval Station Norfolk, Va. March 27, 2020. The Comfort deployed March 28, 2020 in support of the nation's COVID-19 response efforts in New York City and will serve as a referral hospital for non-COVID-19 patients admitted to shore-based hospitals." (Photo By: Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Jason Pastrick, March 26th, 2020)



While these steps are promising and show American determination to demonstrate global leadership, several other measures are necessary for the United States to make its COVID-19 plan as effective as past international health care efforts. First, a global conference is urgently needed at which countries specify their healthcare shortcomings; the United States and its capable partners must apply their collective intellectual capital to help address these shortcomings. Given the data amassed by the Centers for Disease Control the United States has much to offer to nations that have not even a fraction of the necessary resources.

Second, the United States should proactively track where future outbreaks are most likely and begin building resilience in these regions. Brazil and parts of South America are considered vulnerable as is Southern Africa; stockpiling vaccines and PPE supplies, and propagating safe practices through social media campaigns are some easy but effective steps.

As part of this reimagining of American policy there must be an emphasis on fractured societies such as in Syria and Yemen where civil wars and societal divisions not only complicate medical efforts but render these societies potential super-spreaders. As Eleonora Ardemagni has written in the case of Yemen, "...the response to the pandemic is uncoordinated among the official government, the self-proclaimed Houthi government and the local authorities, a potential health crisis is likely to increase political fragmentation and, as a result, the role of miliadioms."<sup>44</sup> Managing the refugee flows from either Syria or Yemen is difficult in the best of times, so these are areas that merit special concern.

One promising factor for the Biden Administration is that neither China nor Russia can claim to have gained an advantage over the United States in terms of providing global leadership in handling the pandemic and while both may have

enjoyed some soft power gains, the United States can quite easily reverse these advantages. A global strategic vision and a channeling of resources, industry, and technology to provide vaccines and equipment to the rest of the world would catapult the United States back into the leadership position. China's vaccines are not considered the most effective while Russia's Sputnik V, though considered very effective, cannot be transferred rapidly around the world unless several nations take up its manufacture on a large scale. Further, in both the cases of Russia and China there is concern that vaccine assistance comes with strings attached even though President Xi Jinping has made claims to the contrary. Given these facts an American approach that brings the countries of the world together, harnesses scientific and logistic capabilities, and is targeted at the most vulnerable countries in the world would be the most effective strategy.

## Conclusion

The globalized nature of the contemporary world has been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic which has shown no respect for national borders and whose spread has not been well managed or contained by purely national efforts. Further, the virus has become another weapon in the strategic competition between Russia, China, and the United States for global influence; and there is reason to fear that the United States may have fallen behind its competitors. With this in mind, the United States should work to create a global consensus at least among democratic nations on defeating the pandemic. Such leadership is not only needed for global economic recovery and in the implementation of non-traditional security, it is also in American self-interest. Failure to meet this challenge will prolong a global calamity, diminish American prestige, and leave the door open for China and Russia to pursue their global soft power agendas. **PRISM**



## Notes

*Amit Gupta is an Associate Professor in the USAF Air War College. The views in this article are his and do not necessarily reflect those of the USAF or the Department of Defense.*

<sup>1</sup> Caleb Silver, El-Erian on the Long-Term Effects of the Crisis, Investopedia Insight, April 30, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> United States National Security Strategy, Washington D.C. December 2017, p.25.

<sup>3</sup> Eryn Brown, “How the pandemic could globalize the economy even more—not less,” Knowable Magazine, 11.05. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, “Jihad vs. McWorld,” The Atlantic, March 1, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Blake Essig, Brent Swails, Yoko Wakatsuki and Ben Westcott, “Top Japanese government adviser says Diamond Princess quarantine was flawed,” CNN.Com, February 27, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Louise Watt, Taiwan Says It Tried to Warn the World About Coronavirus. Here’s What It Really Knew and When, Time, May 19, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> David Herszenhorn and Sarah Wheaton, “How Europe failed the coronavirus test,” Politico.EU, April 7, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Gray, Lack of solidarity hampered Europe’s coronavirus response, research finds, Horizon: The EU Research and Innovation Magazine, November 12, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Kratsev and Mark Leonard, “Europe’s pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public’s worldview,” European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, June 24, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Butler, Coronavirus: Europeans say EU was ‘irrelevant’ during pandemic, The Guardian, June 24, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Gray, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, “COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies using data from 100 countries.” UNICEF, New York, 2020, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Arvind Gupta, Rudra Chaudhuri, Harsh Pant, Rueben Abraham, Nitin Pai, “To Friends in the United States: Facilitate Global Vaccine Manufacturing, Carnegie India Commentary, April 23, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> James Haynes and Cheng Li, “The US cooperated with the Soviets on Smallpox—it should do the same with China on COVID-19 vaccine distribution,” Brookings Institution, August 27, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Factsheet: US Response to the Ebola Outbreak in the eastern DRC, US Mission to the African Union, December 2, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> David Pilling, Why George W. Bush is Africa’s favourite US president, Financial Times, July 17, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> “Green Revolution: Curse or Blessing?” International Food Policy Research Institute, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Tarun Bharadwaj, India to become Russian Sputnik V vaccine’s production hub, to start making 50 mn doses per month by summer, Financial Express (India), April 14, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Ivana Karaskova, Injecting influence: China’s vaccine diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe, MERICS Institute, March 25, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Safi and Milivoje Pantovic, “Vaccine Diplomacy: West falling behind in quest for influence,” The Guardian, February 19, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> What’s next for vaccine diplomacy, Economist Intelligence Unit, Global Forecast 2021, pp. 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 1

<sup>26</sup> “Western powers have lost the vaccine diplomacy battle,” Economist Intelligence Unit, April 28, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Huizhong Wu and Daria Litvinova, Russia turns to China to make Sputnik shots to meet demand, Associated Press, May 3, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> “China sends medical supplies, experts to help battle Coronavirus,” Reuters, March 13, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ken Moritsugu, “China, on virus PR offensive, sends masks and experts abroad,” ABC News, March 21, 2020, China, on virus PR offensive, sends masks and experts abroad - ABC News (go.com).

<sup>30</sup> Dave Lawler, “Vaccine initiative now covers almost entire world, but not U.S. or Russia,” Axios, October 13, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Smriti Mallapaty, China’s COVID vaccines are going global — but questions remain, Nature, May 4, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Eileen Guo and Charlotte Jee, “How the US, UK and China are planning to roll out vaccines,” MIT Technology Review, December 4, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> David Cryanoski, “Arab Nations first to approve Chinese COVID vaccine—Despite Lack of Public Data,” Nature, December 14, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Boseley, “Nine out of 10 in poor nations to miss out on inoculation as west buys up COVID vaccines,” *The Guardian*, December 9, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> US dumping allegations over Chinese mask firms groundless, ungrateful: experts, *Global Times*, May 30, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Jeff Ferry, “Has the US Learned Anything? Cut-price China Face Masks Driving US Mask Makers out of Business, Coalition for a Prosperous America, June 14, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of America’s initial approach see Michael T. Osterholm and Mark Olshaker, *Chronicle of a Pandemic Foretold: Learning from the COVID-19 Failure—Before the Next Outbreak Arrives*, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 4, July/August 2020, pp. 16-17.

<sup>38</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, COVID-19: Vaccine Supply, Vaccine Supply (mea.gov.in)

<sup>39</sup> “Coronavirus G7: Could a billion more vaccines for poorer countries make a difference?,” *BBC News*, June 14, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Osterholm and Olshaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>41</sup> Madhuri Sastry and Suchitra Vijayan, India Desperately Needs Biden’s Help to Address the COVID-19 Surge, *The Nation*, April 28, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Nathan Weixel, Biden backs COVID-19 vaccine patent waivers, *The Hill*, May 5, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Eleonora Ardemagni, *Beyond Yemen’s Militias*, Institute for Security Studies Conflict Series, Brief 8, April 2020, p. 8.