

China's Vaccine Diplomacy Amid COVID – 19 Pandemic: A Case Study of South Asia

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 onset has questioned the proclaimed notions of Globalization such as shared prosperity and security across the board. The ongoing pandemic once again calls for collective action in men and material terms rather than erecting technology barriers and doubting the intentions of each other. This paper aims to address the following inter-related queries: What is the nature of China's health-based assistance to the South Asian states for mitigating the COVID-19 risks? How and why do the United States and India remain skeptical of Chinese anti COVID- 19 Vaccine efforts? And how do other South Asian states perceive Chinese contributions to deal with the ongoing Pandemic? And, finally what lessons can be learned from this divergent debate centered on: Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy? Comparison and contrast of the available information is employed as an analytical technique to determine the nature of skepticism surrounding the Chinese vaccination campaign in South Asia. Consulting data on three various accounts assisted to conclude the findings of this research paper. The findings of this study establish that Western and Indian skepticism, directed against Chinese health diplomacy in South Asia is motivated by their geopolitical contestations with China. In nutshell, the paper's main thrust is to stress the essential value of mutual cooperation in dealing with the Pandemic like COVID-19. There is a need to embrace the concept of 'holistic security' in the highly interconnected world of today and tomorrow.

Key Words: COVID – 19, Vaccine Diplomacy, China, South Asia, United State

Introduction

Global Pandemic like COVID-19 ideally desired that the world being a global village required global response, based on multilateral cooperation and integrated efforts. However, since the outbreak of the disease, the issue has remained contentious and caused more divisiveness than much needed international cooperation. Various Chinese initiatives at global and regional levels reflect the holistic approach of China towards the manifold challenges postured by the pandemic. Since the beginning of the contagion, as China recovered from the health crisis at home, it started offering its assistance and expertise to all in need. However, these initiatives have been interpreted by skepticism, primarily by the

United States and India. Western and Indian writers and scholars have been stressing that Chinese international healthcare assistance is motivated by its geostrategic interests and not by humanitarian considerations. The present research study analyzes the available information surrounding much-criticized Chinese ‘Vaccine Diplomacy’ to answer questions regarding the nature of Chinese vaccine diplomacy: why it has drawn US and Indian criticism, and how do other South Asian countries perceive Chinese contributions to deal with the ongoing pandemic. This information would assist to determine what lessons can be learned from this divergent debate centered on Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy? Consulting literature, reflecting on Chinese health-based diplomacy, its perspective, and level of assistance offered globally and in South Asia, the present research postulates that Chinese health-based diplomacy particularly in the ongoing COVID-19 scenario has multi-dimensional aspects to it. This is essentially anchored in the Chinese notion of ‘shared prosperity and collective security’ fostering a sustainable and peaceful world at large.

Theoretical Construct - Holistic and Collective Security Framework

To have a clear understanding of China’s foreign policy objective of ‘collective security and shared prosperity’, a theoretical mold of Western scholar, Barry Buzan’s work is particularly relevant. This theoretical framework provides a holistic and integrated approach towards security, which can be applied to South Asian states in general and Pakistan in particular. It offers three levels of analysis at individual, state, and international scales (1991). Buzan defines the notion of security as a multi-layered concept; encompassing military and non-military dimensions using the three levels of analysis, not as three distinct rather inter-linked by nature of their interconnectedness. Non-traditional issues have recently emerged as the principal security challenges, not only to individual security but to state security as well. In this context, it is crucial to underscore that responding to evolving security challenges revolving around COVID-19 requires a holistic approach to security.

The challenge of Pandemics such as COVID-19 requires a new approach to addressing security challenges. This approach can be termed as a ‘collective or holistic’ approach to security. Its foremost requirement is the just distribution of resources on the conventional and non-conventional aspects of security at the same time. Plus, collaboration within and beyond national frontiers versus Pandemics such as COVID-19 is the way forward.

Following this line of reasoning, the concept of ‘human security framework’ articulated by the late Dr. Mahbub-ul-Haq in 1994 was adopted by the United Nations. That historic document advocated for a human-centric approach to security by underscoring that human security is a universal concern with direct impact on people without any distinction (UN, 1994). Concept of human security was conceptualized into seven categories comprising, individual, economic,

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political, environmental, and community security, and health, and food security. This development widened the scope of 'security' and led to a rethinking of the paradigm of security in the international system. Thus, it was argued and elaborated that state security cannot be achieved without ensuring people's security as the former becomes ineffective and self-defeating in the absence of the latter.

The overleaf discussion provides a theoretical construct to situate and understand the various strands of China's health-based diplomatic response towards the affected states that sparked sharp criticism from the United States and many other states. This study stresses the need to underscore the criticality of the 'holistic and human security' prism to deal with the ongoing Pandemic and many other challenges in the future. It is argued that the state alone and together has a critical role to reframe national security to be an inclusive process through investment in sustainable human development and societal progress. Security cannot be dichotomized into narrow internal and external threats that are interdependent.

Chinese Perspective on its COVID Health-Based Diplomacy

Chinese Perspective on its health diplomacy can be measured by its official statements and policies announced at different international forums. To mitigate the challenge of the global pandemic, Chinese President Xi Jinping offered several proposals at the G20 Conference of November 2020. He advocated that there is a need to construct an international firewall against the pandemic by making vaccines available and affordable to the people all over the world and China on its part would take the initiative by making its vaccine a global public good. He called for the smooth operation of the international economy by establishing global cooperation networks to ease the movement of people and goods. He acknowledged the boom of innovative technologies during the COVID-19 period and stressed on the need to harness the role of the digital economy to pursue the more inclusive development for all. He proposed numerous other proposals for inclusive development, including debt servicing to developing countries, and cited various Chinese initiatives in this regard. Stressing the need for international cooperation, the Chinese President stated that the principle of broad discussion, cooperative contribution, and collective benefits should be the guiding values. Similarly, world community should uphold the values of International cooperation at multiple levels, pursue candidness and all-inclusiveness, and endorse beneficial cooperation for all the stakeholders. He emphasized that to deal with the unprecedented challenge of international health situation; the G20 ought to perform a greater role (Jinping, 2020).

Addressing the Global Health Summit, conducted on May 21, 2021, President Xi proposed various policy proposals for international cooperation including,

prioritization of human lives, coordinated and systemic response structured upon science-based policies, international cooperation and solidarity, multilateral efforts to bridge the immunization gap and improvement in the global health governance system through strengthening the role international organizations of United Nations and World Health Organization (Jinping, 2021).

He further stated that the pandemic has yet again endorsed the collective destiny of the mankind with a shared future that necessitates the vision of building a global community of health for all. He stressed the need for international cooperation and harmony to discard any effort to tag, brand, or politicize the virus. To him, the greater cause of the service of the humanity demands non-politicization and non-manipulation of the disease and focused attention to control the spread of the contagion (Jinping, 2021).

In response to his previous year's announcement, "making vaccine a global public good," President Xi also specified that in spite of limited manufacturing capacity and greater household demand, China has honored its commitment to international community regarding timely supply of vaccines. In this effort, China provided free vaccines to more than 80 developing countries in urgent need of the vaccines and further exported vaccines to 43 other countries. He noted that China has already provided 2 billion US dollars to various developing countries that needed financial assistance for their national COVID-19 response programs. In its global health effort, China has also exported its medical supplies to more than 150 countries and 13 international organizations, while more than 280 billion masks, 4 billion testing kits, and some 3.4 billion protective suits have also been provided to the various countries of the world.

President Xi further highlighted the level of health cooperation extended by the Chinese hospitals to some 41 African hospitals. This Chinese Assistance helped the construction of the project of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) headquarters that officially started at the end of 2021. Important progress has also been made regarding development of China-UN joint project to set up a global humanitarian response depot and hub in China. China is also a leading player, implementing the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative for Poorest Countries, an enterprise that was established to reschedule the debt payments of poorest countries exceeding some 1.3 billion US dollars (Jinping, 2021). China also announced the list of following proposals indicating Chinese response to the global crisis:

- In terms of international aid, China committed additional allocation of \$3 billion for next three years in support of COVID-19 related economic and social recovery in developing countries.
- In addition to already supplied 300 million doses of vaccines, China dedicated to fund still more vaccines to the world.

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- China approved its vaccine companies to transfer vaccine development technologies to developing countries and carried out joint production with many countries.
- China supports the waiving of intellectual property rights on COVID-19 vaccines for greater benefit of humanity.
- China also proposes establishment of a multilateral forum on vaccine cooperation involving diverse stakeholders, including: vaccine developing and producing countries and business enterprises to discover the ways for just and equal distribution of vaccines around the world.

China also launched its Belt and Road Partnership on COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation. Addressing the occasion, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi clearly stated that, “China conducts international vaccine cooperation with no political purpose, with no calculation of economic interests, and with no political strings attached” (Wang Yi, 2021).

Wang Yi also underlined that China, since the very beginning maintained that "vaccines are a weapon to save lives, not a means to seek personal gains for one country, still less a tool to play geopolitical games...." He also emphasized on the greater need for common vaccine certification and governing policy coordination, centered on scientific and fair principles for all (Wang Yi, 2021)

Chinese Foreign Ministry states that since the beginning of the pandemic, China proposes a vision of a global community of health for all (Briefing, 2021). All along the international health crisis period, China offered concrete proposals for global cooperation, assistance, and joint institutional mechanism to combat the pandemic.

Since the early days of COVID-19, China started reaching out to the countries in need of health assistance. Chinese assistance to Italy, Spain, and Serbia amid the health crisis drew immense praise from the leadership of these European countries and raised questions on the existence and effectiveness of the European Union (Eleanor, 2020).

China also filled the gap when the US withdrew from World Health Organization and stopped its funding amid the crisis, during the Trump presidency (Gerry, 2020).

In May 2020, China was invited to address the 73rd session of the World Health Assembly (WHA) through video link. During his speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced, “China will make its coronavirus vaccine a global public good” (Pan, 2020). The following snapshot of China’s vaccines versus COVID 19 circulated globally as of August 2021 registers this fact very clearly.



Note: This map trails the Chinese vaccine sales and donations around the world.

On August 6, 2021, chairing and addressing the first meeting of the International Forum on COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation (via video link), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, hailed China's diverse contributions in the field of global vaccine cooperation. He noted various features of global cooperation in which China leads the world. He cited Chinese contributions by stating that: China has shared the genetic sequence of the coronavirus with the rest of the world, provided vaccines to the countries around the world, cooperated and assisted the developing countries in their domestic vaccine production, and also provided vaccines to the UN peacekeeping missions and the International Olympic Committee are also among the Chinese vaccine re He further communicated that since September 2020, Chinese vaccine cooperation has been extended to the countries in need of the remedy. At time of his address, four of the Chinese vaccines had already been accepted for use in more than 100 countries with recognition of international standard of safety and effectiveness. He stated that by donating its vaccines to more than 100 countries and exporting vaccines to more than 60 countries, China ranks first in terms of vaccine provision to the world. By highlighting the Chinese global vaccine contributions, he further stressed that China is against the concept of “vaccine nationalism” (GGTN, 2021).

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These repeated pronouncements of Chinese officials highlight the need for international cooperation, coordinated efforts, and global institutional mechanisms, not to be dominated by China, but more focused on multilateralism and international institutional cooperation. Similarly, the summary of Chinese global efforts also reflects the diversity of measures China has taken so far to contain the pandemic worldwide. These efforts still need to be corresponded with equal measures by more powerful states in the international system

How and Why do the United States and India Remain Skeptical of Chinese Anti COVID- 19 Vaccine Efforts?

It has been noted that the initial response to the pandemic lacked international cooperation, solidarity, and coordination (, 2020) [17]. However, in a Realist-based globalized system of the world, the international arena is a field of intense competition. Image building through soft power projection has become a norm in international relations and more so for emerging and aspiring powers like China and India. South Asia indeed is a contested landscape for both states. It's been a long, that India has been self-claiming and projecting itself not just as a natural leader of South Asia but also as an emerging great power of the world. Within this context and being a global manufacturer of vaccines, India had initiated its vaccine diplomacy in January 2021 with a special focus on smaller neighboring countries (Pande & Haqqani, 2021).

In March 2021, The “Quad” group of four nations, including, the United States, India, Australia, and Japan intended to enlarge their global vaccination supplies to counter China's increased vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia and around the world (Pal & Euan, 2021). The spread of the pandemic in India, March onwards, however, challenged this leading role in the region and soon exposed the limits of India's capacity to deal with the health crisis at home and “to lead South Asia” [Pande & Haqqani, 2021]. The rising health crisis forced India to halt its exports and meet the challenge of shortages of vaccines at home. The claimant of the status of great power ended up receiving oxygen supplies from much smaller and dependent Bhutan (Singh, 2021). This emergency nature of the health crisis in the neighborhood eventually led other South Asian countries to request Chinese assistance which China responded on an emergency footing.

Since the beginning, Chinese regional and global initiatives and calls for international cooperation caused the US and Indian skepticism towards Chinese global health assistance. Being in a strategic partnership, their skepticism mainly revolves around their geopolitical concerns vis a vis China that has been officially declared by the United States as a strategic competitor and a national security threat (US National Security Strategy 2018, Pompeo, 2019).

International cooperation in the health sector has been a firm component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for over five years. A research report by a

German Think Tank, suggests that Chinese health diplomacy is a long-practiced phenomenon and is an important part of its international health cooperation under its mega project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI framework document, *The Belt and Road Initiative—Progress, Contributions, and Perspectives* (April 2019) denotes 56 bilateral health agreements that China has signed with the World Health Organization and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Moritz, 2021). It has been noted that since 2015, Chinese Health Ministry is in regular consultations with the some 17 Central and East European counterparts. Similarly, Chinese health cooperation with African nations can be traced back to long before the initiation of BRI project and since 2015 this health-based cooperation has been immersed into the BRI with designation of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (Moritz, 2021). These details accounts reflect that Chinese health diplomacy cannot be regarded as a product of COVID-19 for sheer political gains.

In contrast to the distrust constantly expressed by the US scholars, it has been noted that in the first half of 2021, the stockpiling of COVID-19 vaccines by Western countries has triggered a supply crisis for the rest of the world that in turn heightened the global demand for Chinese vaccines (Zaini, 2021). Similarly, in the region of South Asia, India being constrained by domestic demands and comparatively limited production capacity was not able to take the lead as a vaccine supplier. Hence, there were genuine causes for China to take steps and seal the gap of heightened demand for vaccines not just in the region but globally as well.

On the other hand, as of early September 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) was still appealing to the wealthy nations to speed up their distribution of COVID vaccines to some 92 low to middle-income countries around the world (Carbonaro, 2021). Director-General of the WHO, repeatedly called on G20 countries to “stop making promises and start delivering.” He stressed on the cooperation of the world's biggest economies and highlighted that their cooperation is central to the equal distribution of the vaccine around the world (*GGTN*, 2021). This call for international collaboration by the WHO reflects that the novel challenge of the pandemic is still devoid of international solidarity and coordination and the expression of skepticism towards Chinese initiatives is a reflection of geopolitical considerations by the US and India. This distrust can only be addressed by filling the gap left for China to be bridged or by joining the global efforts coordinated by Unites Nations and its affiliated agencies.

How do other South Asian States Perceive Chinese Contributions to Deal with the Ongoing Pandemic?

According to Bridge Consulting, four geographical regions, comprising a total of 109 countries are direct recipients of the Chinese vaccines around the world. Asia is the top most recipient of Chinese vaccines and by the end of the 2021, the

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continent received some 454 million vaccine doses from China while some 47 million of which were in the form of donations (*Bridge Consulting*, 2021). Pakistan, Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, and Bangladesh are among the top ten countries that received most of the Chinese COVID health assistance

China has supplied the largest number of vaccines to combat COVID-19 to the countries around the world, especially the third world countries, under its Health Silk Road program. Some of the vaccines have been donated while many have been bought by the countries, in some instances using loans offered from Beijing (Lancaster, Michael and Rapp, 2020). As of 11 October 2021, China has sold 1.3 billion doses of Covid-19 Vaccines, donated 75 million, and delivered 960 million doses (*Bridge Beijing*, 2021). Among the top ten countries who have received the most deliveries of doses (sold or donated), there are three south Asian states; Pakistan (61m), Bangladesh (25m), and Sri Lanka (26m), (*Xinhua*, 2021). China has also pledged export deals with some countries including Pakistan and Sri Lanka to aid them in producing locally made vaccine with the help of Chinese technology transfer.

Since the beginning, all South Asia countries had started receiving Chinese health assistance in the form of masks, testing kits, and other related medical equipment and supplies, except India. India is the only country in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that neither requested nor accepted Chinese COVID vaccines (Haider, 2021). On the other hand, Chinese offers for assistance remained opened to all the countries of South Asia.

At the regional level, China initiated a Chinese-led South Asian platform called, China-South Asia Platform for COVID-19 Consultation, Cooperation, and Post-Pandemic Economic Recovery, in April 2021 (Palma, 2021). Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan joined the platform. A jointly held video conference on COVID-19 was hosted by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and attended by the foreign ministers of the five mentioned states on 27 April 2021. Through this platform, the Chinese Foreign Minister proposed multiple initiatives to enhance regional cooperation including; setting up a poverty alleviation center in South Asia to deal with the COVID-19 related economic issues in the region, an e-commerce economic cooperation forum, and an emergency storage facility for vaccines – all steps were put forth and deliberated upon (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). China also extended its invitation to India to attend the meeting that was not reciprocated.

In line with the above-mentioned proposals, the China-South Asian Countries Emergency Supplies Reserve, and a Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Center, was eventually established in China, on July 8, 2021. This development is also seen in India as a Chinese effort to weaken the Indian role in the SAARC region (Haider, 2021). Some other analysts identified this Chinese-led initiative as an attempt to construct an alternative regional framework for South Asia, excluding India (Ghimire, Apoorva, 2021).

Availability of China-made vaccines with relative ease has boosted China's image among vaccine-recipient countries that were not able to secure doses from other donors. This has led South Asian countries to believe that West is gate-keeping essential instruments to fight the raging pandemic, while China is helping other nations. China is giving equal opportunity to all countries contrary to the Western countries which are hoarding the cure and denying the waiver of intellectual property rights to other countries. Receiving less potent Chinese vaccines was thus considered a better alternative than having none at all.

Pakistan received the first batch of the Chinese vaccine on February 1, 2021, and the second on March 1st (*Aljazeera*, 2021). During the handing-over ceremony of the vaccines, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong had proclaimed that, Pakistan is not only the first country in the world that received the Chinese vaccine aid but it is also the recipient of the largest number of China-donated COVID-19 vaccines so far, which is a demonstration of the close and friendly relations between the two countries (*Xinhua*, 2021). Apart from the vaccines, China has also supplied health equipment which includes oxygen cylinders and generators, and surgical masks (Yameng, 2021). Pakistan also received generous help from China even to develop its vaccine, PakVac by June 1, 2021 (*Times of India*, 2021).

Similarly, China also sent a medical team to Bangladesh, as early as in April 2020, to help the country's medical professionals in combating the threat of coronavirus. A batch of 500 fast test kits, medical equipment, PPEs, and ventilators were also supplied by Chinese companies and charity groups (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2020). It had also received around +25 million doses of the vaccines (*Xinhua*, 2021). Bangladesh is also in consultation to develop vaccine with Chinese assistance. Hence, Chinese efforts to combat the disease are comprehensive in nature and welcomed by the regional countries by joining the Chinese regional initiatives.

Sri Lanka had also received a list of medical aid from China during the initial stages of the pandemic which included PCR testing kits, disposable coveralls, facemasks, and medical goggles (*Xinhua*, 2020). Likewise, vaccines have also been donated. Similarly, Nepal has also been the recipient of Chinese aid amid surging cases and the COVID crisis in the country. China supplied 800,000 doses of the vaccine, ventilators, and 2000 oxygen cylinders to the country amid a surge in the number of infected people, even while Nepal was being pressurized by India to not receive Chinese help (Adhikari, 2021).

Multilateralism versus Geopolitics: What Lessons can be Learned from This Divergent Debate Centered on Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy?

Interdependence, integration, and international cooperation at its core, globalization has brought the world closer than ever before, mainly due to the revolution in communication technology. COVID-19's emergence and sudden spread across the globe in the wake of the year 2020 marked another distinction of

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globalization that can be explained in terms of the vulnerability of the international community in the case of pandemics like COVID-19. In principle, a pandemic like COVID-19 in a globalized world should have kindled international cooperation to mitigate the global health challenge. Instead, it initiated new avenues of competition in the international arena among established and emerging powers.

The international arena is indeed a field of competition and soft power projection is certainly a means to further states' interests and images. Soft power projection through health diplomacy, especially in international emergencies like one caused by COVID-19, can be regarded as a mega event for competitive powers to showcase their diverse capabilities and long-term commitments to the status of the regional and international status of power. During the ongoing COVID-19 international health crisis, China proved to be on a steady path. It surely played a mature leadership role at international and regional levels by filling the gaps left open for her without boasting claims. Throughout the period, China constantly called for regional and global cooperation, collective action, coordinated response, and the strengthening of international institutions. However, throughout the same period, China's leading role in the field of regional and international health assistance drew United States' and Indian distrust and as a means to further its geopolitical interest regionally and globally.

This ongoing competitive and biased framing of the international health diplomacy, COVID-19 has questioned the proclaimed notions of Globalization such as global interdependence, integration, shared prosperity, and security across the board. Contingencies like COVID-19 demand the essential value of mutual and international cooperation than unhealthy competition and distrust. There is a need to embrace the concept of 'holistic security' in the highly interconnected world of today and tomorrow. The ongoing pandemic once again calls for collective action in men and material with this phrase in view that "Nobody is safe until everyone is safe."

Chinese vaccine donations are playing a vital role in changing perceptions of China in South Asian countries. Many developing countries turned towards China in the wake of denial of medical help by the West. China is even helping these countries in establishing local industries to manufacture the vaccines so that they can become self-sufficient. These efforts render China with various tangible and non-tangible gains in the international sphere. One such achievement was the declaration by World Health Organization (WHO) as it termed the Chinese vaccines Sinopharm and Sinovac safe for emergency use, helping China move forward towards the goal of making these vaccines a global public good by their inclusion in COVAX, a global initiative to provide free vaccines to countries in need (Modak, 2021). This in turn would help Beijing revamp its Belt and Road Initiative, which has suffered from pandemic-induced shocks that have hit the Chinese as well as partner countries.

Conclusion

China has set a new model of international cooperation in fighting pandemics and public health challenges through proactive collaboration with neighboring countries. Prioritizing public health security, as a focus of its national security, China first sought to contain the transmission of coronavirus within its border. It made people's lives and their health the focus of its national response strategy. Next, China shared its experience of controlling the pandemic with the international community, particularly the regional countries. It sent medical teams to assist developing countries and provided extensive medical equipment to support the struggling healthcare systems.

Then, as vaccines to fight COVID-19 were developed, China invited international cooperation and collaboration. In contrast to the Western countries, China was proactive in sharing its nationally developed vaccines with the developing countries. This proved to be a crucial element of China's public health diplomacy. As developing countries in Asia, Africa, and South America struggled to secure vaccines from the Western world, they had access to China-developed vaccines. This has set a new model of South-South cooperation. It reflects China's concept of shared prosperity in practice.

With millions of deaths worldwide and the crippling of national and international economies, the common goal of established and emerging powers should be to control and eradicate the disease. The nature of the morbidity demands international cooperation and not competition. Appraising the COVID as a global health and economic issue, with human lives at stake, geopolitical considerations should not be allowed to dominate the crucial countermeasures by any dominant international player.

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