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Biogeopolitics of Life Reflected in China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Amid intensifying U.S.–China hegemonic rivalry, China has sought to expand its soft power by taking a leadership role in supplying COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries. This study explores how China's vaccine diplomacy functioned as a biogeopolitical tool, revealing both its strategic ambitions and its limitations as a soft power instrument. Using qualitative analysis of China's vaccine distribution patterns and diplomatic engagements, the study identifies a clear alignment between vaccine allocation and China's geopolitical and economic priorities. Key findings show that China prioritized Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) hub countries and pressured Latin American states to sever ties with Taiwan in exchange for vaccine access. It also leveraged multilateral forums to consolidate influence among vaccine-recipient states. These strategies indicate that China treated vaccines as private goods, not global public goods, aiming to extract political concessions and build strategic alliances. However, this instrumental approach exposed the limitations of vaccine diplomacy in generating lasting soft power, as it emphasized transactional relationships over humanitarian values. The significance of this research is that China's vaccine diplomacy during a time of global vaccine inequality underscores the challenges of converting soft power into genuine hegemony. The selective and strategic distribution of vaccines constrained the sustainability of its influence and revealed the limitations of a biopolitical approach to global health crises. The study emphasizes the urgent need for stronger, more equitable global health governance to prevent the marginalization of vulnerable populations and to counter the geopolitics of life and death revealed by the pandemic.

1. Introduction

The U.S.-centered liberal international order, which expanded after the Cold War, increased political and economic influence worldwide. However, it also faced resistance from Islamic fundamentalist groups after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and created a leadership vacuum due to America's shift toward unilateralism (Baykal, 2021). In this environment, China aimed to expand its influence by capitalizing on rapid economic growth. Starting in 2013, China pursued the

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creation of political and economic communities with regional partner states through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to build land and maritime Silk Roads by 2049 (Institute of Chinese Studies, 2021). Notably, China's strategy to enhance its maritime dominance has been evident. China's rise has heightened hegemonic competition with the United States. Conflicts over trade and technology intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (de Soysa, 2024).

This study examines China's engagement in health diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy aimed at developing countries within the broader context of the U.S.–China hegemonic rivalry. It argues that the spread of infectious diseases globally and the distribution of vaccines serve as biogeopolitical tools that reshape the dynamics of hegemonic conflict (Lee & Lo, 2021). Vaccine donations increasingly affect soft power—although they also have limitations. To clarify, the study defines biogeopolitical actions as measures states take to achieve geopolitical objectives through biopolitical governance during major infectious disease outbreaks. It highlights the state's role and policy choices as key players in international politics. This approach aligns with traditional geopolitical analysis, which considers issues like territory, security, and alliances within a hierarchical framework. The classical geopolitical perspective remains relevant for understanding how the pandemic-triggered crisis, described as "emerging security," is connected to geographical factors. The study combines theoretical examination with the analysis of media reports. It is structured as follows. First, it reviews hegemonic stability theory, the concept of biogeopolitics, and examines U.S.–China power dynamics before COVID-19, and China's health and vaccine diplomacy after the pandemic began. Second, it analyzes how China has linked vaccine supply to the BRI and to the decision of whether to maintain or cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Lastly, it discusses the limitations of China's soft-power strategy and draws relevant implications.

2. Theoretical Background: Hegemonic Stability Theory and Biogeopolitics

Hegemony refers to a state's ability to project and uphold its values, norms, and institutions to maintain international stability. A hegemonic state must gain the quasi-voluntary support of many countries not only through hard power—such as military and economic strength—but also by providing international public goods (Wyatt-Wallace, 2008). According to Charles Kindleberger's hegemonic stability theory, the liberal international economic order assumes the presence of a hegemonic power capable of supplying these public goods (Snidal, 1985). However, providing public goods can serve not only public interests but also as a strategic tool for the hegemon's own economic and political benefits (Wyatt-Wallace, 2008).

In the 21st century, the United States' traditional dominance has been challenged by China's rise. The U.S. labeled China as a challenger to hegemony through the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy and the Trump administration's containment measures, while China expanded

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its economic influence and hard power by supporting infrastructure development in developing countries via the Belt and Road Initiative (de Soysa, 2024). Another key element of hegemonic rivalry is soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr. that refers to the ability to attract support voluntarily through appeal, values, culture, and diplomacy rather than through military force or coercion (Nye, 2004). During the COVID-19 pandemic, China used soft power by supplying vaccines and medical equipment to countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to gain trust and boost its international leadership (Lee, 2023).

From a biogeopolitical perspective, vaccines and public health policies mirror power dynamics within the international political economy. As Erja Jauhiainen's analysis of the Lesbos refugee case shows, refugees were viewed as infection threats during the pandemic and thus excluded from the protection vaccines provided (Jauhiainen, 2022). Thus, biopolitics both safeguards certain groups and excludes others. China's vaccine diplomacy also exemplifies biogeopolitical power. By supplying vaccines to developing countries while requiring conditions such as diplomatic realignment or expanded economic cooperation, China has expanded its influence. This is not just humanitarian aid but a strategic effort to shape other states' policies and choices through exerting control over life. While the United States also employed biopolitics by distributing vaccines to allies, China's approach has been more proactive and conditional (van Dijk, 2023). In sum, China's vaccine diplomacy is a complex phenomenon where hegemonic strategy, soft power, biopolitics, and geopolitical interests intersect. During the pandemic, vaccines served not only as tools for saving lives but also as key resources of power in international politics. China harnessed this resource to pursue global leadership and secure strategic gains in its hegemonic rivalry.

3. China's Vaccine Supply and the Restructuring of Political-Economic Relations

The unequal distribution of COVID-19 vaccines across countries and regions stems from the concentration of vaccine development and distribution in a few nations (Ullah, 2025). Not only economic capacity but also political and diplomatic influence affect a country's ability to secure vaccines (Rinaldi, 2024). In other words, disparities in vaccine access clearly reflect differences in national hard power and soft power. Vaccines can be seen as a form of "safety-management technology" that focuses on protecting a nation's population. The way vaccines shape or redefine international relations demonstrates their use as biogeopolitical tools by states seeking geopolitical advantage (van Dijk & Lo, 2023). Major vaccine-producing countries—such as the United States, China, and Russia—have used vaccines not to ensure global health stability but to advance their own interests (Zhang, 2022). Unlike Western countries, where pharmaceutical companies heavily influence decisions, China centrally controls not only vaccine production but also marketing and distribution under the authority of the Communist Party–state (SWP Berlin, 2021). Therefore, Chinese vaccines can be viewed as "safety devices" that reflect

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state intentions (Foucault, 2007). China has strategically deployed these devices to reshape relations with developing countries. Its vaccine diplomacy operates in two main directions: (1) providing preferential support to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries, and (2) offering vaccine aid conditioned on severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan and securing China's support in multilateral arenas (de Soysa, 2024).

3.1. Geoeconomic Relations

As of February 2022, around 1.39 billion doses of China's Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines had been supplied to 115 countries worldwide (Liu et al., 2022). In Asia, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and the Philippines received large amounts of Chinese vaccines, while in Africa, Morocco, Egypt, and Zimbabwe were major recipients (Zaini, 2022). When signing vaccine supply agreements, China used two strategies to reshape geoeconomic relations with Asian and Eastern European nations: (1) subsidizing vaccine purchase costs contingent on participating in clinical trials, and (2) expanding economic cooperation projects focused on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) hub countries.

Most countries that received significant vaccines—such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and Chile—are part of the BRI. Many of these nations started administering Sinovac or Sinopharm vaccines even before the World Health Organization granted them Emergency Use Listing in May 2021 (Zaini, 2022). Despite financial challenges, these countries were able to begin the vaccination of their populations earlier than other countries because China provided priority access and financial support—through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—on the condition they participate in clinical trials (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2020). Table 2 summarizes key BRI countries, related projects, and the types and amounts of the initial COVID-19 vaccines they received. For example, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Djibouti, Tanzania, and Hungary have undertaken large infrastructure projects—ports, power plants, energy pipelines, and high-speed rail—with Chinese cooperation. Five of these countries (Indonesia, Pakistan, Djibouti, Morocco, and Tanzania) received their first vaccines (CanSino, Sinopharm, Sinovac) between November 2020 and January 2021, allowing them to start vaccination earlier than many other countries. Pakistan, with Chinese assistance, produced its own vaccine (PakVac) in June 2021 and began manufacturing CanSino doses locally (Foreign Affairs, 2021). Indonesia also received CanSino vaccines in November 2020 and Sinovac in December 2020 (Foreign Affairs, 2021). Sri Lanka, an important BRI hub balancing relations between China and India, faced a debt crisis due to loans obtained under BRI project conditions and later sought debt restructuring from China (The Economist, 2022). In January 2021, Sri Lanka received 500,000 doses of Serum Institute of India's Covishield (AstraZeneca) followed by 300,000 Sinopharm doses in March 2021 to vaccinate Chinese nationals living in the country (Xinhua, 2021). By the end of

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2021, Sri Lanka had received over 20 million doses of Sinopharm, but due to its reduced efficacy against infection, the government used Pfizer for booster doses (Epidemiology Unit Sri Lanka, 2021).

China's economic benefits from vaccine diplomacy are summarized as follows.

First, recipient countries must agree to confidential contracts involving clinical trial participation, vaccine type, pricing, and other terms. For example, China asked Bangladesh in January 2021 to share part of the costs for Sinovac clinical trials, but Bangladesh declined and received 2 million Covishield doses instead from India, which has tense relations with China (Hindu Business Line, 2021). Nepal signed a confidential deal with China, but when Chinese officials disclosed that 4 million doses were contracted at about USD 10 each, tensions rose (Hindustan Times, 2021). Many such confidential agreements included clauses that favoured China—such as treating actions contrary to its interests as loan defaults requiring immediate repayment or prohibiting the disclosure of contract terms (BBC Korea, 2021). Therefore, vaccine procurement contracts serve as tools to establish unequal relationships with developing countries and deepen their economic reliance on China. Since most confidentiality clauses relate to loan-financed vaccine purchases, dependence on Chinese credit increases the debt levels of recipient countries. Countries with high bilateral debt to China may receive less international support for debt relief, as repayments ultimately flow back to China.

Second, China has used vaccine diplomacy to expand economic cooperation with BRI countries and neighbouring states. While the European Union procured vaccines collectively, supply shortages led some nations to pursue bilateral deals. Unable to secure enough vaccines, some Eastern European and Balkan countries turned to China, issuing emergency approvals for Chinese vaccines despite the lack of European Medicines Agency approval. Early in the pandemic, China supplied these countries with masks, ventilators, and medical supplies, laying the groundwork for later vaccine agreements (Lee, 2021, p. 166). Hungary, a BRI participant since 2015, became the first EU member to grant emergency approval for Sinopharm in February 2021 due to procurement issues (Politico, 2021). In September 2021, Hungary also signed a deal to build a Sinovac manufacturing plant, which was part of China's plan to position Hungary as its European BRI hub (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 39). The Budapest–Belgrade high-speed railway, started in 2018, extends to Greece's Port of Piraeus, which China operates, and forms a key BRI corridor in Europe (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 9). Hungary and Serbia secured loans of USD 1.855 billion and USD 297.6 million, respectively, for these projects (Reuters, 2020).

The increased cooperation between China and these countries—often overlooked within the EU—helped reduce negative perceptions of China and weaken intra-EU unity. The COVID-19

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pandemic exposed the limits of EU solidarity as member states adopted nationalist strategies for vaccine procurement, which worsened internal conflicts. China exploited these conflicts to expand its influence in Eastern Europe. Thus, Chinese vaccine diplomacy in the region highlights cracks within the international order traditionally supported by EU institutions. Meanwhile, in Latin America, China offered vaccines in exchange for Chinese companies resuming local operations. Brazil and the Dominican Republic reversed earlier decisions to exclude Huawei from their 5G networks after negotiating vaccine supply with China. Brazil's reversal was influenced by the end of the Trump administration – known for its hardline stance on China – and its urgent need for vaccines amid rising infections. Although the U.S. donated large quantities of vaccines to Latin America, China set itself apart by tying vaccine support to BRI involvement, long-term loans, and increased economic dependence (Berg & Brands, 2022, p. 3).

3.2. Geopolitical Relations

China's COVID-19 vaccines have been distributed to many developing countries. Since most recipient nations participate in China's economic cooperation projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and South–South Cooperation, its vaccine supply can be seen as a way to strengthen its influence in these countries and to act with clear political motives (Zaini, 2021). Geopolitically, China has tried to expand its influence in Latin America by tying vaccine assistance for countries without access to the end of diplomatic ties with Taiwan, while in Asia, it has aimed to secure regional leadership in South Asia and counter the United States in the Indo-Pacific by providing vaccines to neighbouring states (Liu et al., 2022).

3.2.1 Vaccines as leverage to pressure Latin American countries?

First, China used COVID-19 vaccines as leverage to pressure Latin American countries into severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The pandemic severely affected Latin America and revealed the fragility of its public health systems. Although the region accounts for only about 8 % of the world's population, roughly one-third of global COVID-19 deaths occurred there (Hakobyan & Khalib, 2022, p. 21). As Latin American nations fell behind in the global queue for Western-developed vaccines, many turned to China and signed vaccine purchase agreements. Out of the total 1.69 billion doses of Chinese vaccines sold worldwide, 396 million doses (about 30 %) were sold to Latin American countries. An additional 10.24 million doses were donated (Zaini, 2021; China Observers, 2022). Long regarded as the United States' "backyard," Latin American states have increasingly turned to China as an alternative partner since U.S.–China hegemonic rivalry intensified in 2008. Between 2000 and 2020, Latin America's trade with China increased from USD 12 billion to USD 315 billion (more than twenty-five times) while China's share of the region's total trade rose eight-fold from 1.7 % to 11.3 % (Americas Quarterly, 2021). Until recently, economic rather than political factors shaped

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China–Latin America relations (Americas Quarterly, 2021), and cooperation between the two was formally marked by a "Special Declaration on the Belt and Road" at the China–CELAC Forum in January 2018 (CSF China Expert Forum, 2019).

After the outbreak of COVID-19, China showcased its status and promoted the narrative of "China's contribution" by providing medical supplies and technical assistance, as well as USD 1 billion in financing for vaccine purchases, to Latin American countries through BRI-related cooperation (Hankyoreh, 2020). However, as the pandemic dragged on and vaccine inequality worsened, it emerged that China had asked over fifty countries worldwide to recognize Taiwan as part of "Chinese territory" in exchange for vaccine support (AidData, 2024). Among Latin American nations, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and El Salvador—all of which established diplomatic ties with China in 2018—secured vaccines relatively quickly, while Nicaragua, whose relations with the U.S. had deteriorated, received Chinese vaccines soon after severing ties with Taiwan (CNN, 2021). Conversely, Honduras and Paraguay did not receive Chinese vaccines because they rejected Beijing's demand to break ties with Taiwan first (Hankyoreh, 2021).

Paraguay remains Taiwan's only diplomatically [aligned country] in South America. Since President Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration in 2016 and her "de-sinicisation" policy, China has increased its efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically. As a result, eight Latin American countries—including El Salvador and the Dominican Republic—have switched recognition from Taipei to Beijing, but Paraguay has maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan. In early 2021, a debate emerged in Paraguay over whether to normalise relations with China to obtain vaccines due to delays in procurement. In response, Taiwan donated helicopters for vaccine transport, along with medicines and protective equipment, and arranged for vaccines through partner countries like the U.S., Japan, and India (Long & Urdinez, 2021). For Paraguay, the political gains from aligning with Taiwan—such as emphasising ideological differences with China and gaining tangible support—outweigh the costs of recognising Beijing (Long & Urdinez, 2021). Therefore, China's vaccine diplomacy has highlighted the distinct nature of China's political system to the world and expanded the political rivalry in cross-Strait relations.

Honduras, like Paraguay, maintained diplomatic ties with Taiwan and had the second-highest COVID-19 death toll in Central America after Guatemala. In April 2021, during a third wave, President Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras sought vaccine support from both Taiwan and the U.S. When that effort failed, he moved to establish diplomatic ties with China. Later, El Salvador—a Chinese ally—donated 34,000 vaccine doses to Honduras, and the Honduran government indicated it was considering opening a trade office in China to improve relations (Hankyoreh, 2021). By July 2021, the COVAX facility had supplied Honduras with 2.94 million doses of AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna, and Sputnik V vaccines, enough for about 80,000

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people—5.4 % of the population—to complete a second dose (Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Honduras, 2021). In November 2021, Xiomara Castro won Honduras's presidential election. Her election reflected a shift in public opinion, influenced in part by vaccine access issues (Hankyoreh, 2022), as she had promised to establish diplomatic ties with China. Paraguay and Honduras were both marginalised in terms of vaccine access and subjected to political pressure from surrounding and partner states over their ties with Taiwan. Even though, in principle, a sovereign state is entitled to make independent political choices to protect the lives of its citizens—as the state is the key actor that exercises life-power on behalf of individuals in the international community—its decisions are constrained by the geopolitical relations in which it is embedded.

3.2.2 Vaccine as soft power by supplying large quantities to South Asian states

Second, China has strengthened its soft power by supplying large quantities of vaccines to South Asian states, with distribution patterns—similar to those in Latin America—prioritising BRI partners such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. While advanced economies negotiated directly with Western pharmaceutical firms, China provided free vaccines to developing countries and sought to expand its influence in South Asia (Zaini, 2021). In this region, China not only competes with India for regional dominance but also remains involved in border disputes. India, home to the world's largest vaccine manufacturing facility—the Serum Institute of India (SII)—transferred production technology from AstraZeneca and has been producing 250 million doses per month under contract (BBC News, 2021). India donated 20 million doses to neighbouring countries—including Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Afghanistan—and thus used vaccines as a tool to regain regional leadership (BBC News, 2021). China and India, which have long clashed over their disputed borders, engaged in military conflicts in Ladakh and in the Tawang area of Arunachal Pradesh in 2020 and 2021 (The New York Times, 2020). In response, India cancelled several cooperative projects with China, tightened trade restrictions, and joined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with the United States, Australia, and Japan, which is a framework partly aimed at balancing China (Cho, 2019, p. 136). As a result, the competition for regional leadership between China and India in the Indo-Pacific is closely linked to the larger context of Sino–U.S. hegemonic rivalry.

China has also supplied vaccines to Southeast Asian states to strengthen diplomatic ties. At the special China–ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in June 2021, Beijing successfully secured a joint statement calling for restraint in terms of provocative actions in the South China Sea. However, when the directly affected countries—such as the Philippines and Malaysia—tried to include specific measures to prevent Chinese provocations at sea, their efforts were blocked by countries like Cambodia and Laos that have received significant vaccine and economic aid from

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China (Reuters, 2021). This situation once again highlighted China's influence in Southeast Asia and indicated that U.S. diplomatic efforts to expand its network of regional partners face considerable obstacles.

China has used vaccine diplomacy to strengthen economic ties, especially with BRI hub countries and regions such as Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. At the same time, as China intensifies its hegemonic competition with the United States, it is expanding its influence in Latin America and continues to counter India—a potential hegemonic power—through various means. Vaccine diplomacy has become a significant layer in the U.S.–China hegemonic rivalry, which was originally driven by technological and trade disputes, and it has highlighted shifts in the international order in both Latin America and Asia. China's selective distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and its insistence on political conditions for support is a geopolitical strategy that uses life itself as a bargaining chip. Consequently, China's vaccine diplomacy does not fully reflect genuine values or persuasive appeal. It remains to be seen whether the soft-power effects of China's vaccine diplomacy will last for the long term.

4. Analysis implication

This study examined how China, seeking to expand its soft power amid the ongoing U.S.–China hegemonic rivalry, has taken the lead in supplying COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries with significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance. Through this analysis, the study confirmed that vaccines functioned as a biogeopolitical mechanism that reshaped patterns of hegemonic conflict during the global pandemic, and it critically evaluated vaccine diplomacy as a foundation of soft power (Zaini, 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

First, China's leadership in supplying COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries can be compared to the process outlined by hegemonic stability theory, in which a great power generates soft power by providing public goods based on universal values and norms (Kindleberger, 1981; Nye, 2004). In practice, most countries that received vaccines early were BRI hub states with already established strong economic ties to China (Brattberg et al., 2021). Thus, vaccines were used as private resources rather than as global public goods. It is crucial to consider the political-economic constraints and difficulties faced by recipient countries that were compelled to accept conditions in return for vaccines (AidData, 2024). They reveal that vaccines served as instruments of China's geoeconomic goals and biopolitical management of life (Foucault, 2007).

Second, China used the Belt and Road Initiative — which had been temporarily stalled due to the spread of the virus — as a channel for vaccine distribution and promoted an integrated model of health aid and economic cooperation (Liu et al., 2022). China further framed its domestic

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pandemic control success as evidence of the superiority of its political system (CSF China Expert Forum, 2019). Thereby, it expanded what had been U.S.–China strategic competition in trade into a broader struggle of values. Notably, although vaccine provision helped China build friendly relations and establish trust with recipient countries, many countries financed their vaccine purchases through loans (Zaini, 2021). This made recipient states increasingly dependent on China (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2020). Such dependence amounts to coercive power and reflects a hard-power approach rather than genuine soft power (Nye, 2004). Selectively providing vaccines based on geoeconomic calculations rather than humanitarian considerations, and increasing financial dependency, limit both the development and the long-term effectiveness of soft power and hamper China's ability to turn soft power into real hegemony (Góni, 2025).

Third, China's vaccine diplomacy has been used to advance geopolitical goals in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. In Latin America, China conditioned vaccine aid on cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan (CNN, 2021; Hankyoreh, 2021). It successfully prompted Nicaragua to do so and sparked debates in other countries about recognizing Beijing (Long and Urdinez, 2021). Although worsening relations with the U.S. played a significant role in these policy shifts, the trend shows China's emergence as a hegemon in Latin America (Americas Quarterly, 2021). Similar patterns are apparent in Southeast Asia and South Asia, where territorial and maritime disputes continue (Reuters, 2021). China supplied vaccines to India's neighbors and Southeast Asian nations to secure regional dominance and counter the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific (Liu et al., 2022; Brattberg et al., 2021). These developments indicate that China's political system and identity influence its vaccine distribution decisions and that the political confrontation seen in cross-Strait relations is being extended globally (Long and Urdinez, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Based on these three findings, the implications of China's vaccine diplomacy are as follows.

First, given that global vaccine inequality created opportunities for China's vaccine diplomacy, there is a clear need to strengthen international health governance. Bilateral agreements between countries and contracts with pharmaceutical companies inevitably reflect political interests and economic disparities (Hakobyan and Khalib, 2022). This leaves low-income nations unable to secure vaccines, exacerbating distribution inequalities. During global health crises, expanding vaccine distribution through multilateral mechanisms like COVAX and enhancing cooperation on health security under global governance are essential (WHO, 2022). Such efforts are crucial not only for managing crises but also for addressing ethical issues related to the marginalization of the right to life.

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Second, in light of global COVID-19 vaccine inequality, it is important to acknowledge that vaccine diplomacy functions as part of a realist international strategy and to pursue justice-oriented methods for vaccine distribution. Early vaccine nationalism in the U.S. and other Western countries, as well as China's selective vaccine distribution under its health diplomacy, reflect geopolitical decisions about whose lives are protected and whose are not (Jauhiainen, 2021). This constitutes a form of necro-geopolitics, which is similar to racialized patterns of exclusion. To overcome this marginalization, healthcare infrastructure and pharmaceutical technologies must be recognized as global public goods connected to the right to life (Foucault, 2007; Gómez-Tatay, 2019).

Finally, this study aimed to shed light on the strategic actions and representations of state actors involved in vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic. However, it has limitations because it treats states as unified actors at the global level. As a result, it fails to fully capture the interactions among diverse actors and structures that shape the international order. Additionally, since the analysis relied on media reports rather than official policy documents, it reflects the perspectives embedded in news coverage. Future research should go beyond surface-level understanding to explore how geopolitical actors make strategic decisions, how these decisions produce outcomes amid conflicting goals and changing conditions, and how geographically and economically intertwined factors shape international results (Stirling, 2018). Given that the case studies in this paper simplify the complex dynamics of geoeconomics and geopolitics, further research is necessary to understand the evolving changes in the international system stemming from their interaction.

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