Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in early 2020 changed it unimaginably. China was forced to face many new challenges at the international level, not only those related to the handling of a health crisis. After overcoming the first wave of the pandemic, China had to focus on foreign policy and public diplomacy efforts to secure its main interests. As the world continues to struggle with COVID-19, China is using the pandemic for its own foreign policy purposes, mainly by using vaccines as a new foreign policy tool. The purpose of the research is to investigate the position of recent Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ with reference to its traditional and contemporary public diplomacy and foreign policy strategies. The investigation has a qualitative character and is based on a content analysis of official press conferences conducted by the Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Keywords

China · Foreign policy · Public diplomacy · ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ · COVID-19

Introduction

China is an emerging power that can be perceived as a major international actor. Even in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, China did not resign from attempts to strengthen its international position. Its goals are extremely wide—China is definitely trying to mark its presence not only within Asian continent but also globally. One of the best examples of Beijing’s intense international activity is the currently implemented idea of the One Belt One Road initiative. The rapid economic development of China can be observed not only in trade but also in intensive military investments (see Sarker et al. 2018, pp. 623–638). All this is supported by diplomatic efforts and the excessive use of public diplomacy in an attempt to highlight the peaceful intentions behind the new developments in China. Since the rapid growth of China can be perceived as a threat to many countries, Beijing decided to pursue its public diplomacy with the aim of presenting China as a peaceful country and, therefore, following the so-called ‘peaceful rising’ strategy (Buzan 2010).

In the extraordinary conditions of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most states had to adjust to the new unstable international reality. Therefore, China released a new strategy on foreign development cooperation at the beginning of 2021, which is related to the pandemic in many aspects. Although many of the activities undertaken by China are not new, they were designed to meet new standards and face new challenges.

The purpose of the research is to investigate the position of recent Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ with reference to its traditional and contemporary public diplomacy and foreign policy strategies. Taking into account the high activity of Beijing within international politics and trade, the pandemic appeared as a serious challenge. The Chinese origins of COVID-19 are believed to have tarnished China’s international image (Silver 2020). COVID-19 was even first called a ‘Wuhan virus’ (Lee 2021). In such circumstances, China had to conduct its foreign policy with great care and forge the negatives into positives. Therefore, preceded by donations of medical protective equipment (see: Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021), ‘vaccine diplomacy’ should be a new tool in the hands of Beijing.
Materials and methods

Since ‘vaccine diplomacy’, which is the main analysed category in the following research, can be related to a specific example of conducting foreign aid, the conducted research required more complex content analysis investigating the position of recent Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ in relation to its traditional and contemporary public diplomacy and foreign policy strategies. The main focus was to identify the context of the pandemic in official press conferences made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in reference to fundamental strategic documents on foreign aid, which is already one of the well-established forms of the Chinese international activity. The goal is to determine whether and in which areas the pandemic influenced Chinese foreign policy and diplomatic efforts, as well as to reveal the motivation behind new ‘vaccine diplomacy’ and how it corresponds with already established declared goals of the Chinese foreign policy.

The investigation has a qualitative character and is based on a content analysis of Chinese strategies on foreign aid and, in the latter part, an analysis of official statements made by representatives of the Chinese government, Ministry for Foreign Affairs more precisely, with reference to the declared objectives identified in the mentioned Chinese documents on foreign aid.

As a first step, a short introduction to Chinese foreign aid was made, in which three consecutive white papers were briefly presented. This provided foundations for the analysis of the latter content analysis of the official statements. This allowed us not only to understand and identify the declared motivations behind ‘vaccine diplomacy’, but also to place it within the wider context of already established strategic documents and previous efforts. The main assumptions and motivations of foreign development cooperation were described in reference to the newest white paper on international development cooperation published in January 2021. This white paper serves as a formal ground for conducting development cooperation and development aid, which currently can be strongly referred to as ‘vaccine diplomacy’. Furthermore, the issues emerging in the official press conferences referring to the COVID-19 pandemic of COVID-19 were confronted with other projects and initiatives such as One Road One Belt, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and finally the Chinese partnership with the developing world (both regionally and globally). This allowed observing how the new concept of Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ is incorporated into already well-established Chinese public and foreign policies.

For the research, all regular press conferences of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) from the period between 1st of April and 30th of July 2021 made by the Ministry’s Spokespersons—Wang Wenbin, Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying—were chosen for the analysis. Within this time scale, 81 official press conferences were released. All the 81 press conferences were filtered with the following key words: vaccine, vaccine diplomacy, COVID, COVID-19, pandemic, coronavirus. Based on already identified within foreign aid strategies narratives, following categories of messages provided by the MFA were listed:

- International cooperation (53 press conferences mention or fully refer to international cooperation in the field of COVID-19 vaccines, additionally 14 out of 53 press conferences refer to regional cooperation as well).
- Providing assistance to developing countries (36 press conferences refer to providing Chinese assistance to developing countries in reference to vaccines availability).
- Advocating for the vaccines to be recognized as the global public good (22 press conferences mentioning Chinese efforts to recognize vaccines as a global public good).
- No reference to ‘vaccine diplomacy’ or COVID-19 pandemic (15 out of all 81 press conferences do not make any reference to either vaccines or the pandemic itself).

Since all of the press conferences referred to different events and issues in international relations, the same press conference could have been categorized in more than one category of messages provided by the MFA.

Since the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the main channel of international communication and is responsible for implementing foreign policy, such statements made during press conferences were perceived as a valuable and credible source of information referring to the current declared motivations of the Chinese foreign policy. The timescale encompassed four-month period from April to July 2021, which is the time when vaccines were already well-established and many developed countries already conducted mass vaccinations of their citizens. At the same time, the problem of uneven distribution of vaccines, with rich countries being privileged, was often raised in global discourse. The selected press conferences show a systematic position and view of the Chinese government. Therefore, analysing official statements from a four-month period has been assumed sufficient in identifying examples of implementation or incorporation of the ‘vaccine diplomacy’ within already existing endeavours. Furthermore, the current goals and the main narratives behind the Chinese foreign and public policies were recognized based on the content analysis. Additionally, providing basic knowledge of the motivations declared in the strategic documents gave an opportunity to better understand, interpret,
and identify the motivations behind the statements made by the officials.

**Theoretical considerations**

Since the purpose of this article is to investigate the position of recent Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ with reference to its traditional and contemporary initiatives, it is necessary to conceptualize some fundamental categories related to this field. Crucial in this research are the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, development aid, and development communication.

The concept of soft power, created by Joseph Nye, refers to the possibility of influencing other states and non-state actors and persuading them to behave in a certain way (Nye 2008). Most countries understand the need to build their soft power, manage their reputation, and shape an international image. All this can contribute to the political, economic, and cultural interests of states (Kaneva 2011; Dinnie 2016; Melissen 2005). Joseph Nye argued that soft power contributes positively to the way a certain state is perceived by the foreign public and how influential it can be. Soft power is an important part within the scope of foreign policy. The way a country is perceived and how influential it can be are factors that influence other international actors to reflect how successful it can be in reaching foreign policy goals. Since soft power increases the potential to influence others, it seems appropriate to expect that China will strive to strengthen it. In fact, China has been doing it for a long time. The number of activities undertaken by Beijing within this area emerged as a ‘charm offensive’ within which China has been trying to charm the world and present its potential and power on many different levels. Back in the 1990s, the PRC engaged itself in so-called peripheral diplomacy in the Southeast and East Asia. It allowed China to develop economically and build new peaceful relations with other countries in this part of the world (Hirono 2011). At the same time, the aim was to improve its image in this region. These activities are frequently held as public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is aimed at reaching foreign publics and shaping foreign perceptions, which are to serve as a fundament for the actions of other countries. At first, public diplomacy was perceived as a tool for hostile states to influence foreign societies and then, through grassroots pressure, to impact the foreign government (Gilboa 2008). Georgyi Szondi (2008) outlines the main goals of public diplomacy as changing behaviour and political attitudes, as well as promoting economic interests. Although public diplomacy encompasses mostly initiatives in a long perspective, some efforts can be perceived as ad hoc tools of responding to potential challenges or threats, especially when states have to face unexpected circumstances. This can be exemplified by a wide category of development aid provided in crisis situations such as the current COVID-19 pandemics, which emerged in international media as ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ (Bocchi 2020; Scimia 2020), ‘mask diplomacy’ (Kowalski 2021), or most recently ‘vaccine diplomacy’ (Aspinall 2021). ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ can be related to both foreign aid and health diplomacy as a more specific way of conducting it. Health diplomacy can be defined in two ways, as international negotiations aimed at solving health related issues or as using different health concepts in their policy-shaping and negotiation strategies with the aim of reaching nonmedical objectives, like, for example, political, social or economic (Fidler 2013). Kickbusch et al. (2007) defined health diplomacy as relating to multilevel and multiple actors negotiations that influence the health areas of global policy.

However, in the twenty-first century, especially the second way of understanding health diplomacy has been gaining impetus as a result of the increased intensification of negative political, economic, and social consequences of different health related issues or crisis. Fauci added that medical diplomacy is about ‘winning of hearts and minds of people in poor countries by exporting medical care, expertise, and personnel to help those who need it most’ (Fauci 2007). Based on given definitions, health diplomacy can also be aimed at reaching non-health results, like political or economic ones. This kind of health diplomacy is usually implemented on a bilateral level. In this context, health diplomacy can have two different meanings: the state may provide assistance to counteract mutual threats deriving from health or medical situation, or to strengthen and improve its bonds with other countries (Fidler 2013). The second understanding can be exemplified by establishing the China-Egypt intergovernmental cooperation committee aimed at combating the COVID-19 pandemic (MFA July 19 2021). Health diplomacy is also often conducted by non-state actors, which will be discussed below.

According to the above, health diplomacy can take many forms and encompasses many different methods of conducting it. In terms of this research, the second concept seems to be more adequate, since it incorporates the concept of soft power, where medical or health aspects can be used as soft power assets potentially strengthening states international positioning, fostering its relations with other actors and contributing to achieving foreign policy goals.

‘Vaccine diplomacy’ can be a contemporary example of this type of health diplomacy used as a support for the foreign policy of a state. One of the first examples of ‘vaccine diplomacy’ dates back to 1798, when vaccination against smallpox was discovered (Hotez 2001). It has entered the global discourse in 2001. ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ refers to ‘almost any aspect of global health diplomacy that relies on the use or delivery of vaccines’ (Hotez 2014). Hotez (2014) also indicates a significant role of international
organizations in ‘vaccine diplomacy’, such as the WHO or the United Nations Children’s Fund. Initiatives conducted by such organizations, like, e.g. vaccination campaigns, can lead not only to solving urgent health issues but even to cease-fire in case of a conflict. Such organizations can also be involved in mediating the cessation of hostilities. Making vaccines available is a significant aspect of ‘vaccine diplomacy’, which can be strongly related to simply providing a specific type of development aid, which further combats existing inequalities between highly developed and developing countries. In this chapter, ‘vaccine diplomacy’ will be understood with reference to the second meaning of health diplomacy, where health aspects and medical aid are used to achieve nonmedical goals. ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ is a new element of Chinese foreign policy shaped by the current COVID-19 pandemic; however, this category is already historically embedded, similar to the concept of health diplomacy.

Finally, the last categories that should be explained include development aid and development communication. The first is defined by the OECD as ‘government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries’. According to the OECD development aid, activities may include grants, soft loans, and technical assistance. Financial support such as loans or credits for military purposes is excluded from accepted forms of development aid (OECD nd). Other forms of development aid include administrative overheads of development agencies or debt forgiveness (Kharas 2007). Providing vaccines and making them more accessible in developing countries, thus supporting their efforts to handle health crises, can be a specific example of development aid.

Development communication, on the other hand, refers to ‘a process of strategic intervention towards social change initiated by institutions and communities’ (Wilkins and Mody 2001). Development communication can encompass both communication for the benefit of developing communities and the development community (Pamment 2016). Pamment (2016) recognizes communication for development, communication of development and communication about development. The second category is particularly interesting, as it refers to promoting aid activities that can positively influence donor’s strength of influence and its national image. The third category, on the other hand, can contribute to setting agendas and influencing mainstream discourses (Wu 2018). It can be argued as well that some public diplomacy efforts (in this specific case through development aid exemplified by ‘vaccine diplomacy’) correlated to development communication, can aim to support negotiating common interests and goals, contribute to engagement, collaboration and relation-building, to extend public diplomacy efforts over wider publics, and finally, to influence behaviours of other actors (Pamment and Wilkins 2018).

Already in the 1990s certain theories provided foundations for discussions over the meaning of managing discourse referring to common good (in this case, this may be related to vaccines as a global public good, which China established within international agenda) and efforts aimed at shaping interests, norms, and goods which are supposed to help in solving global issues and threats (Pamment and Wilkins 2018). Public diplomacy and development communication share mutually the same goals, at least at some points where they strive for social change and influence over others. They are also rooted in the same communication theories (Akerlund 2018). Communicating development through the promotion of aid can be carried out with the aim of securing reputation and image (Pamment and Wilkins 2018), as well as promoting own interests. Through public diplomacy and development communication, certain goals, interests, and motivations can be channelled to the international recipients. This can be done through a specific narration on national interests with regard to aid activities (Pammenta and Wilkins 2018).

**Chinese foreign policy through foreign aid**

Since China is growing rapidly, it is important for its government to public diplomacy, strengthen soft power and conduct its ‘charm offensive’ to secure its foreign policy goals. One of the tools used by China is foreign aid. It became a significant tool for supporting Chinese interests worldwide already at the beginning of the Cold War era. Back in the 1950s other communist countries in Asia were on the Chinese agenda; however, Beijing decided on widening the scope of their interest soon concentrating its foreign aid on developing countries in Africa and Oceania, or even Latin America (Xue et al. 2019). The assistance focused back then on the so-called stadium diplomacy, just to mention some examples of the Chinese activity. This kind of diplomatic effort provided the construction of new sport infrastructure and often its maintenance in the following years. Stadium diplomacy was politically motivated: the PRC was not willing to compete in most sports events or participate in international sport organizations due to the participation of Taiwan in those events. The means of providing aid nowadays varies significantly; however, it is mostly concentrated on grants and loans for infrastructure, scholarships for academic training, technical assistance or debt relief, to name just a few (McCormick 2008). Other types of aid focus on technical assistance: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than 600 Chinese teachers and more than 15,000 Chinese doctors have worked in sub-Saharan Africa (McCormick 2008). The current pandemic again changes the tools used by the Chinese government to provide aid.

The Chinese foreign aid is based on several official documents. The White Paper on Foreign Aid has already been...
published three times—in 2011, 2014 and in 2021. The White Paper on Foreign Aid published in 2011 outlined several core goals and principles of Chinese aid. What should be highlighted first is the often repeated aspect of mutual benefits derived from Chinese foreign aid for both China and recipient countries—for example, we can read about ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’ or ‘Over the years, while focusing on its own development, China has been providing aid (…)’ and ‘China’s foreign aid (…) is mutual help between developing countries.’ (China’s Foreign Aid 2011). These expressions are evidence for the pursuit of development aid with the goal of supporting the own economic goals and providing favourable conditions for further Chinese development. This motivation is also visible within the China’s Foreign Aid White Paper of 2014.

The most current version of the White Paper on Foreign Aid was announced early in 2021. The document titled ‘China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era’ presents such motivations for China’s participation in international development cooperation, as ‘internationalism and humanitarianism spirit’, ‘supporting other developing countries in their fight for national independence and liberation’ and ‘effort to promote economic and social development, which laid a solid foundation for long-term friendship and cooperation’, ‘resolving global development issues’ and ‘implementing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (China’s International Development Cooperation 2021). These issues correspond to the message of presenting China as a responsible international actor and the mutual benefits derived from cooperation. This is even listed as one of the fundamental notions being a driving force for Chinese development aid. Therefore, China is presented as having a ‘sense of responsibility as a major country’ (China’s International Development Cooperation 2021). Furthermore, the idea of China as a capable country is visible in the latest white paper: the statement that ‘China is willing to share its successful experience (…)’ (China’s International Development Cooperation 2021) suggests that this country is developing quickly and efficiently and is achieving great success in many fields, which can now be transferred to other developing countries. The newest document is strongly embedded in previous strategies and focuses on similar areas despite already being implemented in the new pandemic reality.

Although ‘coronavirus diplomacy’, ‘mask diplomacy’ or even ‘vaccine diplomacy’, are not a significant element of Chinese international engagement declared in the newest white paper on international development cooperation, it is quite evident that this form of Chinese activity is highly exploited. In the white paper, reference is made to the World Health Assembly held in May 2020, during which President Xi declared that international cooperation to combat the pandemic is essential. In addition, the implementation of a new assistance fund of US$ 2 billion was declared. President Xi assured about the Chinese willingness to support African countries in their response to COVID-19 (China’s International Development Cooperation… 2021). Faced with the pandemic and in line with the Belt and Road initiative, China also expressed the need to provide infrastructural connectivity within the scope of the initiative. As an example of the Chinese contribution, the engagement of the China Railway Express is given (China’s International Development Cooperation… 2021). The white paper also provides a general list of Chinese initiatives undertaken with reference to the pandemic, which mostly fall under either foreign development aid or health diplomacy. China provided 150 countries and 10 international organizations with medical equipment and materials, sending medical teams to 33 countries by October 2020, contributing to public health infrastructure in the African, Latin American and Asian continents, providing financial assistance to the WHO, UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan, the Asian Development Bank and the International Atomic Energy Agency, finally providing debt relief to the poorest countries (China’s International Development Cooperation… 2021). Such help is declared to be continued in the future as well, and it all fits in the general narrative proposed by Beijing and is showcasing China as influential, powerful, efficient, reliable, and responsible.

Taking into consideration all the motives declared in foreign aid strategies and acknowledging Chinese experience and a long history of providing foreign aid to international recipients, core goals of such endeavours can be identified:

- Providing conditions and space for international cooperation.
- Presenting China as successful, responsible and dedicated actor, especially in providing assistance to developing countries.
- Providing mutual benefits (mostly economic).

From ‘mask diplomacy’ to ‘vaccine diplomacy’

Taking a closer look at new Chinese endeavours in the field of foreign aid, it can be noticed that together with the COVID-19 pandemic new possibilities of exercising foreign aid occurred. The fairly rapid success of the Chinese countermeasures against COVID-19 can be perceived as a potential source of soft power in the new reality of the pandemic. The government can use the pandemic to support its foreign policy goals in many ways. One of the first manifestations of doing so was to make clear links between already well-established foreign aid within the scope of the Chinese foreign policy tools.

China started with ‘mask diplomacy’ (sometimes referred to as ‘coronavirus diplomacy’) as a form of an early response to new pandemic challenges. When Beijing
had taken control over the spread of COVID-19 spread in China, it tried to take advantage of the very difficult situation internationally. Since most countries around the world were unable to combat the pandemic effectively, China, as a country experienced in responding to public health crises, offered its support to those in need. One of such countries offered with Chinese support was Spain, which experienced one of the most severe outbreaks of the COVID-19. Apparently, the aid provided during the pandemic was supposed to have long-term effects. As the Chinese leader Xi Jinping told Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, both countries should continue their cooperation and trade exchange after the outbreak. Such attitude was shared by the Spanish site, as the Prime Minister thanked for the Chinese support and stressed the importance of strategic relations with China (Gobierno de Espana 2020). Italy, which has been called China’s comprehensive strategic partner (MFA June 29 2021), also accepted aid from China. In that case, Xi Jinping suggested that in the future a health silk road could be established as part of the One Belt One Road initiative (Kuo 2020). The head of Italian Red Cross, Francesco Rocca voiced gratitude for the help saying: ‘We have a desperate need for these masks right now. We need respirators that the Red Cross will donate to the government. This is for sure a really important donation for our country,’ (Reuters 2020). Xi also spoke of the promotion of future cooperation as a result of the current partnership to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in his message to Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vui (President Xi Jinping Sends… 2020). Generally speaking, the pandemic created new circumstances for developing cooperative initiatives on many different levels—starting from bilateral contacts to regional cooperation within ASEAN, SCO or One Belt One Road (MFA June 24 2021). COVID-19 significantly influenced the diplomatic efforts of the Chinese government. It took the forms of health diplomacy, which is reflected both in China’s foreign aid and major initiatives such as One Road One Belt and is also incorporated in the latest strategic documents.

The term ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ which has already entered scientific discourse is an interesting phenomenon that seems to correspond to the main official documents on Chinese foreign aid and the declared goals of such foreign cooperation as well. Several different narratives can be identified behind the Chinese ‘coronavirus diplomacy’. For example, Kobierecka and Kobierecki (2021) identified the following meanings behind Chinese ‘coronavirus diplomacy’: ‘expressing Chinese gratitude for the help it received from other countries, presenting China as a global, responsible power that aims to cooperate with the rest of the world and to signal the will to enhance future cooperation’. The main narratives, as well as the methods used by China during the pandemic can suggest that, of course, new circumstances generate a new context for Chinese activity; however, the government seems to follow its main goals within foreign policy with the use of already well-established foreign aid, which in the pandemic context takes new forms. In this section we discuss both the category of ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ and ‘vaccine diplomacy’ as a specific example of foreign aid. After first outbreak of the pandemic, ‘mask diplomacy’ or ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ became outdated since there were no longer serious shortages of medical and protective equipment. Instead, a vivid discussion on developing vaccinations dominated international agenda. ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ is another form of providing both foreign aid and projecting international influence of states. Since many European states and the US were accused of buying much bigger amounts of vaccines than needed, which resulted in shortages of doses in the developing countries (Rich countries hoarding… 2021), China could fill this vacuum by providing own vaccines and assistance to the developing countries.

China already at the beginning of 2021 was the main manufacturer of COVID-19 vaccines—until March China produced almost 170 millions of doses (Lawler 2021). Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ started in July 2020 when Beijing provided first vaccines to be tested in Brazil. Soon, the first agreements were signed with chosen partner countries, mostly low and middle income ones. In December 2020, Egypt was one of the first countries to be donated with Chinese vaccines produced by Sinopharm (Lee 2021). As of June 2021, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin declared that Beijing provided already 350 million doses to its international cooperative partners, donated vaccines to more than 80 developing countries in urgent need and exported doses to more than 40 countries. China first focused on managing ‘vaccine diplomacy’ on the governmental level, however, later decided on engaging itself in providing assistance through COVAX as well. Wenbin highlighted that Chinese vaccines provided for COVAX ‘will enable Chinese vaccines to make greater contributions to the global response.’ He also mentioned about international solidarity and responsibility of providing the developing world with better accessibility to vaccines (MFA June 10 2021). The same narrative referring to international solidarity in combating COVID-19 could have been found in other official statements made by the Foreign Ministry (MFA June 1 2021). In terms of geographical distribution, the highest number of vaccines was delivered to other Asian and Pacific countries. Out of total 32,55 millions Chinese vaccines donated, 23,27 million reached Asia and Pacific. Africa was the second region that received 7,16 million vaccines, while Europe was donated with the lowest number (China COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker 2021). China also signed an agreement with the Islamic Development Bank on assisting 11 Islamic African countries in building anti-epidemic
public health laboratories (MFA June 16 2021). Those figures can be very suggestive, showing the main regions of focus for the Chinese foreign policy as well as the main regions of its influence.

In case of the Chinese public diplomacy, it is worth noting that it has a very specific character when compared to more Western patterns. It is highly centralized and almost fully subordinated to the Chinese Communist Party. Such model can be referred to as a ‘party-led diplomacy’ (Zhao 2019). Taking into consideration the results of a research conducted by the Pew Research Center between June and August 2020 among respondents from 14 countries which showed that the general perception of China during the pandemic is strongly negative. The median for 14 countries showed that 73% of respondents had negative views of China. Also the assessment of Chinese reaction to the outbreak of pandemic was negative. The median result was 61% respondents saying China has done a bad job in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic (Silver et al. 2020). By managing the process of international communication, the ruling party can change those negative opinions through ‘vaccine diplomacy’. Lee (2021) even refers to this situation as a geopolitical opportunity for China, especially in the context of Sino-American relations. The US under Trump’s presidency did not engage significantly in ‘vaccine diplomacy’, which gave a free space for the Beijing. What is more, the US is even more criticized for how it handled pandemic. 84% of the respondents in the Pew Research Center surveys indicated that the US has done bad job and only 15% assessing it positively (Silver et al. 2020).

![Image]

Results—narratives behind Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’

As a result of conducted content analysis of 81 official press conferences made by the Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs’ spokespersons specific narratives could have been identified. The majority of the statements made, referred strongly to the aspects of international cooperation (53 press conferences referred to such aspects of the Chinese international activity), also on regional level (14 out of 53 press conferences). The second category can be related to providing assistance by the Chinese government in the field of vaccines availability and accessibility. In this category 36 press conferences were identified. Third category of messages was the Chinese declaration to advocate for the COVID-19 vaccines to be recognized as the global public good—22 press conferences made at least small reference to this. Since the third category can be perceived as a specific way of voicing China’s role in making vaccines available and accessible to the developing countries, the second and third category are discussed together in the latter part of this section. Out of all 81 press conferences that were analysed, 15 had no direct or significant reference to ‘vaccine diplomacy’ conducted by the Chinese government.

China as an advocate of international cooperation and solidarity

China is engaged in international cooperation on many different levels through which this country creates beneficial environment for development and support to its regional and global agenda. China is using many global, regional platforms and forums for this sake, among others United Nations, ASEAN, Shanghai Cooperation Organization or One Belt One Road initiative. China also focuses on developing bilateral relations through cooperation with its strategic partners. ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ is yet another tool to enhance and provide space for new cooperative initiatives. On a global level, China used among others the period of its presidency in the UN’s Security Council. During one of the press conferences, Zhao Lijian highlighted that, in the context of the pandemic, ‘China will continue to work closely with the international community to improve the efficacy and efficiency of UN peacekeeping operations and play a greater role in safeguarding international peace and security (MFA June 17 2021).

Significant activity of the Chinese government can be observed on a regional level. Almost all ASEAN countries, excluding Vietnam, declared their willingness to accept Chinese vaccines at the beginning of 2021. Beijing also promised donations to Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. China may be willing to use its vaccines to support its regional agenda, particularly on its key foreign policy issues such as its moves in the South China Sea (Doherty et al. 2021). Taking into account the vulnerable situation and many territorial disputes with other states in the region, ‘vaccine diplomacy’ may be a useful tool. Blablova and Karaskova suggest that the Chinese strategy is a compilation of politics and business where ‘Jabs are used as a tool, to reinforce established relations and capitalize on new opportunities’ (Karaskova and Blablova 2021).

‘Vaccine diplomacy’ also found its space within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and One Road One Belt initiative. At the SCO meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the SCO held in July 2021, participants declared their willingness to combat the pandemic, fight against vaccine nationalism, ‘oppose political manipulation in the study of origins’, promote solidarity and joint efforts in the global fight against the pandemic (MFA July 14 2021a). Within the One Road One Belt initiative, whose objective is to focus on developing relations with neighbouring countries among others (Belt and Road Initiative 2021), the theme of vaccines is also visible. Already in December 2020, New Zealand declared its willingness to cooperate...
within the Belt and Road cooperation with China in the area of vaccine research (Wang Yi speaks with New Zealand’s… 2020). Later on, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian during a press conference on 30 July 2021 talked about launching by 29 countries an Initiative for Belt and Road Partnership on COVID-19 Vaccines Cooperation, aimed at securing more equitable distribution of vaccines (MFA July 30 2021). Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also hosted the first International Forum on COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation on August 5, which is the result of an earlier announcement made by President Xi. The main motivation declared by Beijing to engage in such an initiative is ‘strengthening international cooperation on vaccines, promoting a fair and equitable distribution of vaccines around the world’ (MFA July 29 2021).

An interesting phenomenon is also the declared willingness of Beijing to transfer technologies to other developing countries and participate in joint production of vaccines with them. Such production already started in several countries, e.g. Indonesia, Pakistan, Mexico, Brazil, United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Egypt and Turkey (MFA July 12 2021; MFA July 13 2021). China is also cooperating widely with countries in Latin America (e.g. Cuba) or the Middle East (e.g. Syria). Such cooperation focuses mostly on the means of counteracting the pandemic, contributing to the development and deepening friendship between states (MFA July 19 2021).

Chinese government since the beginning of exercising ‘vaccine diplomacy’ communicates intensively to the foreign audiences Chinese developments in the field of combating the pandemic and inspiring cooperative initiatives on regional and global range. Through such communication on development, China is trying to channel its own goals and interests. Especially taking into consideration the strong focus on cooperation, creating new economic bonds, creating strategic partnerships and looking for new directions of cooperation correspond strongly with one of the main goals of the Chinese foreign aid.

**China as a responsible actor and provider of assistance to developing countries**

One of the narratives provided by the Foreign Ministry in official statements is presenting China as a responsible international actor, who provides assistance mostly to developing countries. The spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry strongly highlighted that ‘Since the onset of the epidemic, China has unreservedly shared with other countries its experience in containment and treatment in an open and transparent manner’ and that ‘China’s efforts have gained worldwide recognition’ (MFA June 23 2021). In another statement, we can read that ‘At trying times such as the international financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, China never gives up solidarity and partnership with other countries’ (MFA June 30 2021).

Analysis of the press conferences showed that, the MFA’s spokespersons often focused on providing and securing accessibility and affordability of the COVID-19 vaccines, mostly in the regions vulnerable to pandemic and developing countries (MFA April 20 2021; MFA June 2 2021; MFA June 28 2021). Bilateral cooperation manifested by providing the Chinese vaccines to strategic partners was mentioned in many occasions, among others to Pakistan (MFA, March 10 2021), Chile (MFA, June 29 2021), Papua New Guinea (MFA July 14 2021a), Indonesia (MFA July 15 2021), Egypt (MFA July 19 2021), Algeria (MFA July 20 2021). Chinese government also stressed the need to provide vaccines globally, either through international cooperation (MFA July 29 2021) or through COVAX (MFA July 13 2021) criticizing at the same time the western, developed countries for hoarding the vaccines. During one of the press conferences, Wang Wenbin stressed that: ‘We resolutely oppose "vaccine nationalism", and will work with the international community to promote fair and reasonable distribution of vaccines’ (MFA April 26 2021).

While referring to the Chinese engagement in assisting developing countries with Vaccines and other types of medical and health support, the MFA’s spokespersons also invoked deep gratitude voiced by political leaders of the supported countries. Wang Wenbin cited several comments of foreign politicians on Chinese assistance: ‘Equatorial Guinean President Teodoro Obiang said the Chinese vaccine has brought a ray of hope to the country’s struggling fight against the epidemic. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa said the vaccine donated by China was like the light at the end of the tunnel. Chilean President Sebastian Pinera said that Chinese vaccines are safe and effective (…).’ (MFA July 2 2021).

Another significant aspect that constituted a separate category of messages outlined in the method section was advocating for the vaccines to become a global public good. This aspect was evoked in many press conferences; however, here it is presented as a form of the Chinese assistance, as providing vaccines as a global public good will result in better accessibility and affordability of them, which is the main goal of declared Chinese support for the developing countries. During the World Health Assembly held in May 2020, President Xi declared that international cooperation to combat the pandemic is essential and that after developing the Chinese vaccine, the COVID-19 vaccines available as a global public good (MFA July 2 2021; MFA July 15 2021). This issue was frequently brought up on many other occasions (MFA April 20 2021; MFA April 26 2021; MFA May 6 2021; MFA June 10 2021). Xi Jinping also added that ‘This [making vaccines a global public good]...
will be China’s contribution to ensuring vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries’ (Speech from President Xi Jinping 2020). This issue of vaccines as a global public good was evoked in many official statements made by representatives of the Chinese Foreign Ministry (President Xi Jinping’s Special… 2020).

In the case of exhibiting China as a responsible international actor, mostly through communicating development through the promotion of aid can be perceived as an attempt of securing reputation and image of this country. This again is part of a wider context of the Chinese foreign aid as a tool of promoting certain image and contributing to the Chinese international positioning.

Conclusions

China, as an active actor in international relations, is gaining increasing influence in global politics. China develops economically and militarily. It voices loudly and clearly its major interests not only in the region, but also globally. Other major powers like the United States can feel threatened by such rapid development and the growing role played by China. Therefore, China decided to follow both the ‘peaceful rise’ and the ‘charm offensive’. Public diplomacy in its many different forms is an especially significant tool in the hands of Beijing. Therefore, during the pandemic which generated new threats to Chinese soft power and reputation, it had to focus on new possibilities to protect both its international position and its foreign policy goals. ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ can be perceived as a new diplomatic tool focused on responding to new challenges and a tool that is able to fill a new gap in international environment. China was one of the trendsetters in using medical assistance as a form of both foreign development aid and support for own policy goals.

‘Vaccine diplomacy’ can be perceived as a new element in many of the current Chinese foreign policy and public diplomacy efforts that can be related to foreign aid. It is already incorporated to current strategic white paper on international development cooperation introduced the beginning of 2021. Analysing the latest strategy, and the previous documents referring to the Chinese foreign aid, following goals of providing such aid can be listed:

- Providing conditions and space for international cooperation.
- Presenting China as successful, responsible and dedicated actor, especially in providing assistance to developing countries.
- Providing mutual benefits (mostly economic).

Similar messages can be identified within official press conferences of the Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Analysing them from the perspective of potential manifestations of ‘vaccine diplomacy’ as a form of foreign aid, it can be said that this specific tool is used for chanting specific messages and narratives provided by the government, which remain in line with the main goals of the Chinese foreign aid.

Both foreign and ‘vaccine diplomacy strive for generating favourable conditions for international cooperation. Foreign aid strongly focuses on safeguarding through such cooperation economic benefits. ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ do not indicate this directly; however, taking into consideration countries that were subject to the Chinese medical assistance (countries in the region, developing countries, central America or Latin America), it can suggest that the Chinese government wants to foster more friendly conditions for the future cooperation. Therefore, Western accusations that Chinese donations may have conditions attached (Doherty et al. 2021) might be true. When looking closer at the numbers, it also appears that, in fact, only insignificant percentage of all Chinese vaccines worldwide were in fact donated. Only some countries received donations; others had to purchase them or were offered loans to buy them. The last option mainly referred to Latin American countries.

Also the goal of presenting China as a responsible and dedicated international actor can through foreign aid can be identified within the ‘vaccine diplomacy’s scope. Advocating for higher accessibility and affordability of vaccines on a global scale is an evidence for that. Criticizing the Western countries for ‘vaccine nationalism’ and lack of willingness to provide developing countries with COVID-19 jabs on the one hand and stressing the Chinese contribution to making vaccines global public good, cooperating with many developing countries not only in the form of providing them with vaccines, but also cooperating within the technology transfer or vaccines production showcases China in a positive light.

Currently, ‘vaccine diplomacy’ appears to be channelled through all major Chinese initiatives such as regional organizations (SCO, ASEAN), regional and bilateral cooperation and global initiatives like One Road One Belt. It is also mentioned in its newest official document on international development cooperation introduced at the beginning of 2021. Current endeavours of the government within ‘vaccine diplomacy’ correspond with declared motivations of the Chinese foreign aid. Those undertakings have a strategic meaning. Communicating development through promotion of aid plays a significant role in both promoting the Chinese political and economic interests, as well as securing its reputation, international positioning and image. The donor-country (in this case China) through its aid, projects an image of a responsible and cooperative contributor to global wealth and development. It also provides a fundament for creating new strategic partnerships and is beneficial to
creating space for the future cooperation. Such efforts aim to make the donor-country look good, provide legitimacy, prove value, and attract (Pamment and Wilkins 2018).

Communicating development through the promotion of aid can be carried out with the aim of securing reputation and image (Pamment and Wilkins 2018), as well as promoting own interests. Through public diplomacy and development communication, certain goals, interests, and motivations can be channelled to the international recipients.

Those categories identified within official statements made by the Chinese government’s representatives can be related to those core goals that were identified within strategic documents on providing Chinese foreign aid. Those are providing conditions for international cooperation, presenting China as a successful, responsible actor and contributing to mutual benefits between donor-country (China) and recipient countries (mostly developing countries).

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Post-covid China: ‘vaccine diplomacy’ and the new developments of Chinese foreign policy

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