

INTERNATIONAL

VIEWPOINT: Vaccine Diplomacy in Latin America, Caribbean a PR Coup for China

7/12/2021

By R. Evan Ellis





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The COVID-19 pandemic has created multiple opportunities for the People's Republic of China to advance its commercial position and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The most significant, in the short term, has been China's vaccine diplomacy. Over a million people in the region have died from COVID-19 since the virus was first detected in the region in February 2020. That death count, according to the Pan American Health Organization, is about 75 percent more than in the United States, which has registered a similar number of infections.

Moreover, while the United States has inoculated over 62 percent of its adult population, bringing infection rates dramatically down and allowing it to begin to reopen its economy, the end of the struggle is nowhere in sight for Latin America, where variants of the virus are driving new waves of infection and forcing new economic shutdowns in countries from Colombia to Trinidad and Tobago.

In the context of the region's urgent need for vaccines to combat the pandemic, a perfect storm of unintended effects from U.S. policy decisions, the dynamics of international vaccine contracts and prioritization, and China pursuing strategic and business opportunities, has given rise to a widespread and dangerous — albeit erroneous — perception that Beijing is coming to the rescue of the region with its vaccines while America focuses exclusively on its own population.

From the beginning of the vaccine rollout, the United States pursued a strategy of attending to the needs of its own population through direct vaccine contracts with major pharmaceutical manufacturers, while simultaneously contributing generously to the World Health Organization's Covax initiative to help other nations obtain the vaccine they needed. Covax, by design, deliberately deemphasizes the identity of donors and focuses on equitable distribution of vaccines of demonstrated quality.

The \$4 billion U.S. commitment to Covax is far greater than that of any other international donor or group, including the European Union and the United Kingdom, with neither China nor Russia even making the list.

Unfortunately, the massive, urgent demand for vaccines, logistics difficulties, and — ironically — the need by Western pharmaceutical firms to prioritize contracts they had with the U.S. government, has to date limited the number of vaccines reaching the region through the Covax effort. At the same time, the nature of Covax suppressed the region's understanding of the role of U.S. generosity for the 76 million Covax doses already distributed globally, according to the organization.

Meanwhile, driven in part by the need for ethnic diversity in vaccine testing, Chinese companies such as Sinovac and Sinopharm conducted phase II and III clinical trials in multiple Latin American countries including Peru, Brazil and Argentina. This created the basis for the subsequent rapid certification and distribution of Chinese vaccines there.

Moreover, China's relative control of COVID-19 at home — by contrast to the grave situation in other nations — and the ability of Chinese companies to ramp up vaccine production, set the stage for Beijing to dramatically expand exports of its vaccines to countries in need in Latin America and elsewhere. It is currently providing its vaccines to at least 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries.

According to the Pan American Health Organization, as of the end of May, Chinese-made vaccines accounted for 82 percent of all doses administered in Chile, 86 percent in El Salvador, and 32 percent in Peru.

The May receipt of 1.3 million Chinese vaccine doses by Venezuela, already reliant primarily on Chinese and Russian vaccines, promises to deepen the Maduro regime's dependence on China as well.

The Chinese government, with the collaboration of its Latin American partners, has extended the impact of its vaccine diplomacy by making every vaccine delivery a photo op, with boxes of Chinese vaccines emblazoned with Chinese markings unloaded from aircraft in front of assembled reporters, often with the president of the recipient country or other senior officials present.

Vaccine diplomacy highlights China's disposition in a broad range of areas to capitalize on the needs and hopes of the region to advance its economic and other interests. Despite the impression often given by China, the majority of Chinese vaccines are sold to the region, not donated, in contrast to the generous U.S. \$4 billion contribution to Covax, or those of other developed countries in Europe and Asia.

In the early days of its vaccine campaign, China offered a \$1 billion loan fund to facilitate Latin American purchases of exclusively Chinese vaccines, in the same way that its policy banks provide loans that help Latin American governments buy Chinese products and services in other areas.

The nation also used vaccine diplomacy to advance political and other strategic objectives. Both Brazil and the Dominican Republic reversed prior commitments to exclude the Chinese vendor Huawei from their nations' 5G networks, after receiving Chinese commitments to deliver their vaccines.

The PRC attempted unsuccessfully to persuade the government of Mario Abdo Benitez in Paraguay to abandon its longtime ally Taiwan and diplomatically recognize the People's Republic of China in exchange for vaccines. Honduras' President Juan Orlando Hernandez publicly committed to open a commercial office in China — the first step in changing his own country's diplomatic recognition of the nation — in an attempt to obtain the latter's vaccines.

Such national compromises to obtain needed vaccines may have strategic repercussions. The inclusion of Chinese telecommunications equipment in 5G networks in the region will likely make it difficult for the United States to provide sensitive intelligence and other information to partners which have allowed such equipment.

For companies seeking to avoid intellectual property theft by the Chinese government and its associates, given the potential risk of IP theft from the use of untrusted networks, the presence of Huawei and other China-based vendors may impede investors from locating high-value added production lines, research and headquarters facilities in those countries.

Driven by their need to bring the pandemic under control in their countries, the turn to China-made vaccines has not only altered sovereign decisions of Latin American nations regarding key foreign policy decisions and critical telecommunications infrastructure, but has had unintended counterproductive side effects in their fight against the virus.

In Chile, studies showed the efficacy of the first dose of the two-dose Sinovac vaccine regimen to be as low as 3 percent, allowing the virus to continue to spread even as the government led the region in vaccination rates, inoculating 94 percent of its population with at least one dose by the end of May.

It is in the strategic interest of the United States to help our neighbors more rapidly and effectively vaccinate their populations, while more aggressively pushing back against the Chinese narrative that China is generously rescuing the region. The Biden administration's donation to global partners of 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, and its commitment to make available up to 20 million doses of the Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines as surplus production becomes available in the United States in June, is a step in the right direction. As those vaccines are sent abroad, however, Latin America and the Caribbean must be a priority destination, and America must do more to spread awareness about its efforts.

As seen by the devastating effect of the P1 and other Brazilian COVID-19 variants, controlling the virus in Latin America is also important to minimize the risk from proliferating mutations, particularly given the high levels of people movement between the United States and the region for reasons of business, tourism and family.

Controlling the pandemic in Latin America is also a fundamental precondition for easing pressures to migrate to the United States. It is also important for easing the socioeconomic stresses that cause the region to lose faith in the possibility of solving their challenges through democratic, market-oriented approaches. Such loss of faith is the vehicle which brings to power anti-U.S. populist leaders, whose regimes subsequently open the door to more threatening engagement by China and other external actors.

Finally, U.S. generosity and leadership in helping the region vaccinate its populations arguably counters our competitors' narratives about U.S. neglect, while building goodwill in working with Americans in other critical areas, from cooperation on shared security challenges, to democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights.

For these reasons, it is in America's interest to rapidly implement and build on current government initiatives to make vaccines available to global partners beyond those provided through Covax. The nation must also go one step further, however, and prioritize Latin America and the Caribbean to receive these vaccines.

Where needed and agreed by partner governments in the region, the United States should help provide logistics support to the delivery, distribution and storage of the donated vaccines, to possibly include assistance in providing them to local populations.

In such efforts, the U.S. military — including the National Guard with its state partnership programs in the region — may have a valuable role to play. Similarly, involving international observers and non-governmental organizations will reduce the risk that vaccines are diverted or otherwise used improperly.

No other region is more directly linked to U.S. security and prosperity than Latin America and the Caribbean. It is at a critical juncture with the pandemic and vaccination. The initiative we take now through vaccines and other support will be reflected for years to come in the degree to which our southern border links us to opportunities or separates us from threats.

R. Evan Ellis is a Latin America research professor at the Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views expressed herein are strictly his own.

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