

Vaccine Diplomacy

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The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected most of the vital sectors in the United Arab Emirates' economy. The consequent oil-price slump and restrictions on interstate movements represent an ongoing threat to the country's main sources of revenue. It is no surprise then that the UAE aims to be a world leader in the fight against the coronavirus.

Oil exports, aviation, tourism, hospitality and logistics all experienced dramatic downturns because of the pandemic.¹ The urgent need to reverse this negative trend pushed the UAE to implement a radical reshaping of its coronavirus response. “[The UAE] has shown foresight by seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to showcase its capabilities, and prove it is a punchy regional and increasingly global actor”, Dr Neil Quilliam, an Associate Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House,² said.

Position of Strength: How the UAE Leverages Its Advantages

Health security has become a strategic priority during the pandemic, leading to a competition among countries to not only control the virus, but also to expand their spheres of influence. In this era of “health diplomacy”, the vaccine has turned into a concrete instrument of foreign policy.³ In this regard, China and Russia are spending most of their diplomatic capital on enhancing their soft power through bilateral relationships by presenting the provision of vaccines as a benevolent action, although their strategies also represent a clear attempt to enhance their international reputations.⁴

As far as China is concerned, the urgent need to rehabilitate its international image after incurring widespread criticism for its alleged lapses during the early stages of the Covid-19 outbreak is a crucial factor in its vaccine diplomacy drive. However, when it comes to the specific regional context of the Middle East, economic interests, such as the revenue opportunities of exporting Chinese vaccines, the networks of relationships established through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),⁵ as well as the need to ensure a stable price in the oil and gas markets,⁶ are elements that should be considered in addition to the reputational aspect. What has also emerged is that Beijing — by showering the region with Sinopharm vaccines — is signalling to the West that it has both the capabilities and the political will to engage more assertively in the Middle Eastern arena.

However, mounting Chinese engagement in the region should not be read as Beijing's intention to take over the historical role of Washington because, as pointed out by Eyck Freyman, “China's goal is to achieve influence

¹ Mogielnicki, Robert, “The United Arab Emirates' Post-Covid-19 Outlook”, *Columbia SIPA Journal of International affairs* 73, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2021, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/united-arab-emirates%E2%80%99-post-covid-19-outlook>.

² Dr Neil Quilliam, Interview with authors, 29 March 2021.

³ Fazal, Tanisha, “Health Diplomacy in Pandemic Times”, *International Organization* 74, 2020 (Supplement), pp. E78–E97,

https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/A82469023B94AA29F23A52AF0C4B3F27/S0020818320000326a.pdf/health_diplomacy_in_pandemical_times.pdf.

⁴ Jennings, Michael, (2021) “How well will vaccine diplomacy work?”, *Times Now*, 9 March 2021, <https://www.timesnownews.com/columns/article/how-well-will-vaccine-diplomacy-work/730246>.

⁵ Siddiqui, Sabena, “China looks to boost its GCC interests with 'vaccine diplomacy'”, *Al Monitor.com*, 4 November 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/11/china-covid19-vaccine-diplomacy-treatment-phase3-trials.html>.

⁶ Talwar, Puneet, “China is getting mired in the Middle East”, *Foreign Policy*, 17 August 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/17/china-is-getting-mired-in-the-middle-east/>.

without entanglement”.⁷ Therefore, as Dr Jonathan Fulton commented in the wake of the recent official visits of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to several Middle Eastern countries, rather than being focused on challenging the geopolitical balance of power in the region, “China’s MENA interests are met by working with stable, networked, status quo countries, which is why UAE is the MENA country that has the most well-rounded relationship with it”.⁸

The UAE’s small size and population, relatively low number of Covid-19 infections and solid economic status allowed the country to enter the field of vaccine diplomacy from a position of strength. The country has been one of the world’s largest aid donors during the pandemic.⁹ Its pivotal position between West and East and its cutting-edge logistics sector have allowed it to enhance its standing not only in the Middle East but also in the South Asian and African regions.¹⁰ The UAE’s vaccine diplomacy starts at the domestic level. Vaccines were distributed based on priority (front-line workers and the elderly first), but are now available to all nationals and non-nationals. In Dubai, the Sinopharm, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca vaccines are available, while Abu Dhabi offers Sinopharm and Pfizer.

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Strengthening relationships with major vaccine producers was a decision that allowed “the UAE to benefit from the first-mover advantage in Covid-19 vaccine stakes”,¹¹ says Dr Guy Burton, Adjunct Professor of International Relations at Vesalius College in Brussels. The country was an early participant in both the Chinese and Russian Covid-19 vaccine trials and deepened its reliance on the Chinese drug by starting the vaccination of its front-line medical workers in September 2020 and extending approval for general use in December 2020.¹² To avoid shortages and assure more vaccine options for its citizens and residents, the country then successfully secured agreements for the distribution of Western pharmaceutical products such as Pfizer.¹³ This multi-pronged strategy allowed the country to inoculate its population with the highest level of cumulative doses given per 100 persons.¹⁴ Part of the UAE’s Covid-19 strategy is to become a global vaccine transportation and distribution hub. Vaccines arrive from manufacturing hubs such as India (which manufactures a third of the world’s production), which are then stored in the UAE and redistributed by flying smaller outbound loads to other countries. Because of their commitment to cutting-edge logistical and aviation infrastructure, both Abu Dhabi and Dubai have become dominant commercial and transport hubs.¹⁵

Both emirates have leveraged this advantage and now serve a crucial function in the supply chain for vaccines. Dubai International Airport, for example, is part of a corridor with Hyderabad and can handle up to 300 tonnes of doses per day; up to 10 million doses can be stored at the required temperature range at its distribution hub.¹⁶

⁷ Freymann, Eyck, “Influence Without Entanglement in the Middle East”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 February 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/25/influence-without-entanglement-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁸ Fulton, Jonathan, “Mr. Wang goes to the Middle East”, Atlantic Council, 1 April 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mr-wang-goes-to-the-middle-east/>.

⁹ Galeeva, Diana, “Small States Response to Covid-19: View from the UAE”, POMEPS (Project on Middle East Political Science), No. 39, April 2020, pp. 38–40, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/POMEPS_Studies_39_Web.pdf.

¹⁰ Soubrier, Emma, “Gulf Humanitarian Diplomacy in the Time of Coronavirus”, Arab Gulf States Institute Washington, 1 May 2020, <https://agsiiv.org/gulf-humanitarian-diplomacy-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.

¹¹ Dr Guy Burton, Interview with authors, 24 March 2021.

¹² Shamu, Hai and Mu, Qing. “UAE to become Middle East’s vaccine center with China’s contribution”, *Global Times*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1214300.shtml>.

¹³ Ali, Mona, “Vaccine diplomacy: In 2021, the UAE will become the new vaccine hub of the Middle East”, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 29 December 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/uae-will-become-new-vaccine-hub-middle-east/>.

¹⁴ The National (2021) “UAE tops global rankings for vaccination rates”, *The National*, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/health/uae-tops-global-rankings-for-vaccination-rates-1.1226883>.

¹⁵ Kamrava, Mehran, “Cities, Globalized Hubs, and Nationalism in the Persian Gulf”, *Middle East Journal* 74, No. 4, Winter 2020/2021, pp. 521–536, <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mei/mei/2020/00000074/00000004/art00003>.

¹⁶ Reuters, “Dubai Airports and GMR Hyderabad agree deal to aid vaccine distribution”, 4 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/emirates-india-vaccine-idUSKBN2991FP>.

Abu Dhabi also has launched the Hope Consortium, a public-private logistics partnership between the Department of Health Abu Dhabi, Etihad Cargo, Abu Dhabi Ports Company, Rafed and SkyCell. Established in November 2020, Hope has the capacity to distribute more than six billion vaccine doses.¹⁷ The recent decision to establish a production centre of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine in the UAE epitomises the country's willingness to be a leading actor in the transition towards a post-coronavirus world and expand ties with fast-growing markets in Asia. With the agreement between Sinopharm CNBG and Abu Dhabi-based G42, the UAE became the first nation in the region to set up a Covid-19 vaccine production facility. The new joint venture aims to produce up to 200 million doses annually at a new plant that will become operational this year.¹⁸ As in China, vaccine production in the UAE will be a state-run enterprise that is likely to be advantageous in terms of scale and speed of production. The upgrade from buyer and distributor to primary provider of pharmaceuticals "will increase the UAE's soft power and foreign policy profile", says Dr Quilliam.¹⁹

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Threading the Needle: The UAE's Attempts to Shape Perception

The UAE has created a narrative fostering the perception that the programme is mainly an Emirati effort. By rebranding the vaccine Hayat-Vax (*hayat* means "life" in Arabic), it marketed the product to an Arabic-speaking audience of consumers and fostered a public discourse based on the traditional ideas of hope and a positive attitude towards the future.²⁰ But this branding effort may prove insufficient in promoting the UAE-produced vaccine, especially since uncertainty regarding its efficacy remains high. This concern was confirmed by the director of the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Gao Fu, who admitted that the five vaccines China is producing offer low protection compared to American and European vaccines.²¹ With the Chinese vaccines, there were no stringent regulatory authorities involved to ensure quality, and long-term safety concerns linger, given the fast pace at which the vaccine was developed.

Vaccine diplomacy does not come risk-free. China previously experienced problems with faulty personal protective equipment (PPE), and should the UAE-produced vaccine contribute to any major health complications, the country could potentially suffer reputational damage. Even with vaccination efforts ongoing, new strains of the coronavirus are emerging quickly and may lead to increased transmission and severity of the virus. While the data is still inconclusive, it is possible that these variants could have an impact on the effectiveness of currently-distributed vaccines.

Policymakers undoubtedly aimed to achieve the so-called "perfect equilibrium" during the vaccine's selection process by considering elements such as pricing, storage criteria, transportation costs, efficacy and the absence of side-effects.²² Nevertheless, there are other more irrational and less scientific variables that can influence the perception of a vaccine. In this regard, the public relations effort behind the Hayat-Vax initiative has been successful at attracting media attention. "[In terms of] column inches and being talked about, it is generating the kind of media coverage which can help shape opinion, at least at the elite level", notes Dr Burton.²³

¹⁷ Hailey, Roger, "Abu Dhabi leads Covid vaccine Hope Consortium", 26 November 2020,

<https://www.aircargonews.net/sectors/pharma-logistics/abu-dhabi-leads-covid-vaccine-hope-consortium/>.

¹⁸ Arabian Business, "UAE's Covid-19 plant to boost regional pandemic fight and the pharma industry", 29 March 2021,

<https://www.arabianbusiness.com/healthcare/460987-china-picks-uae-as-regional-production-hub-for-sinopharm-vaccine>.

¹⁹ Dr Neil Quilliam, Interview with authors, 29 March 2021.

²⁰ Zinser, Sophie, "The UAE Covid vaccine could become a global leader, but we must see full data", *The Guardian*, 30 March 2021,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/30/uae-covid-vaccine-global-leader-china>.

²¹ McDonald, Joe and Wu, Huizhong, "Top Chinese official admits vaccines have low effectiveness", AP, 11 April 2021,

<https://apnews.com/article/china-gao-fu-vaccines-offer-low-protection-coronavirus-675bcb6b5710c7329823148ffb6ef9>.

²² Balasubramanian, Sai, "Vaccine Diplomacy: A New Frontier in International Relations", *Forbes*, 24 February 2021,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/saibala/2021/02/24/vaccine-diplomacy-a-new-frontier-in-international-relations/?sh=3ca486e822bc>.

²³ Dr Guy Burton, Interview with authors 24 March 2021.

“Aside from the clear commercial and healthcare benefits and geopolitical considerations, the UAE is also keen to champion the humanitarian element”, says Dr Quilliam.²⁴ In this regard, Dr Burton adds that there could be an element of “whitewashing” going on concerning the UAE’s involvement in the Libyan and Yemeni conflicts, with “talks of donating pharmaceutical supplies present[ing] a more benign image” of the country.²⁵ This message could be sullied, however. According to travel industry experts,²⁶ it is just a matter of time before Dubai, which already brands itself as a safe holiday destination, begins luring foreigners and tourists by touting its pandemic success. But as its vaccine rollout has been slower than that in many European countries, Dubai may use free vaccination as part of a package to reignite its healthcare and medical tourism industry, which has struggled since the outbreak. This could give rise to cynicism over its message of global altruism.

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A New Type of Soft Power

Vaccine diplomacy will not alter the world order, nor will it threaten the status of the United States or European countries as donors in the region. Overall, the number of vaccines the UAE has supplied is relatively small, and the Covax Initiative (a programme sponsored by Unicef, Gavi, CEPI, the European Union and WHO) will soon direct global distribution to poorer countries. Vaccine diplomacy should be understood as a mix of humanitarian and strategic ends, conducted multilaterally, bilaterally, or by a combination of both. The concept implies a link between national self-interest and the provision of a public good that is in the global interest.

“Vaccine diplomacy is basically development aid,” claims Dr Efe Sevin, Assistant Professor at Towson University’s Department of Mass Communication. To understand why these countries are engaging with each other right now and how such engagements will influence international affairs, “we need to move beyond the vaccine.”²⁷ The UAE has a long history of providing foreign aid, so vaccine diplomacy can be seen as a continuation of this. The UAE is the sixth-largest donor of vaccines at this time, having offered to donate 500,000 doses to Malaysia, 50,000 each to the Seychelles and Egypt, 40,000 to the West Bank and Gaza, and 10,000 to Albania. According to Anna Bezruki from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies who has been tracking vaccine donations, “the recipient states are a mix of high income [the Seychelles], upper-middle income [Malaysia and Albania] and lower-middle income [Egypt]. Given the mix of countries and their relatively low disease burdens and higher incomes, it is suggestive that political considerations and relationships were part of the decision-making process, and not solely the epidemiologic or financial need of the recipients.”²⁸

However, even if the course of the UAE vaccine diplomacy is set, some shortcomings may undermine its success. First, the necessity of administering a third booster of Sinopharm vaccine for those who have been inoculated indicates that the regular immune response to Sinopharm vaccines wanes much faster than that of other vaccines.²⁹ Nevertheless, there is no certainty that even a third inoculation would guarantee the achievement of herd immunity. Second, the high levels of vaccine hesitancy among the Middle East and North Africa should not be underestimated. Even though vaccine acceptance is highly dynamic over time, many Arab countries have shown to be among those with the lowest acceptance rates in the world.³⁰

²⁴ Dr Neil Quilliam, Interview with authors, 29 March 2021.

²⁵ Dr Guy Burton, Interview with authors, 24 March 2021.

²⁶ DW, “Rumors of vaccine tourism unfounded-for now”, Deutsche Welle, 17 March 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/rumors-of-vaccine-tourism-in-dubai-unfounded-for-now/a-56900573>.

²⁷ Dr Efe Sevin, Interview with authors, 29 March 2021.

²⁸ Anna Bezruki, Interview with authors, 8 April 2021.

²⁹ Webster, Nick and Maxwell, Chriss, “UAE Sinopharm booster: why will some people require a third dose of Covid-19 vaccine?”, *The National*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/health/uae-sinopharm-booster-why-will-some-people-require-a-third-dose-of-covid-19-vaccine-1.1225637>.

³⁰ Sallam, Malik, “COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Worldwide: A Concise Systematic Review of Vaccine Acceptance Rates”, *Vaccines* 9 (2), 160, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines9020160>.

High levels of disinformation, distrust towards the national governments, and the fear of side-effects may prove to be a major obstacle to the success of the UAE's endeavour, which is specifically tailored towards an Arabic-speaking public.³¹

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Finally, despite its fast-paced vaccination campaign, the UAE is still off the “green list” of several European capitals. Indeed, while it is true that travel corridors for Emirati-vaccinated travellers have been established between the UAE and a few countries such as Serbia and Greece,³² this is fairly insignificant, since Emirati citizens and residents are barred from entering the bulk of European countries. Paul Griffiths, the chief executive officer of Dubai Airports, has repeatedly expressed his disappointment at this state of affairs, especially considering the volume of UAE–UK flights in pre-pandemic times.³³ Therefore, there is no doubt that with many countries loosening restrictions ahead of the summer holiday season, the UAE has a vested interest in seeing its national airlines returning to business as usual and tourists returning to its shores as soon as possible.

It is too early to assess the Emirati programme's success. What is clear is that vaccines are much more than a health issue for the UAE. They represent a tool that helps the country attain two intermediate objectives that are instrumental in achieving its primary strategic goal: to bolster the UAE's status as a leading global player. On the one hand, as Dr Quilliam asserts, the push for vaccines “reflects the need for a swift rollout in order to avoid damaging restrictions on an already sluggish economic recovery”.³⁴ On the other hand, as Dr Burton notes, “it generates a warm glow about the country and its leaders' effort to make the UAE the best actor in the world.”³⁵ ♦

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³¹ Schaer, Cathrin (2021) “Coronavirus: Arab countries struggle with high vaccine hesitancy”, Deutsche Welle, 16 April 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/middle-east-covid-vaccine-rollout-hesitancy/a-57227395>.

³² Denman, Selina, “UAE Travel Corridors: An Ultimate Guide to Bahrain, Greece, Serbia and Seychelles”, The National, 16 May 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/lifestyle/travel/uae-travel-corridors-an-ultimate-guide-to-bahrain-greece-serbia-and-seychelles-1.1223750>.

³³ Benny, John, “UAE airlines await UK's 'green list' signal for ease of travel — but will it take longer?”, *Gulf News*, 21 May 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/business/aviation/uae-airlines-await-uks-green-list-signal-for-ease-of-travel--but-will-it-take-longer-1.1621583975508>.

³⁴ Dr Neil Quilliam, Interview with authors, 29 March 2021.

³⁵ Dr Guy Burton, Interview with authors, 29 March 2021.



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