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Vaccine Diplomacy in the Mediterranean: *The Contest for Influence*

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In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic brought the medical equipment wars, when several countries commandeered supplies for themselves as they reeled from the unexpected surges and lack of equipment. 2021 has brought a “vaccine war”, with the leading Western vaccines competing with Russian and Chinese variants. China, where the coronavirus originated in 2019, has been on a public relations drive, donating equipment and now vaccination shipments in Asia and Africa, while also signing lucrative contracts for the inoculations. Its drive has set off a new front in its regional rivalry with India, which acquired the licence to produce the vaccine made by the British-Swedish AstraZeneca company and shipped off thousands of free doses to its neighbours.

China had its biggest success in the East and South Mediterranean with Turkey, which ordered 50 million doses of the Chinese CoronaVac vaccine, and Egypt, in addition to sales elsewhere in the region. Its vaccines have been widely treated with suspicion because of the discrepancies in Phase 3 trials, but received an endorsement by the United Arab Emirates which approved the Sinopharm vaccine in September and later declared it effective.

Perhaps the most derided vaccine, however, was the hastily-announced Russian Sputnik-V. Widely reported in the Western press as a publicity stunt, Russia still found buyers across the Mediterranean and even in Europe, with Hungary opting for the Russian vaccine.

The countries that bought the Sputnik-V vaccine were vindicated in early February after the prestigious British science journal the Lancet published preliminary data indicating that Sputnik is almost as effective as the American Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and more effective than the British-Swedish AstraZeneca vaccine produced in collaboration with Oxford University.

Russia and China have also enjoyed an edge by being able to promise swifter delivery and rollout of the vaccine than the other main manufacturers and the COVAX alliance supplying equitable priced and free doses to developing countries. The alliance is co-led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and the World Health Organization, and supported by the European Union. Its programme, however, was slow to start off, making some countries reach deals with other suppliers. The Russian and Chinese vaccines have become cornerstones in much of the East and South Mediterranean countries vaccination drives, in one the most successful exercises of soft power for both countries across the region.

Most appealingly for some countries, Russia has offered to help set up domestic manufacturing of the vaccine. Both the Russian and Chinese vaccines had been treated with some scepticism in the region where Western products are generally seen as superior—but they now stand to gain prestige as the Russian vaccine in particular proves to be as effective as Western variants. In addition, the expertise offered in allowing some of the countries to become more self-reliant in vaccine production and the

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speedy delivery of doses may shore up Russia and China's already considerable soft power in parts of the eastern and southern Mediterranean.

Egypt

The most populous country in the Arab world, Egypt has seen several waves of the coronavirus pandemic. It has reported more than 173,000 positive cases, with almost 10,000 deaths, but the real numbers are thought to be higher due to lack of mass testing. The results also do not include tests from private clinics.

A close ally of the United States, Egypt has also forged close ties with China and Russia—with the latter becoming an increasingly key supplier of advanced weaponry such as Su-35 jet fighters.

Egypt has leveraged its ties to sign up for millions of doses of the vaccine from several suppliers.² The country has so far announced a deal for 25 million doses of the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine through an agreement signed between the Russian Direct Investment Fund and the Egyptian Pharco Pharmaceuticals, and 40 million doses, mostly the British-Swedish AstraZeneca, through the Geneva-based Gavi vaccine alliance. It also signed a deal for 40 million doses from the Chinese Sinopharm company.³

Russia has said it would share with Egypt means to produce the Sputnik-V vaccine, and the two countries are expected to sign a deal for local production that could turn Egypt into a regional vaccine supplier.⁴

The country began vaccinations in late January, using the Sinopharm vaccine to inoculate frontline health workers, followed by other vulnerable groups. It has so far received 50,000 AstraZeneca doses produced in India by a collaboration between the Russian R Pharma and the Indian Serum Institute, and 50,000 Sinopharm doses. China has said it would provide 300,000 doses soon for free.⁵

The government has said it expects a further five to eight million doses to arrive in by the end of February through COVAX, and would set up a website for the vaccine drive registration.⁶

Both Russia and China had long pushed soft power in Egypt. Cairo has good military ties with both countries that helped it diversify its military – although its most important supplier remains the United States – and Russia is helping it build a nuclear power plant. With the vaccines, both countries have again provided Egypt with an option for a cheaper alternative for Western products—and the means to produce them domestically.

Algeria

The largest North African country, Algeria has reported more than 110,000 positive coronavirus cases and almost 3,000 deaths. The country has close ties with Russia. It began its vaccine drive in late January after the first shipment of 500,000 dose order for the Sputnik-V vaccine, starting with health workers.⁷ That shipment was followed shortly after by 50,000 AstraZeneca doses.⁸ The country also expects between 12 and 16 million doses from COVAX partnership which includes Gavi and the World Health Organization.

² Egypt strikes deals to get 100 million coronavirus vaccine doses in 2021: minister

<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/97241/Egypt-strikes-deals-to-get-100-million-coronavirus-vaccine-doses>

³ Egypt expects COVID-19 vaccines from GAVI alliance within weeks: minister <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-egypt-int-idUSKBN29G20S>

⁴ Egypt registers three new coronavirus vaccines within days <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1798276/middle-east>

⁵ Egyptian Health Ministry reports 7 side effects from Sinopharm vaccine <https://egyptindependent.com/egyptian-health-ministry-reports-7-side-effects-from-sinopharm-vaccine/>

⁶ Egypt to receive 5 to 8M doses of Covid-19 vaccine this month: Spox <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/98600/Egypt-to-receive-5-to-8M-doses-of-Covid-19>

⁷ Algeria launches coronavirus vaccination campaign <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210130-algeria-launches-coronavirus-vaccination-campaign>

⁸ Coronavirus: first batch of AstraZeneca vaccine arrives in Algiers <https://www.aps.dz/en/health-science-technology/37828-coronavirus-first-batch-of-astra-zeneca-vaccine-arrives-in-algiers>

Like Egypt, Algeria is also in talks with Russia to start producing Sputnik-V.⁹ China has also offered to send Algeria vaccine doses.¹⁰ Like most other countries, Algeria's main priority is obtaining the needed doses at the best prices.

Morocco

Morocco, a close US ally, has recorded almost 500,000 coronavirus cases and 8,500 deaths. The country has a population of 36 million. It started its vaccine programme in late January, after receiving 2 million AstraZeneca doses produced in India and half a million Sinopharm doses.¹¹ It will receive an estimated 1.9 million doses of AstraZeneca from the COVAX partnership.¹² Its government says it will receive 65 million doses in total of the Chinese and AstraZeneca vaccines and has proceeded to unroll the programme quickly.¹³

Tunisia

With a population of 12 million, Tunisia was seen as a success story in containing the pandemic in 2020 before a loosening of restrictions led to a surge, and its vaccination programme has lagged behind others in the region.

The country has yet to receive any doses, but is expecting the arrival of 93,000 Pfizer doses and 600,000 AstraZeneca doses through COVAX. It has made a deal with Pfizer for two million doses and has also approved the Sputnik-V vaccine for use, after initially hesitating to order the Russian vaccine.¹⁴

Tunisia now looks set to order the Russian vaccine, in what could be a big diplomatic win for Moscow. Russia has sought to improve its relations with Tunisia, a close security partner of the United States, which in turn is looking to enhance its military ties with Tunisia to further squeeze Moscow in the region.

Libya

Coronavirus has swept the country that was in the midst of a civil war when the pandemic began. Libya has reported 127,000 cases and 2,000 deaths, but the absence of mass testing suggests that the numbers are far higher.

Libya will receive 2.8 million doses from COVAX and made an order for 500,000 Johnson and Johnson vaccine doses.¹⁵ It expects to receive its first shipment of 300,000 to 400,000 doses by the end of February.¹⁶

⁹ Algeria says it has discussed with Russia producing Moscow's Sputnik V vaccine <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-algeria-russia-idUSKBN2A11L6>

¹⁰ China offers COVID-19 vaccines to Ethiopia, Algeria <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/china-offers-covid-19-vaccines-to-ethiopia-algeria/2141626>

¹¹ Morocco gets half million doses of Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-morocco/morocco-gets-half-million-doses-of-sinopharm-covid-19-vaccine-idUSL8N2k22CX>

¹² The COVAX Facility: Interim Distribution Forecast <https://www.gavi.org/sites/default/files/covid/covax/COVAX-Interim-Distribution-Forecast.pdf>

¹³ Morocco acquires 65 million COVID-19 vaccine doses from China, UK <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/morocco-acquires-65-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-from-china-uk>

¹⁴ Tunisia looks to Russia, Pfizer for vaccination program <https://apnews.com/article/algeria-tunisia-coronavirus-pandemic-africa-tunis-0a496cd1341ac646d5ad56fb13177093>

¹⁵ Al-Najjar Expects Corona Vaccine to Arrive at the End of February <https://libyaalahrar.tv/2021/02/10/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF-500-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AD/>

¹⁶ Al-Najjar Expects Corona Vaccine to Arrive at the End of February <https://libyaalahrar.tv/2021/02/10/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%AD-%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A8%D8%B1/>

Libya's relations with Russia are complicated. Moscow had backed an offensive on the capital by the eastern military commander Khalifa Haftar, along with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. But a new unity prime minister selected in a UN-led dialogue earlier this month had also visited Moscow repeatedly to curry favour for his candidacy, and Libya and Russia have discussed reviving trade contracts. A supply of Sputnik-V vaccines could be in the cards with a new national executive that will seek to boost ties with Russia, but there are no indications yet that it begun to negotiate a supply of Russian vaccines.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories

Israel, perhaps the closest US ally in the region, has carried out the most vaccinations per capita in the world. At least 3.5 million Israelis have been vaccinated so far, out of a population of 9 million. The country ordered millions of doses from Pfizer and a smaller number from Moderna.

Israel carried inoculations for Palestinians in East Jerusalem, where they have Israeli residency, but was called on to also extend its campaign in the West Bank and Gaza. It has promised to supply the Palestinian Authority with 5,000 doses. The Palestinian Authority said it has ordered several million doses from different vendors, and received 10,000 doses of the Sputnik-V vaccine and additionally cut a deal for Chinese vaccines.¹⁷ It will receive 240,000 AstraZeneca and 37,440 Pfizer doses from COVAX.¹⁸ The United Arab Emirates announced that they will deliver 20,000 doses of the Sputnik-V vaccine to the Gaza strip in the upcoming days. Overall, the programme will create hurdles especially in the Gaza strip, which is subject to both Israeli and Egyptian border controls and restrictions.

Lebanon

One of the hardest hit countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean, Lebanon finally started its vaccination drive on February 14, procuring a supply of AstraZeneca through COVAX and Pfizer.¹⁹ It has also approved the Sputnik-V vaccine for use, allowing for private sector import, and may approve the Sinopharm vaccine.²⁰ The country is undergoing an unprecedented economic meltdown that makes it especially reliant on the COVAX programme, with a parallel private track that would source Sputnik-V doses.

Jordan

Jordan, a key US ally in the region, launched its vaccination drive in January after agreeing to buy one million doses from Pfizer. It also struck a deal with COVAX for two million doses, and approved the use of the Sinopharm vaccine.²¹ Jordan has extended the programme to its refugee camps, where it hosts almost 700,000 displaced Syrians as well as refugees from other countries.²²

¹⁷ Palestinians receive 10,000 doses of Russian vaccine

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-to-receive-10000-doses-of-russian-vaccine-thursday/>

¹⁸ Occupied Palestinian territory and Tunisia notified of indicative allocation of COVID-19 vaccine doses during first half of 2021 via COVAX Facility <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/occupied-palestinian-territory-and-tunisia-notified-indicative>

¹⁹ Lebanon kicks off vaccination against COVID-19 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/14/lebanon-kicks-off-vaccinations-against-covid-19>

²⁰ Lebanon authorises emergency use of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-lebanon-vaccine/lebanon-authorises-emergency-use-of-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-idUSL1N2KB1VK>

²¹ Jordan's coronavirus vaccination programme to start next week – minister <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-vaccination-jordan-in-idUSKBN29E0MF>

²² Refugees receive COVID-19 vaccinations in Jordan <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/1/5ffffe614/refugees-receive-covid-19-vaccinations-jordan.html>

Syria

Syria's eleven year long civil war has displaced approximately 6.6 million people, and effectively partitioned the country between regime controlled territories, an Islamist-extremist controlled enclave in Idlib, and areas of Turkish and Kurdish control. It has yet to roll out a vaccination drive, and a COVAX programme intends to vaccinate five million Syrians starting in April.²³

Surprisingly, Syria has yet to announce a deal with Russia for the Sputnik-V vaccine, although Moscow, along with Iran, has effectively kept the Bashar al-Assad regime in power through the country's eleven-year civil war.

Turkey

Turkey began its vaccination drive with the Chinese-made CoronaVac in late January. Turkey had signed a deal with the Chinese Sinovac Biotech for 50 million doses²⁴ and also plans to start producing the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine domestically. Turkey is also in discussions with Biontech/Pfizer for possible production of the vaccine in Turkey. Biontech has also agreed that Turkey will receive 4.5 million doses of the vaccine in the coming months with an option for a total of 30 million doses.

Turkey has a complicated relationship with both the US and Russia. While traditionally its closest ally, the US has imposed sanctions on Turkey for acquiring the Russian S400 air defence system. Its ties with Russia are no less convoluted: the two countries have fought on opposing sides in Libya, Syria, and Azerbaijan, occasionally directly engaging each other's forces.

Turkey views itself as a power in its own right. The process that led to its purchase of the Chinese vaccine is unclear, but it is in keeping with its tendency to diversify its options and to produce domestically when it can, while providing China with a major diplomatic—and commercial—win.

Turkey is working on an indigenous vaccine that will probably be licensed in early summer as the testing for their locally produced vaccine named EURO-COV already started.²⁵

Conclusion

Russia and China have both sought to provide alternatives to Western products and arrangements, whether militarily, technologically, and now medically. While the COVAX programme is inexpensive, Russian and Chinese supplies of the vaccine appeared to be quicker and more efficient. In the long term, the Sputnik-V vaccine may prove to be the most important regionally if local production is successful. The end result is a win-win situation for both Russia and its local clients in the region, and a public relations coup for both Russia and China.

That being said, the impact of “vaccine diplomacy” should not be overstated. It is unlikely to shift the regional architecture in any meaningful sense, any more than past efforts at regional diplomacy. Egypt, for example, is fairly teeming with donated projects and infrastructure from countries that have sought to build up soft power in the country or fundamentally change bilateral relations, whether with Russia, China or Western states. Tunisia, for instance, had shown some reluctance initially in obtaining the Sputnik-V vaccine which now appears to be among its best options—but that is unlikely to translate into openings in other areas of bilateral cooperation such as increased military coordination or arm sales.

²³ WHO preparing to deliver vaccines across Syria from April despite conflict <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-vaccine-syria-idUSKBN2A32V7>

²⁴ Turkey to receive 2nd shipment from 2nd batch of vaccine Friday <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/turkey-to-receive-2nd-shipment-from-2nd-batch-of-vaccine-friday/2126721>

²⁵ Turkey begins phase 2 trials of local COVID-19 vaccine <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/turkey-begins-phase-2-trials-of-local-covid-19-vaccine/2140929>

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