

Vaccine diplomacy and the South African Sovereignty Maintenance Struggle within BRICS cooperation

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Abstract

The Covid 19 pandemic has brought an unprecedented litany of challenges diplomatically and in the procurement of vaccines globally. Among the nations and regional blocs that it affected, the pandemic greatly exposed the weaknesses of the diplomatic ties between BRICS nations; Russia, China, Brazil, India, and South Africa. As the pandemic broke out three of them, Russia, China and India quickly reacted with the invention of vaccines which were donated and circulated to many countries throughout the world and Africa in particular. Surprisingly while Brazil quickly accepted the readily available Sinopharm vaccine from China which is a fellow BRICS bloc member, South Africa though being the worst affected country in Southern Africa seemed to dither on finding a solution from either China or Russia. South Africa put more faith initially in AstraZeneca ahead of Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines from China and Sputnik V from Russia. She relied enormously on Johnson & Johnson (Netherlands/USA), AstraZeneca, and Pfizer. In the light of these developments, this paper seeks to explore the seeming South African reluctance to procure vaccines from her BRICS allies Russia and China. The South African attitude towards vaccines from fellow BRICS bloc members and the time taken to approve the Sinovac vaccine leaves analysts with many questions. We ask in this paper; why was South Africa sceptical about receiving medical assistance or procuring vaccines from China and Russia? In an attempt to answer the question this paper used various published sources including books and journal articles, newspaper articles, and abundant online reports on the pandemic. It concludes that being aware that as part of the arsenal of soft-power diplomacy, big powers including China and Russia tend to bolster their diplomatic presence in Africa and other developing regions through strategies such as vaccine diplomacy, South Africa made the bold move as a way of maintaining unfettered sovereignty.

Keywords: Vaccine, Diplomacy, Sovereignty, Cooperation, and Covid-19