

# 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

## Overview

The BRICS multilateral diplomatic bloc was formed in 2006 with an initial membership of four nations namely Brazil, Russia, India, and China. In 2010 South Africa was invited to join the forum by China as a fifth member of the bloc. The BRICS forum was initiated to foster diplomatic relations and economic activities amongst the member states. The choice of South Africa ahead of other emerging African economies like Nigeria and Ghana is not much surprising since in southern Africa and the African continent in general she is the most thriving economy with a huge GDP and offers great geopolitical advantages to any power that befriends her. The relations among the BRICS member countries are pinned on the virtues of non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit. One thing uniting the countries was a shared interest in countering the influence of western capital markets and that of the Bretton woods institutions in particular. At the Sanya Summit of 2011, the BRICS nations agreed to cease mutual trade payments in United States Dollars and “instead henceforth give credits to one another in their national currencies alone” (BRICS, 2011). BRICS has also initiated cooperation

in other areas such as scientific development, trade, energy, the curbing of transnational organised crime and healthcare (BRICS,2015). However, in all this, they do not appear to be a unitary force bound by clearly laid down rules of engagement. Each member country has the freedom to chart its course in order to achieve its goals. At best their diplomatic arrangements should be looked at as a framework for cooperation, more than anything else.

Though the multilateral formation has produced enormous results in the line of multi-lateral and bi-lateral relations, differences amongst member states have also been immensely evident. A case in point is the territorial military impasse between China and India over the Doklam plateau since 2017 which has resulted in bloody military clashes (He, 2020). Furthermore, the intrusion and expansion of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative have also culminated in tension with emerging India over the growing Chinese influence in Africa and other parts of the globe (Fallon, 2015). India on the other hand has aroused the ire of China through undertaking strategic partnerships with the United States (Hall, 2016).

Though there has been great cooperation among BRICS countries in line with the set goals of BRICS, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic became an acid test for the cooperation among member countries. In line with the 17<sup>th</sup> sustainable development goal which calls for integration and partnerships at all as in economic development projects and research on disease control, the BRICS member countries seem to be failing in this regard (Mpungose, 2021). Each of the member countries seems to follow a secretive agenda with no sharing of information on research about vaccines produced by the three big powers Russia, China, and India. South Africa and Brazil have lagged in the vaccine development race whilst the Chinese manufactured Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines and, the Russians, Sputnik V vaccine and India the Indian Covaxin (Mpungose, 2021). So puzzling and shocking is how South Africa reacted to the breakthrough inventions of her BRICS counterparts. She showed little trust in the Chinese and Russian vaccine inventions, by openly opting for western vaccines Astra Zeneca and Johnson and Johnson ahead of Sinovac, Sinopharm, and Sputnik V.

The paper utilised qualitative research methodology due to the complex nature of phenomena, qualitative research significantly helps to analyse and understand unique events and interpretations (Hammerberg, 2016). Secondary sources namely books, accredited journal articles, reports, electronic documents, and organisational publications were utilised. The thematic data analysis approach was used to analyse the relevant data. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that thematic analysis helps identify, organise and group pure data in varying patterns so as to determine themes addressed in the paper. The major themes in this paper are South Africa and Sino Vaccines and South Africa and Sputnik V Diplomacy.

### **BRICS Historical Politicking Dilemmas**

BRICS as an organisation has been immensely affected by several diplomatic tiffs between some of the forum's member states such as the China-India clashes on the Himalayan region border dispute in the year 2020 (He, 2020), whilst South Africa and Russia have severed relations over the nuclear plant deal nullified in the year 2017. It looks like these tensions continue to be played in other possible areas of cooperation including collaboration in the fight against COVID 19. Tensions have also rocked the BRICs boat as relations between China and India have been tense over the years since the annexation of Tibet by China in 1950 in which India still recognises Tibet as an autonomous state. Rahmati (2020) believes that the geo-political tension between India and China is having detrimental ramifications on the BRICS forum as long as the border issue remains unresolved. The lack of harmonisation and bilateral fallouts on the border issue has been highlighted by Sebastian (2020), who has also attributed the lack of harmonisation and bilateral fallouts between the two countries to the unresolved border dispute as evidenced by the latest clashes at Ladakh and Galway

Valley. In addition, Russia and South Africa also have tense diplomatic relations arising from the collapse of the nuclear energy plant deal which would have seen Russia supplying nuclear reactors to South Africa nullified (Thamm, 2019). Though the countries established strategic partnerships in 2006 the deal was reignited through the Cooperation in Nuclear energy.

The administrative and human rights abuse track record of Russia and China have also been at the core of divergence of bilateral interests with South Africa which is a more liberal and democratic country. It must be remembered that the BRICS coalition has set limited targets for the grouping as it was virtually founded on the principle of dismantling western hegemonic economic, geopolitical, and institutional prowess without clearly spelling out how it must be achieved (Mpungose, 2021). The BRICS coalition's development has also been drawn back by the pursuit of member countries of national interests at the expense of those of the forum, as witnessed by the Sino-India and Sino-Russian conflicts and mistrust. The Sino-Russian relations have also been tested in the Middle East where Russia has had long-term influence and the Chinese are fairly new players in the region seeking to strengthen their Belt and Road initiative, which is also perceived by both Russia and India as a threat to their established economic interests. So a lot of conflict and mistrust exists between BRICS member countries.

With such intra-bloc conflicts in existence, member countries are justified when they seek help from elsewhere. The conflicts arising within the forum's member states have been a major impediment to the maximum utilization of vaccines and have seen South Africa turning to other players at the expense of fellow trade partners in the BRICS forum. Lack of harmonisation due to diverging nationalist ideas has seen multilateralism failing at the expense of bilateral relations. As such in BRICS a coherent bloc approach failed to materialise due lack of strategic partnerships to counter COVID-19 pandemic. Though having established the BRICS Vaccine research and development centre to counter the influence of the World Health Organisation to ensure an effective response in the wake of any pandemic BRICS (2015), the covid 19 vaccine procurement raised alarm on the levels of cooperation as a grouping. The South African response to the western vaccine accreditation and procurement vis a vis those of BRICS allies is an indication of trying to protect its sovereignty or guarding against being exploited by the bigger Bloc members.

### South Africa and the Sino-Vaccine Diplomacy

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed China to unleash its soft power strategy through vaccine diplomacy to spread its influence globally. As the first country to be affected by the Coronavirus, China was miles ahead of other nations in finding solutions to the pandemic. Hence when the virus spread to other parts of the world, they looked up to China for assistance (Heisbourg, 2020). China's positive response to European, American and other nations' call for help was interpreted by many scholars and political commentators in different ways (Heisbourg, 2020). Some commentators saw China as a nation trying to take advantage of the pandemic to spread its influence into European, East Asian, American, and African spaces (Christensen, 2020). China was seen by the United States of America as a nation that was desperate to spin the pandemic which began at its doorstep for its propaganda purposes. In this regard, European analysts quickly designed the term 'mask-diplomacy' for it (Campbell, 2020). The Chinese "mask-diplomacy" involved supplying medical masks and dispatching teams of Chinese doctors, ventilators, and personal protection equipment from early 2020 to countries like Italy, Spain, Iran, Iraq, and the Netherlands which were heavily affected by the virus (Rudolf, 2021).

In the United States of America, China was blamed for not being forthcoming in providing full information about the virus (Campbell, 2020). As the West continued to bash it and blame it for the outbreak of the pandemic, China retorted by boosting her soft power by recasting itself not

as the source of the problem but as the provider of much-needed aid and expertise to fight the pandemic and the United States of America's influence (Campbell, 2020). Thus the shortage of the much-needed equipment and expertise to fight the pandemic globally and attacks from the USA and the Western powers prompted the Chinese to use the mask-diplomacy to further their geopolitical goals. When the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines were invented in early 2021 the 'mask-diplomacy' became the 'vaccine-diplomacy' as vaccines became the most sought-after items and over a billion vaccines were distributed to over a hundred countries in the form of sales and donations (Rudolf, 2021). Many of the beneficiaries of the vaccine donations were said to be countries in coherent support of the Belt and Road Initiative through which debt would bond them to no conflicting allegiance to Chinese policies as high demand but suppliers were failing to cope with the demand. Hu and Cheng (2021) assert that the effectiveness and efficiency data of the Chinese drugs have been subject to scepticism but, the World Health Organisation approved the use of Sinopharm on May 7<sup>th</sup> and Sinovac on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 in what is seen to be a 'realpolitik' approval process.

Bozzatto (2021) acknowledges that though festering debates the regulation and approval had taken centre stage the vaccines proved and passed the efficacy test of providing immunisation and this presented an opportune damascene moment to counter western health hegemony through the Covid19 vaccine availability. From then onwards the Chinese became actively involved in the distribution of the vaccines to allies of the Belt and Road Initiative and in turn, also cemented its geopolitical prowess. China is believed to have pledged donations to fifty-six countries and of the recipients, fifty-five were members of the Belt and Road initiative (Think Global Health, 2021). However, what is clear is that though China took the opportunity to influence and steer its ultranationalist goal of being a global superpower challenging western imposed hegemony, a BRICS member country South Africa was not an early beneficiary. We, therefore, turn to look at this bizarre relationship between these two member countries in the light of the Chinese vaccine diplomacy.

In early 2020 South Africa became the country with the highest Covid-19 cases and deaths in Southern Africa, but surprisingly when the vaccines were first availed South Africa did not turn to China for a solution (Mpungose, 2021). China had made two inventions the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, but when South Africa began to vaccinate her population on 1 February 2021, she turned to India and received a million doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford-19 produced by Astra-Zeneca-SK Bioscience and the serum Institute of India (Mpungose, 2021). When the vaccine was suspended on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2021 for the low efficacy rate against the 501Y.V2 variant of coronavirus which was most common in South Africa then, the South African government began a roll-out of the Johnson and Johnson Covid-19 vaccine (Dzinamarira, *et al*, 2021). The country imported more than 9 million doses of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine within the first quarter of 2021 and was expecting to bring in 20 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech, within the same period (Dzinamarira, *et al*, 2021). Surprisingly in that period, there was no mention of Chinese vaccines, though other nations like Zimbabwe, were already forcing citizens to get the Chinese vaccine. In fact, in Zimbabwe, a non-BRICS member, over 90 percent of the vaccines are from China (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zfhzlt2018/eng/zfzs1/t1893006.htm>). This leaves people wondering why the situation is like that, between China and South Africa. It was not until 3 July 2021 that the South African regulatory body approved the use of China's Sinovac vaccine in emergency cases only (Cocks, 2021).

Although South Africa accepted the use of Sinovac she appeared to be treading cautiously when it came to Chinese products. She appeared to be refusing to be a dumping ground for Chinese products and maintain her sovereignty, knowing how much China wants to dominate African countries. South Africa, unlike Zimbabwe, which just accepted the Chinese drug without adequate information as revealed by a doctor who received the first load of donated vaccines from China, rejected the Chinese vaccine early on citing doubts over a lack of transparency in clinical trial data (Cocks, 2021). Still,

after accepting the use of Sinovac, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa continued to appeal to the Western drug Companies and their allied governments to temporarily waive vaccine patents so other countries could manufacture them and not China (Cocks, 2021). This shows how much the South Africans wanted to control their destiny and would not sell their sovereignty for vaccines that they could source from elsewhere and be found cheering another sovereign for being its saviour like a majority of poor African countries always waiting in the corridors of China for donations in exchange for their resources. A statement from the Chinese embassy of South Africa on 11 August 2021 shows that Sinovac was only authorised with conditions for the emergency use of the Sinovac vaccine. This shows that what South Africa was saying was that she could not be pushed by another power to do as the other power wanted.

The Chinese claim that they do not engage in Vaccine diplomacy and neither are they using their vaccine as a tool for seeking political interests (Cocks, 2021). However, in an embassy statement, they seem to contradict themselves by indicating that “not long ago China launched the Initiative for Belt and Road Partnership on Covid-19 Vaccines Co-operation which received positive responses from the BRI [Belt and Road Initiative] partner countries. South Africa and others were welcome to join the initiative” (Za Chinese embassy, 2021). The Belt and Road Initiative is a policy to promote Chinese influence throughout the globe and is entirely funded by the Chinese. It is therefore clear that in this case, China was playing vaccine diplomacy to spread and exert its influence on recipient countries. It is for this reason that South Africa seems to have chosen to stay out of the Chinese plot. Many African countries desperately needed the vaccines but could not afford them, and if China was genuine about wanting to defeat Covid-19 in Africa it should have started from there. It is quite apparent that South Africa is not unaware of Chinese machinations to bring her under Chinese influence like the rest of Africa. China seemed to be begging the South Africans to accept Chinese vaccines. The Chinese embassy indicated its willingness to “actively implement President Xi Jinping’s solemn commitment to continue to do its best to assist South Africa in delivering Chinese vaccines to South Africa as soon as possible and help the South African people fight and ultimately defeat Covid-19” (Za Chinese embassy, 2021) Interestingly China by end of September 2021 had not yet defeated Covid-19 in her backyard. In July 2021, the Chinese embassy in South Africa claimed that 2.5 million vaccines had been approved for delivery (Cocks, 2021). This was possibly meant to put pressure on South African citizens so that they would call upon their government to source Chinese vaccines. It cannot be forgotten that with a population of close to 60 million people South Africa would be a big market for Chinese vaccines. It was no surprise that the opposition party of South Africa the Economic Freedom Front mobilised its members to demonstrate against the government demanding the government seek vaccines from Russia and China which the government was not doing (Sguazzin, 2021).

Although China sounds like a benevolent aid giver, her statements and actions quickly betrayed her. South Africa was not unaware of China’s schemes to dominate African economies. However, what happened between China and South Africa, both BRICS member states also reflects the weaknesses of the bloc. One other problem of depending on China is that the weaker partners always have to be displayed on Chinese and national TV channels and be shown to the world as beneficiaries of the great generosity of Xi Jinping. History has now shown everyone that Chinese money is always followed by Chinese men. Everything has to be publicised, and Chinese government officials are seen presenting the aid items together with leaders of African countries receiving the aid.

### **Sputnik V Vaccine Diplomacy and the South African Response**

The global demand for vaccines due to surging cases of Covid-19 infections and deaths precipitated a global vaccine race in which many countries forgot about strengthening multilateralism but



instead opted to catalyse and further their nationalist goals. BRICS was one of the organisations that failed to achieve most of its goals due to a lack of coherent policy formulation and implementation. Though most of its member countries had been ravaged, by Covid19 resulting in high mortality rates, the forum failed to amalgamate and collaborate to find a solution to the pandemic. Without any cooperation in research among the BRICS member countries, Russia became one of the countries in the world to lead in the production of vaccines.

Sputnik V, the Russian Covid-19 vaccine was created by the Gamaleya National Research Centre for Epidemiology in early 2020. By August 2020 Russian authorities approved its use and mass vaccinations began in Russia (Eby, 2021). This was quickly followed by a roll-out of the same vaccine at the international level by the end of 2020 in countries like Belarus, Argentina, and Serbia. By June 2021 it had been approved in sixty-six countries Eby (2021), but not in South Africa a BRICS member country. Whilst its quick spread to about 66 countries points to the use of the vaccine to spread Russian influence, it is again surprising that South Africa did not quickly embrace the vaccine, though as proven above it had the highest mortality rate in Southern Africa. The question remains, why was South Africa not willing to accept the Sputnik V vaccine?

South Africa's failure to accept vaccines from BRICS member countries reveals that the BRICS bloc has no laid down procedures on how member countries should act in given situations or circumstances. It has no laid down principles on expected group members' behaviour. This is undeniably one of the weaknesses of the group. The Covid-19 pandemic has therefore helped reveal that BRICS is not an international alliance of global powers, but a mere framework for cooperation in certain specific areas, but with no directly binding rules of engagement or operation. Members do not seem to have any obligations towards each other. It is very certain that in BRICS each member country is free to act as determined by its peculiar interests at any given time. South Africa has therefore used her right of choice and chose not to use the Sputnik V vaccine.

The South African preference for Western vaccines ahead of the Russian Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine also demonstrates that the Ramaphosa regime preferred leaning more toward the West than the East in bilateral relations. The Pretoria administration had more faith in the Western system and seemed to trust their judgments more than those of China and Russia. In rejecting the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, South Africa proved that she follows the leadership of the Western powers and the European Medicines Agency. Though the Sputnik V vaccine has been accepted in many countries in South Africa a BRICS member state refused the vaccine basing her argument on the western narrative of inadequate data or information about the vaccine to give the regulatory authorities something to work with (News24, 2021). Most Western observers were quite sceptical and appeared not convinced by the speed with which the drug was invented. As Eby (2021) states "their reactions display surprise that Russia is capable of such a scientific feat." The Russians were accused of failing to make available to the European Medicines Agency any data about the vaccine's manufacture and the clinical data availed was (in?)complete (EconomicTimes, 2021). The pro-Western Ramaphosa regime in South Africa simply mimicked the words of the west in justifying its non-acceptance of the Russian vaccine. The excuse it gave for not using the Sputnik V vaccine irrespective of the fact that it had been approved by the World Health Organisation on 24 August 2021, was that the South African regulatory body was still waiting for more information on the jab for it to be approved. Secondly, it was reported that the South African government was also still waiting to hear from "other reputable regulatory bodies", such as the European Medicine Agency since none by then had approved the vaccine because of the secrecy around it from Russia. Russia also did not help matters, as it continued to hold up critical data (Reuters, 2021).

National pride and a desire to pursue independent policies as a sovereign nation also seemed to be at the centre of South African actions. It is reported that in February 2021 South Africa turned

down a Russian donation of 15 million doses of its Sputnik V vaccine to South Africa because of the uncertainty over the efficacy of this vaccine against the Beta variant (Sars-Cov-2) which was first identified in South Africa (News24, 2021). The regulators also indicated that they still needed more time to assess the best vaccine to bring into the country in the face of more emerging variants like Delta (News24, 2021). This shows that though South Africa was a member of BRICS it chose to maintain its sovereignty by refusing to be dependent on super powers especially China and Russia whose impact on other African states like neighbouring Zimbabwe and Zambia have been so detrimental to the sense and path of national economic development. In Zimbabwe, the Chinese now participate at the ruling party's congresses showing that they are even closer to the politburo, which is the national decision making body.

One other dimension of looking at it is that of assessing the perceptions of the current South African government on doing business with Russia since the foiled nuclear deal of 2017. Russia's role in the US\$76 billion shady nuclear deal during the presidency of Jacob Zuma made her to be seen as a superpower of unethical conduct which promoted corruption in Africa (Chutel, 2018). The deal which was to see Russia constructing a nuclear power plant in South Africa which would cost the nation US\$76 billion involved the Zuma family, the Gupta family and Russia lacked transparency and everything about it was shrouded in secrecy (Chutel, 2018). It was only scuttled by the country's well-established legal and administrative institutions and norms, independent media and vibrant society, which saw two lady activists mobilising the people against the deal. This tarnished the image of Russia in the eyes of South Africans, and any deals involving Russia seem to be attracting close scrutiny. It is for this reason that we can conclude that a potential Russia-South Africa Sputnik V vaccine deal was scuttled permanently. Russia made scepticism and suspicion about its vaccine worse by refusing to release information on the vaccine's manufacture and other crucial clinical data that South African regulators wanted to analyse. It is clear from this that, Russian, just like Chinese vaccine diplomacy failed to weaken the power of South African sovereignty.

## Conclusion

The survival of nation-states on the international fora has been solemnly on the power struggle. Any global state will always use their advantage to leverage itself in the power struggle. The outbreak of COVID 19 presented a case for developing nations to be exploited by the great powers which were quick to grab the opportunity to spread their influence through vaccine diplomacy. The majority of countries in the global south have been victims of stringent conditions in vaccine diplomacy (Ribeiro, 2021). However, while a number of African, East Asian and Latin American countries were reading about a strengthening of bilateral relations through vaccine donations, South Africa a BRICS bloc member surprised many by not making it easy for China and Russia, her fellow BRICS bloc members to bring their vaccines into the country. This study has shown that, there is no simple answer to the puzzle, but that South Africa was being pragmatic, and fighting hard to maintain her sovereignty. By not accepting to be an easy recipient of vaccines donated by Russia and China, she was making a clear statement that she is not dependent on any of them and that she is an equal partner in BRICS. It may also have been a way of showing them that her loyalties are elsewhere, especially in the West and she could not let the donated vaccines sway her towards the East. One other thing that comes out clearly in all this is that the BRICS bloc is not a unified alliance of global powers with any binding clauses of engagement. If they were an alliance then they should have placed major emphasis on joint vaccine manufacturing and health-related research and equitable distribution of vaccines to combat the pandemic within their bloc. The BRICS bloc is big in name but divided and small in practice. Xi Jinping at the China-Africa summit articulated the advantages of the "Chinese public good" Vaccine and that it had very "expedient conditions." Fareed Zakaria (2021) in his book on post-pandemic period alludes that plagues are associated with conflicts whilst business boom and

capitalisation thrive in pandemics. South Africa refused to be trapped in the big powers' economic and power games.

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