

Chinese vaccines sweep much of the world, despite concerns

March 2 2021, by Huizhong Wu and Kristen Gelineau



In this Dec. 23, 2020, file photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, a Sinovac worker checks the labeling on vials of COVID-19 vaccines on a packaging line in Beijing. With just four of China's many vaccine makers claiming they are able to produce at least 2.6 billion doses this year, a large part of the world's population will end up inoculated not with Western vaccines boasting headline-grabbing efficacy rates, but with China's traditionally made shots. (Zhang Yuwei/Xinhua via AP, File)

The plane laden with vaccines had just rolled to a stop at Santiago's airport in late January, and Chile's president, Sebastián Piñera, was beaming. "Today," he said, "is a day of joy, emotion and hope."

The source of that hope: China—a country that Chile and dozens of other nations are depending on to help rescue them from the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's [vaccine](#) diplomacy campaign has been a surprising success: It has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccine to more than 45 countries, according to a country-by-country tally by The Associated Press. With just four of China's many vaccine makers able to produce at least 2.6 billion doses this year, a large part of the world's population will end up inoculated not with the fancy Western vaccines boasting headline-grabbing efficacy rates, but with China's humble, traditionally made shots.

Amid a dearth of public data on China's vaccines, fears over their efficacy and safety are still pervasive in the countries depending on them, along with concerns about what China might want in return for deliveries. Nonetheless, inoculations with Chinese vaccines have begun in more than 25 countries, and the shots have been delivered to another 11, according to AP's tally, based on independent reporting in those countries along with government and company announcements.



In this Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021, file photo, a health worker administers a dose of China's Sinopharm vaccine during the start of the vaccination campaign against the COVID-19 at the Health Ministry in Dakar, Senegal. China's vaccine diplomacy campaign has pledged roughly a billion doses of its vaccines to dozens of countries. (AP Photo/Leo Correa, File)

It's a potential face-saving coup for China, which has been determined to transform itself from an object of mistrust over its initial mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak to a savior.

"We're seeing certainly real-time vaccine diplomacy start to play out, with China in the lead in terms of being able to manufacture vaccines within China and make them available to others," said Krishna Udayakumar, founding director of the Duke Global Health Innovation

Center at Duke University.

China has said it is supplying "vaccine aid" to 53 countries and exports to 27, but it rejected a request by the AP for the list. Beijing has denied vaccine diplomacy, and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said China considered the vaccine a "global public good." Chinese experts reject any connection between the export of its vaccines and the revamping of its image.



In this Thursday, Sept. 24, 2020 file photo, a worker inspects syringes of a vaccine for COVID-19 produced by Sinovac at its factory in Beijing. Sinovac and Sinopharm both rely on a traditional technology called an inactivated virus vaccine, based on cultivating batches of the virus and then killing it. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

China has targeted the low- and middle-income countries largely left behind as rich nations scooped up most of the pricey vaccines produced by the likes of Pfizer and Moderna. And despite a few delays of its own, China has largely capitalized on slower-than-hoped-for deliveries by U.S. and European vaccine makers.

Like many other countries, Chile received far fewer doses of the Pfizer vaccine than first promised. Chinese company Sinovac acted quickly, sending in 4 million doses.

The choices are limited for Chile and many other low- and middle-income countries. Vaccine deployment globally has been dominated by rich nations, which have snapped up 5.4 billion of the 7.8 billion doses purchased worldwide, according to Duke University.

China's vaccines, which can be stored in standard refrigerators, are attractive to many countries that may struggle to accommodate the ultracold storage needs of vaccines like Pfizer's.



In this Monday, Feb. 15, 2021, file photo, a teacher receives a shot of the CoronaVac vaccine for COVID-19, by China's Sinovac Biotech, at Salvador Sanfuentes public school during the start of the vaccinations for educators in Santiago, Chile. It wasn't until Sinovac swooped in with 4 million doses in late January that Chile began inoculating its population of 19 million with impressive speed. (AP Photo/Esteban Felix)

Sinovac and Sinopharm rely on a traditional technology in which a live virus is killed and then purified, triggering an immune response. Some countries view it as safer than the newer, less-proven technology used by some Western competitors that targets the [coronavirus](#)' spike protein, despite the lack of publicly available safety data on the Chinese vaccines.

In Europe, China is providing the vaccine to countries such as Serbia and Hungary—a significant geopolitical victory in Central Europe and the Balkans, where the West, China and Russia are competing for political and economic influence. Hungary is the first EU country to use a Chinese vaccine.

But China's vaccine diplomacy will be only as good as the vaccines it is offering, and it still faces hurdles.

"The Chinese vaccine, in particular, there was insufficient data available compared to other vaccines," said Ahmed Hamdan Zayed, a nurse in Egypt who overcame his initial reluctance and got Sinopharm's vaccine.



In this Monday, Jan. 18, 2021, file photo, Terezinha da Conceicao, 80, left, and Dulcinea da Silva Lopes, 59, become the first women in the country to receive

the COVID-19 vaccine produced by China's Sinovac Biotech Ltd, during the start of the vaccination program in front of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. China's vaccine diplomacy campaign has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to dozens of countries. (AP Photo/Bruna Prado, File)

Sinopharm, which said its vaccine was 79% effective based on interim data from [clinical trials](#), did not respond to interview requests.

Chinese vaccine companies have been "slow and spotty" in releasing their trial data, compared to companies like Pfizer and Moderna, said Yanzhong Huang, a global health expert at the U.S. think tank Council for Foreign Relations. None of China's three vaccine candidates used globally have publicly released their late-stage clinical trial data.

CanSino, another Chinese company with a one-shot vaccine that it says is 65% effective, declined to be interviewed.

There is also confusion around Sinovac's efficacy. In Turkey, where Sinovac conducted part of its efficacy trials, officials have said the vaccine was 91% effective. However, in Brazil, officials revised the efficacy rate in late-stage clinical trials from 78% to just over 50% after including mild infections.



In this Monday, Feb. 1, 2021, file photo, a woman gets a shot of China's Sinovac CoronaVac vaccine as part of a priority COVID-19 vaccination program for the elderly at a drive-thru vaccination center in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. China's vaccine diplomacy campaign has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to dozens of countries. (AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo, File)

An expert panel in Hong Kong published data submitted by Sinovac to health regulators that showed the vaccine was just over 50% effective.

Globally, public health officials have said any vaccine that is at least 50% effective is useful.

Receiving countries are also worried that China's vaccine diplomacy may come at a cost. In the Philippines, where Beijing is donating 600,000

vaccines, a senior diplomat said China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, gave a subtle message to tone down public criticism of growing Chinese assertiveness in the disputed South China Sea.

The senior diplomat said Wang didn't ask for anything in exchange for vaccines, but it was clear he wanted "friendly exchanges in public, like control your megaphone diplomacy a little." The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the issue publicly.



In this Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021, file photo, an elderly man looks at his vaccination card after getting a shot of the CoronaVac vaccine for COVID-19 developed by China's biopharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech, at a clinic in Santiago, Chile. It wasn't until Sinovac swooped in with 4 million doses in late January that Chile began inoculating its population of 19 million with impressive speed. (AP Photo/Esteban Felix, File)



In this Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021, file photo, a health worker holds a box containing a dose of China's Sinopharm vaccine during the start of the vaccination campaign against the COVID-19 at the Health Ministry in Dakar, Senegal. China's vaccine diplomacy campaign has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to dozens of countries. (AP Photo/Leo Correa, File)



People rest and are monitored for the possibility of side effects after receiving a dose of Chinese Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine in Belgrade, Serbia, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. China is providing the vaccine to countries such as Serbia and Hungary—a significant geopolitical victory in Central Europe and the Balkans, where the West, China and Russia are competing for political and economic influence. (AP Photo/Darko Vojinovic)



In this Thursday, Feb. 4, 2021, file photo, medical workers receive the COVID-19 vaccine during a mass vaccination in Jakarta, Indonesia. The choices are limited for Indonesia and many other low- and middle-income countries hit by COVID. Vaccine deployment globally has been dominated by rich countries, which have snapped up 5.8 billion of the 8.2 billion doses purchased worldwide, according to Duke University. (AP Photo/Achmad Ibrahim, File)



In this Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021 file photo, workers unload a container of China's Sinopharm coronavirus vaccines at the Belgrade Airport in Serbia. China is providing the vaccine to countries such as Serbia and Hungary—a significant geopolitical victory in Central Europe and the Balkans, where the West, China and Russia are competing for political and economic influence. (AP Photo/Darko Vojinovic)



In this July 15, 2020 photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, Sinovac staff members work in a purification area to be used in production of COVID-19 vaccines in Beijing. Sinovac and Sinopharm both rely on a traditional technology called an inactivated virus vaccine, based on cultivating batches of the virus and then killing it. (Zhang Yuwei/Xinhua via AP)



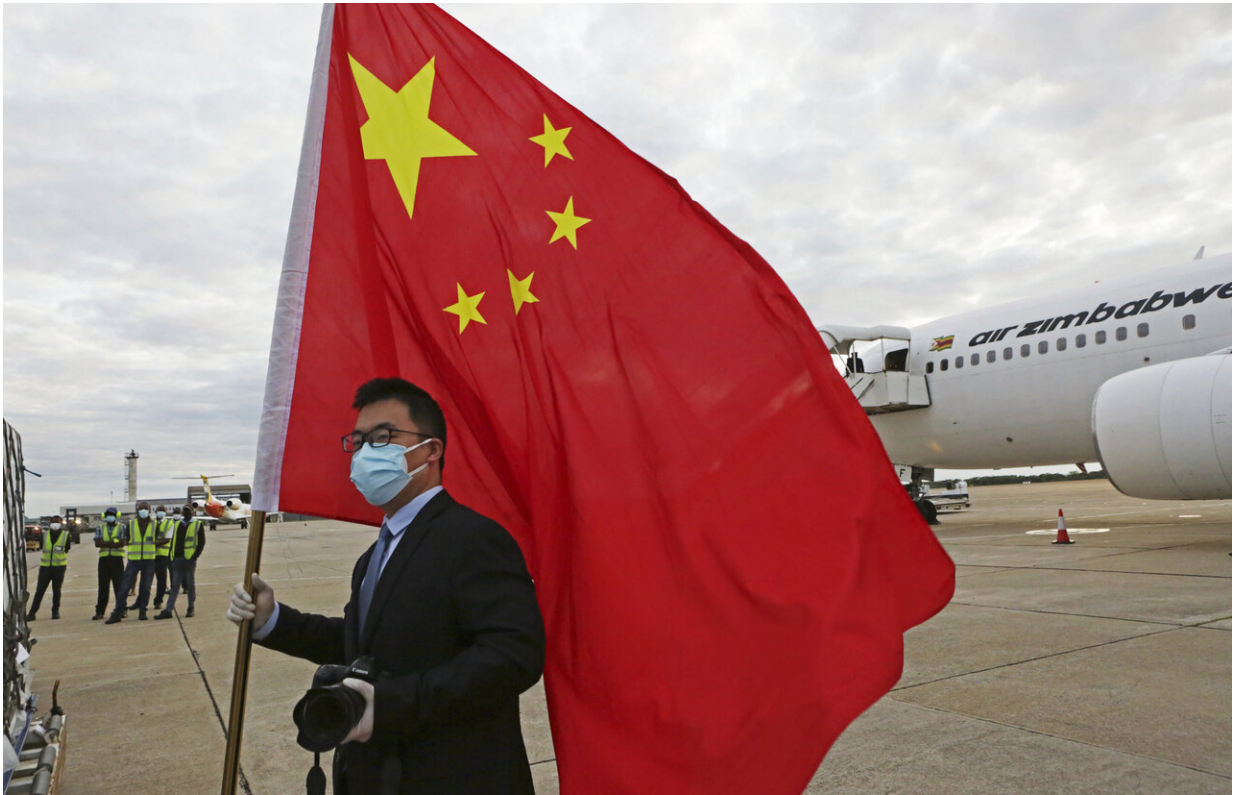
In this Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021 file photo, Dr. Lili Rahmawaty, right, gives a shot of COVID-19 vaccine to a colleague at North Sumatra University Hospital in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The choices are limited for Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, and many other low- and middle-income countries clobbered by COVID. Vaccine deployment globally has been dominated by rich countries, which have snapped up 5.4 billion of the 7.8 billion doses purchased worldwide, according to Duke University. (AP Photo/Binsar Bakkara)



In this Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 file photo, a health worker wearing a face mask and shield holds a sign as she and others call on the government to give them a vaccine with the safest, highest efficacy and effectivity during a protest outside the Philippine General Hospital in Manila, Philippines. The group is opposing a plan by the government to have health workers vaccinated with China's Sinovac. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)



In this Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 file photo, President Sebastian Pinera speaks in front of the plane carrying the country's first batch of the CoronaVac vaccine for COVID-19 developed by Chinese biopharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech, at Arturo Merino airport in Santiago, Chile. "Today," he said, "is a day of joy, emotion and hope." (AP Photo/Esteban Felix)



In this Monday, Feb, 15, 2021 file photo, an official from the Chinese embassy in Zimbabwe holds a Chinese flag next to a plane carrying Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine from China upon arrival at Robert Mugabe International Airport in Harare. Zimbabwe received its first COVID-19 vaccines with the jet carrying 200,000 Sinopharm doses from China. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi)



A man receives a Chinese made Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine in Budapest, Hungary on Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. China is providing the vaccine to countries such as Serbia and Hungary—a significant geopolitical victory in Central Europe and the Balkans, where the West, China and Russia are competing for political and economic influence. (AP Photo/Laszlo Balogh)

Still, the pandemic's urgency has largely superseded hesitations over China's vaccines.

"Vaccines, particularly those made in the West, are reserved for rich countries," said one Egyptian official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter. "We had to guarantee a vaccine. Any vaccine."

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