South Africa's Foreign Policy During COVID-19: Evaluating Prospects of Establishing the BRICS Vaccine Centre and Intra-BRICS Cooperation

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Abstract: The 13th BRICS Summit held in 2021 affirmed the need for intra-BRICS cooperation to implement vaccine collaboration including the establishment of the BRICS Vaccine Centre, which was initially proposed by South Africa in 2018. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the need to re-assess South Africa's foreign policy objectives in BRICS in terms of vaccine diplomacy, and implementation of the BRICS vaccine centre to its benefit. The article determines whether South Africa effectively cast its foreign policy net during COVID-19 through the BRICSs alliance. This paper utilises one of South Africa's four levels of engagement through its 2012 BRICS strategy which is to strengthen intra-BRICS cooperation from a more organizational perspective. The methodology implemented examines whether South Africa can strategically leverage intra-BRICS vaccine cooperation through COVID-19 vaccine capacity and political collaboration. Given the divergent interests of the BRICS grouping, this paper argues that pragmatism may be the best foreign policy option in navigating options for implementing a BRICS Vaccine Centre, which can act as a lever to promote South Africa's interests.

Keywords: Vaccine, intra-BRICS, COVID-19, Foreign policy, Cooperation, Capacity

1. Introduction

South Africa's foreign policy has long been influenced by the universal foreign policy principle and the strengthening of relations with all countries particularly in African countries and the Global South. According to the 2011 White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Relations, *Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu*, there are two key tenets that inform South Africa's international engagement which are Pan-Africanism and South-South solidarity. The second tenet is based on cooperation amongst countries in the Global South designed to promote a mutual position on political, economic, social and human rights issues (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2011). In 2010 South Africa joined Brazil, the Russian Federation, India and China to form an economic block termed BRICS. Joining BRICS aligned within South Africa's objectives of cooperation amongst countries aimed at addressing political and economic rights (Institute of Security Studies, 2017). The BRICS key major interest is premised on the international agenda that has been dominated by Western priorities and capacity for action on issues such as the role of the Bretton Woods institutions and the failure to reform the UN Security Council (Spence, 2016).

According to President Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa's membership in BRICS should be viewed in the context of "recasting" South Africa's international relations after decades of isolation during the apartheid era as a pariah state (Harvard International Review, 2019). Recasting the foreign policy net was framed by the late former President Nelson Mandela. Writing 2019on the eve of South Africa's first democratic election, Mandela argued that, '*all nations will have boldly to recast their nets if they are to reap any benefit from international affairs in the post-Cold War era*' (Mandela, 1993) In essence, South Africa's foreign policy had to be far more strategic in its drive to foster closer engagement with emerging economic powerhouses such as Brazil and a strengthening of the soft relations that had been maintained with India and China (Partnered Content, 2021).

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a need to re-examine the country's foreign policy objectives in BRICS. Despite BRICS pledges to enforce global governance and economic reforms, the lukewarm cooperation on COVID-19 vaccines manufacturing, distribution and access has led to South Africa and its peers missing an important political and economic opportunity to demonstrate their ability to mount a strong collective response to a far-reaching global crisis

(Mpongose, 2021). The 2021 BRICS summit, in an effort to demonstrate joint public interest, affirmed the need for intra-BRICS cooperation to promote vaccine development. This initiative began in 2018 when South Africa proposed the establishment of a joint BRICS vaccine research centre which became part of the BRICS' Johannesburg Declaration (South African Government Declaration, 2018). Given the state of health infrastructure and pharmaceutical manufacturing capabilities and development in South Africa and the continent, the establishment of this health institution will be of great significance and benefit to the African continent. However, unlike setting up a finance institution such as the New Development Bank, implementing a vaccine research centre is a complex task that requires significant and sustained funding, infrastructure such as manufacturing plants, cold rooms, and other resources such as uninterrupted power supply, Information Communication Technology (ICT), skilled resources, and political will. Implementation of the BRICS Vaccine Research Centre in South Africa begs the question as whether this is a practical proposal for the country's foreign policy interests given the current domestic climate of low economic growth. It is within this context that South Africa's adoption of the BRICS cooperation concept needs to be examined in the light of COVID-19 as it relates to the issues of capacity, economic relevance and political will.

Pertinent questions have to be asked about the extent to which BRICS can collaborate on a global vaccine or research centre to counteract viruses. This article examines whether the South African government's foreign policy can be strategically leveraged for intra-BRICS vaccine cooperation based on BRICS COVID-19 vaccine capacity and political collaboration. The paper is broken into five parts focusing on the introduction, background to South Africa's foreign Policy and BRICS, domestic realities of South Africa's vaccine capacity, BRICS capacity and collaboration during COVID-19, and whether South Africa strategically cast its net during COVID-19. The paper utilises one of South Africa's four levels of engagement through its 2012 BRICS strategy which is to strengthen intra-BRICS cooperation from a more organizational perspective (Harvard International Review 2019).

2. Background

South Africa's dynamics within BRICS are complex as the relationships are not necessarily complementary, but continuously nuanced with different political objectives and interests. For example, South Africa does little trade with Russia, while all the other three BRICS members are all major trade competitors in South Africa and the continent (Johnson, 2015). In order to assess South African foreign policy interests in relations to COVID-19 dynamics over the past two years and the establishment of the BRICS Vaccination Centre it is important to unpack the significance of its foreign policy post 1994. The late President Nelson Mandela touted human rights as the core concern of international relations. From a South-South perspective, President Mbeki's government became actively involved in African development and India-Brazil-South Africa Alliance (IBSA) relations designed to increase cooperation and collectively pursue a new global order amongst them. China's position despite its recognition was relatively neglected by Pretoria (Alden & Wu, 2016) as Mbeki also distrusted China and viewed it as a potential New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) competitor on the continent.

Under President Jacob Zuma, IBSA became a thing of the past, and BRICS became the new kid on the block. A BRICS partnership was of political interest to President Zuma's foreign policy which preferred diplomatic engagement with the East as this suited the domestic agenda of shifting away from neoliberal "White Monopoly Capital" linked to the West (Institute of Security Studies, 2017. Countries such as China not only offered economic options, but ideological ties and political contexts. Unlike idealistic Mbeki, Zuma who was a realist had limited interest in African politics or the G-8 (Spence, 2016). He instead focused on keeping his domestic interests of state capture in check, and leaned towards Russia and China.

Ramaphosa's foreign policy began with a focus on the establishment of the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFTCA), which he viewed as a business platform for African countries to trade among themselves and reap the benefits of the tariff-free area. The AFTCA establishment was followed by his action oriented role as the AU President in 2020. In this role, he helped launch the Africa Medical Supplies Platform (AMSP) as a single online marketplace to enable the supply of COVID-19-related medical equipment in Africa (South African Government, 2020). However, President Ramaphosa the country's economic crisis have forced his government to ensure that domestic issues are inter-linked with foreign policy issues

where possible. This is demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic where international decisions were made to address domestic interests. In essence, one would argue that unlike Mbeki, Ramaphosa's foreign *policies* are designed with the aim of achieving complex domestic issues first, followed by a more balanced and realistic approach to international affairs (Strategic Comments, 2021).

3. South Africa's Vaccine Capacity Realities

South Africa's pharmaceutical sector is currently the largest drug market in Africa, with the fifth highest expenditure on pharmaceuticals per capita. The total market value in 2015 was estimated at R44.0bn with R34.2bn (86.7%) attributable to the private healthcare market and R6.8bn (13.3%) to the public sector (Rayment, 2020). The country boasts the fifth-highest worldwide pharmaceutical expenditure per capita (Benavides & Riley, 2019). Moreover, in 2021, South Africa's Afrigen Biologics used the publicly available sequence of Moderna Inc's (MRNA.O) mRNA COVID-19 vaccine to make its own version of the shot, which is also the first mRNA vaccine designed, developed and produced at laboratory scale on the African continent (Benavides & Riley, 2019). Furthermore, in terms of government based manufacturing, South Africa does have world-class local vaccine-production facilities in the form of the Cape Town-based company, Biovac, which was created in 2003 in partnership with the private sector as a way to "establish local vaccine manufacturing capability" (Ndivhuwo, 2021).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed South Africa's limitations in pharmaceutical manufacturing. Biovac, along with other South African pharmaceutical companies, have not produced vaccine shots from scratch because they have not engaged in the production of active pharmaceutical ingredient (API), which is the raw material necessary to manufacture a vaccine or drug from scratch (Oxford Business Group, 2014). API ingredients are the active substances in any diagnostic test, treatment or vaccine that make it work. Consequently, South African producers import 95% of API's, including all of those used in the production of generic ART's, mainly supplied by India and China, as well as packaging materials and other inputs (Oxford Business Group, 2014). By 2015 pharmaceutical imports accounted for 85% of the country's total (two way) pharmaceutical trade, despite the depreciation of rand against global currencies.

To date, the gap between imports and exports of pharmaceutical products continues to grow and imports are growing at an even faster rate than exports. Needless to say, compared to China and India, South Africa, does little local manufacturing, and is currently mostly confined to assembling, and into some lower-end products. South Africa had to contract private companies like Johnson & Johnson, whose shots were produced locally by Aspen Pharmacare Holdings, and Pfizer (Bloomberg, 2021), demonstrating a need to either fast track Biovac's manufacturing capacity or push the establishment of the BRICS vaccine centre for domestic and regional objectives.

South Africa's domestic capacity to manufacture vaccines is also severely affected by lack of energy due to power outages dubbed "loadshedding by its State Owned Electricity supplier, ESKOM. Lack of maintenance of existing power stations, failure to successfully introduce new infrastructure, poor management and allegations of corruption are some of the suggested reasons (Niselow, 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, SA already had a strained healthcare system, largely owing to inefficient financial management, a disparity in the distribution of resources, a quadruple burden of disease (Pooja, 2015), and electricity shortages that crippled the health industry and the economy. What then do South Africa's infrastructural problems mean for the establishment of an institution such as a vaccine centre which is a very high tech industry? Notwithstanding the fact that fixing ESKOM has become a bureaucratic process that could linger even after completion of the BRICS vaccine centre if it was established in the near future.

From a domestic perspective, South Africa would probably benefit from the BRICS Vaccine cooperation which would probably increase the manufacturing of its own national institutions such as Biovac. To date, at a push, Biovac could manufacture 30-million doses of vaccines per year using multi-dose vials. But this number hinges on the type of technology used to produce some vaccines and the willingness of foreign manufacturers to do "technology transfer" as part of licensing their product for local production (Sulcas, 2021). For instance, in 2021, Biovac began implementing a process to manufacture Sanofi Pasteur's six-in-one jab, Hexaxim, with a plan to fill four million doses of Hexaxim by year end. However, this is tiny compared to the Serum Institute of India's huge capacity and to Aspen's reported capacity of

300 million vaccine doses a year (Dorfman & Kirsten, 2021). The bottom line is that unless South Africa's domestic infrastructure challenges are resolved, accomplishing the country's foreign policy objective of intra-BRICS cooperation thereby elevating South Africa's health and manufacturing status nationally and regionally through the BRICS vaccine centre will not succeed.

Lastly, South Africa's vaccine capacity has been heavily aligned with that of the West. In 2021, a Sisonke study was rolled out by the South African Medical Research Council, which demonstrated that Johnson and Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine was safe for use. According to the National Department of Health, South Africa has received a total of 60 606 060 COVID-19 vaccines – 39 272 220 Pfizer doses and 21 333 840 J&J doses, which is inclusive of Sisonke doses (Malan & Grant, 2022). The Pfizer doses include donations from the United States which total 7 443 540 (Malan *et al*., 2022). Besides the vaccine doses, there is clear collaboration to implement the vaccine processes with the South African health department, in collaboration with the US government into health districts with the lowest vaccination rates, specifically in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, where immunisation rates in some areas are below 25% (Malan *et al*.). To date, there has been no vaccine collaboration roll-out with some of South Africa's BRICS partners such as China and India. This is despite South Africa's emphasis on South-South cooperation as a necessary process to entrench BRICS-intra cooperation. One could argue that the South African government was practising realism to protect the health of its people as there were valid scientific concerns related to the BRICS COVID-19 vaccines Sinopharm, and Sputnik V whose results of large-scale human trials, have recently been published and peer-reviewed in the prestigious Lancet medical journal showing an impressive 91.6 efficacy for the vaccine (Ullah & Chance, 2021). Moreover, it could also be argued that South Africa's vaccine diplomacy has been aligned with the US in particular for decades as evidenced with the HIV-AIDS testing, treatment and funding that have jointly taken place for years (Stevens, 2021). Due to more than 30 years of joint biomedical research, the US-South Africa long term health partnership made it possible to quickly implement COVID-19 vaccine trials (Ullah *at al*., 2021). Where then will the BRICS Vaccine Centre fit into South Africa's pharmaceutical plans when this type of vaccine agenda is dominated by the US? It is not clear how South Africa would navigate this balance between the West, East, and South, and it may actually be more practical to collaborate with the US instead on this endeavour.

4. BRICS Capacity and Political Collaboration with South Africa During COVID-19

South Africa is not the only BRICS country grappling with vaccine production at a national and global scale. Furthermore, while all BRICS countries are currently engaged in vaccine development, this is not uniform across the countries. Russia was the first country to register a two-dose COVID-19 vaccine named Sputnik V for use before any other nation. However, Russia was unable to engage in mass scale production for a while due to its lack of pharmaceutical infrastructure (Ullah *et al*.). Even where pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity exists, rapid production of COVID-19 vaccines at sufficient scale also depends on extensive transfer of technology which Russia did not have at a large scale and ended up relying on China to assist at some stage. Brazil also leaned on China by partnering with China's Sinovac Biotech Ltd. to produce the CoronaVac shot, labelled the ButanVac (Pinto, 2021). India on the other hand, has been in a better position as a leading exporter of generic drugs across the world depends on China for more than two-thirds of its bulk drug needs (Pinto, 2021). Like South Africa, it is now preparing to produce its own mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccine which would be a scientific breakthrough (Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2021).

China is the main exception amongst the BRICS countries as the world's largest supplier of APIs also known as bulk drugs (Kurian & Kapur, 2020). The other BRICS members depend on China to engage in pharmaceutical production which emphasizes the need for China's leadership in this vaccine centre establishment. Given its global manufacturing status, it is *sine qua non* that the centre will not become effective without China's capacity and support. This section examines the BRICS capacity and politics of vaccine production in relation to South Africa's national interests. Brazil is not discussed as there was zero collaboration between the two countries on this matter.

4.1 South Africa – Russia

South Africa's ties to Russia stretch back to the 1960s when the former Soviet Union gave support to

anti-apartheid freedom fighters. However, despite their strong ties, on October 2021, South Africa's Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) rejected Russia's Gamaleya Centre manufactured COVID-19 vaccine, citing some safety concerns (Redaction African News, 2021). South African officials pointed to two failed research studies testing an HIV vaccine also using Adenovirus Type 5, which found men who were vaccinated had a higher risk of being infected with HIV. The regulators said they had asked the Russian makers of Sputnik V to provide data proving the vaccine's safety in a country with high rates of HIV but that "the applicant was not able to adequately address (their) request" (Redaction Africa News, 2021).

Russia on the other hand, due to the global backlash regarding its invasion of Ukraine, recently reminded South Africa of its support for the fight against apartheid, including financial and military training to the African National Congress (ANC) and its armed wing, *uMkhonto we Sizwe*. The Russian foreign ministry in South Africa also added how it was also the first to come to the aid of the South African people at a time when the West on the other hand had implemented travel bans against the country due to its discovery of the Omricon variant. Russia's recent reminder for its COVID-19 support to South Africa is interesting, as it raises the politics of diplomatic payback. Needless to say, President Ramaphosa's BRICS collaborative research call was his first on December 10, 2021, was more in reaction to the international flight bans as he felt betrayed by his perceived Western partners, that he even declined to attend US President Joe Biden's virtual Summit for Democracy in December 2021 (Fabricus, 2021).

President Ramaphosa's request for the BRICS countries to conduct joint research in December 2021 also revealed South Africa's foreign policy position on the BRICS Vaccine Centre as the South African Minister of International Relations, Dr Naledi Pandor stated on December 14, 2021, that the cooperation was growing amongst the BRICS countries as they had invited their BRICS scientists to collaborate on research, share data and information on COVID-19 with a focus on Omricon. The Minister also added that *"South Africa is currently the host of the BRICS Vaccine Research Centre and the research on the Omicron variant will form part of the centre's initiatives*" (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2021). Interestingly, no explanations were given as to why Brazil, India and China did not respond or provide any reasons for their scientists not participating in the intra-collaborative research on Omricon.

4.2 South Africa – India

Unlike China, Brazil, and Russia, the Indian and South African vaccine producers entered technology-centred agreements with their Western partners, but did not own any COVID-19 related patents. In an attempt to address this issue, even before concluding these agreements, the two countries' governments led a push at the World Trade Organization (WTO) in October 2020 to waive intellectual-property rights for COVID-19 technologies and vaccines (Mpungose, 2021). But the other BRICS foreign ministers did not collectively support this proposal until June 2021, eight months after it was first submitted. China and Russia had previously remained silent on the issue, while Brazil, as BRICS expert Karin Costa Vazquez notes, was the only member of the group openly to oppose this idea, in direct alignment with former US President Donald Trump. Brazil's position became more supportive only in early 2021, after US President Joe Biden's administration announced its support for the proposed IP waiver (Mpungose, 2021). Brazil's support of the US over its BRICS partners begs the question as to the relevance of the alliance given its objectives to promote global governance reforms of institutions such as the WTO which are Global North dominated.

In 2021, President Ramaphosa constantly reiterated his call for the WTO to finalise deliberations on the waiver on COVID-19 vaccines and treatments so that developing economies would be able to access and manufacture their own vaccines (Business Tech, 2021). From a foreign policy perspective while the BRICS alliance only began supporting South Africa and India on the proposed IP waivers much later in the game, this process demonstrated a push towards South Africa's political objectives of pharmaceutical production from a domestic and regional angle.

Along with the cooperation for IP waivers, South Africa and India cooperated on a business arrangement for COVID-19 vaccines that demonstrated a lack of intra-BRICS organisational cooperation. South Africa ordered at least 1.5 million shots of the vaccine from the Serum Institute of India (SII) which had emerged as a key vaccine supplier. During

the delivery of the vaccines, the South African Parliament's Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation, through its Chair, Ms Tandi Mahambehlala, extended *"gratitude to the government of India, as a true friend in need and a trusted partner in the BRICS for prioritising South Africa to receive its first batch of the vaccine to fight the pandemic"* (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2021). This was despite the fact red flags were raised prior to the delivery regarding the sale price. South Africa bought doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine at a price $5.25 of (€4.32) while according to a Belgian Minister, European Union members paid $2.16 (€1.78) for the doses (Sullivan, 2021). In other words, South Africa's AstraZeneca's costs were 2.5 times higher each than most European countries as they were nearly two and a half times the amount paid by most European countries.

The high price costs between the two BRICS countries were followed by a disastrous arrival of a million doses as they came a month before their expiry date (Bhatia, 2021) which according to the South Africa's Health department, they were unaware, and only able to identify the expiry date of April upon on arrival. The South African government engaged the Serum Institute of India to exchange of the expiring stock and failed to secure an agreement on resolving the matter. Somehow, it seemed that communication between the two BRICS countries even from a political level failed to address the impasse. South Africa also moved to suspend another 500 000 vaccinations from India following a small clinical trial showing that the shot offered minimal protection against mild to moderate illness from the 501Y.V2 coronavirus variant that was dominant in the country (Reuters, 2021).

This business cooperation debacle between the two BRICS countries was unfortunate, but also questions that assumption of good business practices expected to transpire between South-South countries versus the West which has been tagged as exploitative. BRICS is regarded a continuation of the tradition the historic Bandung Conference to galvanise their economic and political collective muscle in the context of the Cold War and assert themselves in the international system (State of the Nation, 2018). South Africa's foreign policy failed to make headway in this debacle and was forced to cut its economic losses by selling the vaccines to the African Union. What is the likelihood of this saga replaying itself through the establishment of a BRICS Vaccine Center which requires participation from manufacturing institutions such as the Serum Institute?

4.3 South Africa – China

South Africa's engagement with BRICS is dominated by its trade relations with China. However, the China-South Africa case is very interesting as it demonstrates how South Africa was not easily swayed into using China's vaccines which were finally approved for roll out at the tail end of the Omicron virus crisis on February 2022 (Maromo, 2022). South Africa's decision not to roll out China's vaccine in South Africa is significant as it is the main country with the capacity to implement the BRICS Vaccine Centre in South Africa. Furthermore, that China's contribution is premised on its vaccine diplomacy. Vaccine diplomacy is the use of vaccines to increase a country's diplomatic relationship and political influence of other countries (Allison, 2020). China has made no secret that vaccine distribution is wrapped up in its broader geopolitical ambitions. In fact, it has even explicitly included vaccine distribution in its broader Health Silk Road initiative, which aims to bolster China's international soft power (Gopaldos, 2021). However, despite diplomatic pressure from China, South Africa remained pragmatic by pursuing its own foreign policy interests which did not necessarily always align with China.

In 2020, the Chinese Embassy in South Africa through BRICS public health cooperation, stated that it would promote the development of the BRICS Vaccine R&D Centre, advance collective vaccine research and trials of BRICS countries, including China and South Africa, set up plants, authorise production and recognise each other's standards (Fabricus, 2020). During the November BRICS Summit in 2021, China's President Xi indicated that China had designated its own national centre, to support the development of the BRICS Vaccine R&D centre (Fabricus, 2020). He also confirmed that while Chinese companies were already working with their Russian and Brazilian partners on Phase 3 of clinical trials of vaccines, his government is prepared to have cooperation with South Africa and India as well (Fabricus, 2020). However, SAHPRA conditionally approved that the CoronaVac COVID-19 vaccine manufactured by Sinovac Life Sciences of China would be used in South Africa under specific conditions in 2021 (Maromo, 2020). The conditions were based on the safety, quality and efficacy data submitted by the vaccine manufacturer to SAHPRA between 22 March

2021 and 22 June 2021 (Maromo, 2020). As indicated earlier, to date, Sinopharm has not been rolled-out extensively for use in South Africa like Johnson and Johnson and Pfizer. More than likely, even the vaccine deal the AU brokered with Johnson & Johnson was probably influenced by South Africa's leadership when President Ramaphosa served as AU president in 2020 (Stronski, 2021).

China did not give up easily on promoting the use of its vaccine in South Africa, and tried another diplomatic tactic through its People's Liberation Army (PLA), which as part of its vaccine donations to militaries in 28 countries, offered 300,000 free doses of the CoronaVac jab manufactured by Sinovac to the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) (Fabricus, 2021). According to Fabricus, the PLA's COVID-19 health outreach contributions to foreign militaries were to "promote and further deepen links between the PLA and recipient military elites in those countries" (Fabricus, 2021). However, it seems in South Africa this process backfired as the South African National Defense Force (SANDF) Director of Corporate Communication denied any plan to use Sinovac vaccine in order to complete the vaccination roll-out for the military community (Fabricus, 2021). Moreover, the Corporate Director added that since CoronaVac was never part of the national vaccine roll-out, they could not acknowledge the existence of an offer to donate the vaccine to the army (Fabricus, 20210), making China's vaccine diplomacy null and void.

Finally, the China vaccine case with South Africa is tricky as both countries are heavily pursuing the same continental market. In 2020, Chinese Ambassador Chen in South Africa indicated China would give full play to South Africa's important role as a bridge for BRICS cooperation with Africa (Fabricus, 2021). This statement was made despite the fact China has already infiltrated the continent through its own direct bridge of COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing which has been extended to African countries. For example, in 2021, China has signed a deal with Morocco to start using the established facilities of a Moroccan pharmaceutical firm to make 5 million doses a month of Sinopharm vaccines for continental and global production (Caiyu, 2021). This is China's second vaccine production line in Africa after one in Egypt which announced that it had produced the first 1 million doses of vaccines developed by China's Sinovac, using its local facilities, with the daily output reaching 300,000 doses. If the supply of raw materials is sufficient, daily output is expected to double (Caiyu, 2021). China's pledge to work through South Africa, while pushing its own interests through setting up continental vaccine centres, demonstrates its drive to promote the health Silk Road and public good through its soft power tactics. Where then does the BRICS Vaccine Centre fit in China's vaccine diplomatic angle, and what does China's manufacturing capacity from a geopolitical perspective mean for the BRICS Vaccine Centre implementation in South Africa? Suffice to say, it is obvious that the centre will not become effective without China's capacity which may not positively impact South Africa's national interests.

5. Has South Africa Strategically Used its Foreign Policy to Promote Vaccines Cooperation Among BRICS Countries?

South Africa's foreign policy of strengthening intra-BRICS cooperation from a more organizational perspective has been a dominant theme at BRICS summits over the years. BRICS has argued that what unites them is a common commitment to multilateralism and the principles of mutual respect, sovereign equality, inclusiveness, and strengthened collaboration (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2020). Currently, the most important aspect of BRICS' cohesion is its geopolitical outlook. BRICS has been pursuing an anti-hegemonic notion based on classic geopolitical power politics and relations underpinned by military strength, economic performance, diplomatic and political influence, and soft power.

This paper has demonstrated the challenges the South Africa faces with regards to casting its foreign policy net for intra-BRICS vaccine cooperation inclusive of the establishment of the BRICS Vaccine Research Centre. Russia and China, and at some point India tried to engage in spreading out their vaccine production market as far as possible, while South Africa and Brazil were focused on fast tracking their COVID-19 vaccine production entries in their regions. However, COVID-19 demonstrated a clash of interests that went against some of the BRICS objectives of intra collaboration, solidarity, and reform of global governance institutions. The BRICS countries were at first not only unanimous in their support of India and South Africa in their diplomatic quest for the patent waiver at the WTO, but their lack of collaboration spoke volumes. Particularly when China emphasized that its objectives are

to assist the continent through vaccines production, and yet would not endorse a measure that would have assisted Africa in that same process. The India-South Africa Astrazena case also demonstrated that BRICS solidarity is not always practical as the Indian government left the South Africans to fend out for themselves with the Serum Institute of India after forking out hefty sums of money for expiring vaccinations. Notwithstanding that China's promise to work with South Africa to implement vaccine manufacturing was questionable when it has already begun implementing vaccine pharmaceutical production on the continent. South Africa needs to question what does China's manufacturing capacity from a geopolitical perspective mean for the BRICS vaccine Centre particularly in relations to China's foreign policy interests of its Health Silk Road and "public good" concept. Especially when it is China that would be the main driver in terms of vaccine capacity? Moreover, given that all the BRICS countries have decided to start developing their own vaccines for redistribution on the continent, then which vaccine will be produced in this BRICS Vaccine Centre? Suffice to say, pharmaceutical manufacturing is about economics is a big business and South Africa needs to examine China's interests from that angle. There is also the matter of profits from the BRICS vaccine centre which will need to be divvied up amongst the members once it is up and running. Unlike the New Development Bank, the pharmaceutical industrial complex is a billion dollar business linked to many other global players?

South Africa should also reconsider its branding as a gateway to the continent when in fact it is China which has become the economic link to Africa. China has even become a more accepted Brother or Sister by Pan-Africanists on the continent. There is absolutely no way that the BRICS vaccine Centre could benefit South Africa's domestic and global agenda given its limited influence compared to China. Perhaps South Africa should promote the BRICS Vaccine Centre as a tool of Pan-Africanism for the BRICS countries, which through China's manufacturing capacity could promote the continental pharmaceutical industry from a regional perspective thereby which would also strengthen South Africa's agency through a numbers approach.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite South Africa's strong trade relations with China, under Ramaphosa regime, it seems West pharmaceutical industries under Biden have also made great inroads in South Africa, and started soft power tactics. The recent announcement that Johnson & Johnson has granted South African Pharmaceutical Company, Aspen, an intellectual property license to produce its vaccines under the new brand name, "Aspenovax" is an example of the soft power at play. Based on the BRICS interactions over the past two years, will South Africa therefore be better off casting its foreign policy net with its pharmaceutical partners in the West than the BRICS grouping? Unlike Zuma who adored the East, or Mbeki, who shunned China to a degree Ramaphosa needs to continue to play his realist balancing act between BRICS and the West to find solutions that address the country's domestic issues that would tie in with manufacturing global interests. In practice, considerations of financial, commercial, political and health interests overtake alliances if they are not able to deliver as was the India case. Realists consider the survival of the state as the most important thing which is what President Ramaphosa has also been grappling with. Finally South Africa to be successful at implementing its foreign policy measures such as establishing a BRICS Vaccine Centre, it needs to urgently address its social and economic problems. Until the government deals with the domestic issues that are affecting the country's foreign relations, such as its energy crisis, Pretoria will only have limited success in recasting its net and achieving its foreign policy objectives.

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