

Vaccine Diplomacy as a Form of Soft Power: The Successful Case of Türkiye

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ABSTRACT *The coronavirus pandemic has been raging across the globe for more than two years, claiming over 6 million lives and severely upending daily routines. It is no wonder that the production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, known as the most effective and widespread tool in the fight against this sad chapter in recent history, has become an essential element of international politics. Both the race for geopolitical leverage and the emerging health technologies have affected Ankara, which has been seeking its niche in the post-COVID-19 international system. Though its Sputnik V vaccine deal with Russia casted doubt on Türkiye's intentions as part of the Euro-Atlantic common front, the country has emerged as a generous humanitarian aid provider and secured its place among a handful of nations who can boast homegrown SARS-CoV-2 vaccines. This article uses the soft power theoretical framework to analyze Türkiye's vaccine diplomacy and its role in the country's efforts to maintain and boost its stakes in the global power configuration.*

Keywords: Türkiye, COVID-19, Vaccine Diplomacy, Soft Power

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become the 5th documented one since the 1918 Spanish flu, the most severe influenza outbreak of the 20th century. First discovered in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, the coronavirus has rapidly spread worldwide and evolved among the human population. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of late May 2022, there have been 524,878,064 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6,283,119 deaths.¹ As a global response, vaccinating the world against this disease has led to the largest vaccine procurement and supply operation in history. The vaccine race involved scientists around the world working faster than ever before to develop a remedy against the spread of the cruel disease. It may have not redrawn the geopolitical map, but it has at the very least sharpened the available trends, which remain subject to extensive academic research. Studies have addressed the negative trends for the European Union's (EU) and the U.S. credibility in the Western Balkans amid the assertive vaccine diplomacy of Beijing and Moscow in the region.² Some papers have analyzed the geopolitical use of vaccines by Russia while it seeks to improve the country's image and strengthen its stakes.³ Meanwhile, others have analyzed the competing COVID-19 practices of the U.S. and China to a mass further clout in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴ One thing is clear: the coronavirus pandemic has tested the global distribution of power and foreign policies of big players, in particular.

Türkiye –a well-established regional actor with beyond-regional ambitions– has joined the post-COVID-19 geopolitical rivalry. First, Ankara's vaccine diplomacy has echoed its autonomous foreign policy strategy, which isn't based on the influence of Western allies or Eastern partners. Four vaccines have been officially approved for use in Türkiye: Comirnaty (Pfizer/BioNTech, U.S./Germany), CoronaVac (Sinovac, China), Sputnik V (Gamaleya Institute, Russia), and also Turkovac –the first domestically produced option. Though the Comirnaty and CoronaVac vaccine deals have not raised questions about Türkiye's Euro-Atlantic commitments, Ankara's approval of emergency use of Sputnik V and discussions on the possible joint production of the Russian coronavirus vaccine in Türkiye have sparked debate over the loyalty of the Erdoğan Administration regarding the consolidated NATO-EU coronavirus response. Second, the pandemic has offered Türkiye an unprecedented opportunity to shore up its international influence by providing the world with much-needed public health goods, including its SARS-CoV-2 vaccine, which has been officially approved for local use. The resounding supplies of vaccines to friendly countries in urgent need and other forms of medical aid provided to 160 countries and 12 international organizations worldwide have become another pillar of Ankara's soft power.

The objective of this study is to apply the soft power theoretical framework to explore the dynamics of Türkiye's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy. By em-

ploying the soft power concept, introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s to explain the ability of a state to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion, this paper focuses on the importance of vaccine diplomacy in understanding the grand foreign policy strategy of Ankara under the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The author's insights into

Türkiye's donations of home-grown or imported vaccines to specific regions and countries with less access have been in line with the emergence of the COVID-19 vaccines as a new public diplomacy instrument

Türkiye's self-positioning as a regional power with global ambitions, which is particularly exemplified in the Erdoğan-lobbied the 'world is bigger than five' idea, are explored. The research design is based on qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as discourse analysis as the core methodologies. Within the qualitative content analysis, the relevant recorded human communications are studied. The primary data sources include manuscripts, research articles, news items in local and foreign media outlets, and think tank reports. Both manifest and latent content analysis is employed to make an overall assessment of the particular social evidence. For the quantitative analysis, the official government web portals and trusted open-source statistical databases are referred to. To obtain indicators of President Erdoğan's perceptions and attitudes toward the role of Türkiye in the 21st century geopolitical landscape, transcripts of his official statements and speeches are also analyzed.

The concept of soft power addresses the ability of states to attract and persuade. Whereas hard power, the ability to coerce, grows out of a country's military or economic might (which would in no way be diminished in the case of Türkiye), soft power arises from the attractiveness of a nation's culture, political ideals, and policies. Although force may sometimes play a role, according to Joseph S. Nye, Jr.,⁵ traditional instruments of power are rarely sufficient to deal with the new dilemmas of politics, and new power resources sometimes prove more relevant. With this in mind, soft cooperative power is just as important as hard command power. If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change. If it can support institutions that make other states want to channel or limit their activities in ways the dominant state prefers, it may be spared the costly exercise of utilizing coercive or hard power. In general, power is becoming less transferable, less coercive, and less tangible. Moreover, cooperation would often be needed for small, weak states that are not fully capable of managing their domestic problems, including health issues like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not surprising that vaccine diplomacy is being labeled a 'new chapter in the

Ankara is more consistent in its preference for unilateral moves and confrontational statements instead of formalized international cooperation

and countries with less access have been in line with the emergence of the COVID-19 vaccines as a new public diplomacy instrument. Positioning itself as a regional strongman with extra-regional resolve, Türkiye also joined the intriguing vaccine diplomacy race led mainly by China, India, Russia, and the U.S. The destinations of vaccine donations delivered by the country have been consistent with Ankara's public diplomacy efforts, including developmental aid and trade-boosting activities. These activities have particularly focused on Africa and to a lesser extent the Balkans and brotherly Turkic nations. This article aims to provide insight into the 'supplementary function' of the pro bono vaccine supplies to target recipients in Türkiye's wider soft power agenda. The agenda echoes the officially declared enterprising and humanitarian foreign policy aimed at protecting the interests of the Turkish people in an unstable regional and global environment, as well as creating conditions for the sustainable peace, development, and prosperity of neighboring states and beyond. In addition, the research looks implicitly at the 'controversial relationship' of the country with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine deliveries as a manifestation of the autonomous foreign policy strategy the Turkish government has been pursuing since the first success in the parliamentary elections of the Erdoğan-led Justice and Development Party (AK Party) back in 2002 and following his ascendance as the Prime Minister and subsequently as the President.

story of soft power'⁶ or even an 'empathetic soft power.'⁷ Like other influential nations, Türkiye has also recognized the opportunity to expand the horizons of its geopolitical influence amid the ongoing pandemic.

Türkiye's donations of home-grown or imported vaccines to specific regions

COVID-19 Pandemic and Türkiye's Vaccine Policies

Türkiye has secured jabs from different suppliers with 147,416,299 doses administered in the 85-million-populous nation so far, according to the Turkish Ministry of Health.⁸ The report of 'Our World in Data,' a scientific online publication, says as of late-May 2022 this makes up 53.1 million fully vaccinated citizens or 62.9 percent of the total population.⁹ After the pandemic unfolded across the world, Chinese Sinovac's CoronaVac was the 'first-runner' in the country's vaccination campaign, which started in mid-January 2021.¹⁰ Initially, in late November 2020, Türkiye had signed a deal with China to buy 50 million doses of CoronaVac, which was soon duplicated in a +50mln request.¹¹ The country was among the very first to purchase the Chinese-produced vaccine: When the deal was made, CoronaVac had not yet been approved any-

where, even in China.¹² In the spring of 2021, Türkiye started administering German-made Pfizer/BioNTech's coronavirus shots with a total supply of up to 5 million doses, thus introducing a second vaccine in the fight against COVID-19 amid record highs of new cases.¹³ Finally, in late April 2021 Türkiye agreed with Russia on the delivery of 50 million doses of Gamaleya's Sputnik V.¹⁴ In addition, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), the sovereign wealth fund responsible for promoting the Russian vaccine abroad, said Turkish pharmaceutical firms were likely to produce Sputnik V at their plants, in another sign of long-visible Russian cooperation with NATO-member Türkiye.

Türkiye's Sputnik V move aligns with Ankara's foreign and security policy since the ascendance of Erdoğan. The vaccine deal with Russia was in line with Türkiye's complex (but significant) ties with Moscow, including the purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems, which was against the wishes of Ankara's NATO allies; President Erdoğan's contentious stance on his Belarusian counterpart Oleksandr Lukashenko, a close ally of President Vladimir Putin; Ankara's reluctance to join Western sanctions against the Kremlin in response to the protracted aggression against Ukraine; coordinated Russia-Türkiye action in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and Libya; and a long-established dependence on Moscow for energy, tourism, and trade. Ankara is more consistent in its preference for unilateral moves and confrontational statements instead of formalized international cooperation. The Erdoğan Administration's recent rejection of the preliminary NATO bids of Finland and Sweden amid their alleged support of groups Ankara deems as terrorists, namely the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the PKK's Syrian and Iraqi offshoots, and also the followers of Fetullah Gülen,¹⁵ is another manifestation of how Türkiye fiercely defends its right to pursue national-interest-based policies. At the same time, the country (also formally a candidate for EU membership) has remained a dedicated NATO ally when it comes to the bloc's peacekeeping activity, fighting terrorism, and its basic political-security agenda. Türkiye's multifaceted vaccine diplomacy is another part of Ankara walking a careful line between the West and the Kremlin.

In June 2021, Türkiye entered the homestretch in delivering its first domestically produced SARS-CoV-2 vaccine with the start of Phase III clinical trial with volunteers at Ankara City Hospital. Patriotically named Turkovac, it was developed through the collaborative efforts of scientists from Erciyes University and the Türkiye Institutes of Health Administration (TÜSEB).¹⁶ Following a long period of preparation and research, the mass production of Türkiye's coronavirus vaccine was launched in December 2021. Turkovac is the nation's first vaccine to reach the production stage starting from the cell after 50 years. The last time a vaccine was developed solely by Turkish scientists was in 1998.¹⁷ Addressing the commencement ceremony via videoconference, President Erdoğan said: "I hope Turkovac will bring auspicious outcomes for our

Turkovac has strengthened Türkiye's response to the pandemic and initially enjoyed a boom in the public interest

CoronaVac, was released to the Turkish public after receiving emergency use approval.¹⁹ At a time of new highs in daily COVID-19 cases in the country, Turkovac joined German-made Pfizer/BioNTech Comirnaty and Chinese CoronaVac jabs in the vaccine portfolio available for Turkish citizens.

Despite no data on the shot's efficacy disclosed as of yet, Türkiye is formally ranked among the rare (nine in total) nations worldwide proudly having their SARS-CoV-2 vaccines. Amid a surge in infections, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, the president of TÜSEB, and members of the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board set an example as some of the first to receive the Turkovac vaccine as a booster shot in late December 2021.²⁰ People soon flocked to hospitals to get their coronavirus jabs. The target audience for Turkovac was still unvaccinated 'hesitators' as their first dose and those vaccinated with mostly CoronaVac as a booster shot. Turkovac has strengthened Türkiye's response to the pandemic and initially enjoyed a boom in the public interest.²¹ In addition, to lend a helping hand to one of its closest allies, Türkiye took another landmark step in March 2022 with the Turkovac Phase III clinical trial and the introduction of a third dose –and the first abroad–²² in neighboring Azerbaijan, Türkiye's key ally in and out of the Caucasus. The Turkish-made vaccine was made available for Azerbaijani citizens between the ages of 18 and 59 who had previously received two doses of an inactive vaccine and those who had not been infected with COVID-19. However, data detailing the effectiveness of Turkovac's success in both countries have yet to be released. It has so far been officially approved for use in Azerbaijan and was granted WHO Emergency Use Listing (EUL) status.

The Debates on Sputnik V

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said it was not up to the Alliance to advise on what vaccines should be used, pointing out that they are “ultimately decisions that have to be taken by individual allies.”²³ On the contrary, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell hailed the purchase of the vaccine from Russia as “good news for humanity.”²⁴ The geography of Sputnik V host countries has ranged across Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the South Caucasus

(Armenia, Azerbaijan), Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Venezuela), the Middle East (Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Syria, the United Arab Emirates), and 47 more nations. On the Euro-Atlantic map Albania, Hungary, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have also approved Russia's homegrown vaccine for emergency use. Merely 60,000 doses, of which one-sixth had been donated by the UAE, were allegedly supplied to Albania.²⁵ Montenegro reported the Sputnik V delivery of 50,000 vaccines from the manufacturer itself in addition to 2,000 jabs donated by Serbia.²⁶ A total order of 200,000 doses aimed at people over the age of 65 has reportedly headed for North Macedonia.²⁷ Finally, Hungary was one of the earliest Sputnik V 'customers,' having ordered 2 million doses from the Russian manufacturer,²⁸ and even cut a deal on its local production,²⁹ which has never been translated into concrete action.

The Hungarian case has been no surprise as Moscow's relations with Budapest remain unique within the EU and NATO. In recent years, the allegedly pro-Kremlin stance of Hungary, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of the ruling Fidesz party, has aroused particular discomfort among its Western allies.³⁰ Heavy dependence on Russia for energy supplies and the similar conservative political outlook of Orbán and Putin³¹ has remained steady even since Moscow launched a war against Ukraine. Hungary not only opposed any EU sanctions on Russian hydrocarbons and Western arms shipments through its territory to Ukraine but also pioneered the Kremlin-dictated idea of paying for Russian gas in rubles.³² The fact that Budapest is the first European capital to have accepted delivery of Sputnik V, without waiting for approval from the European Medicines Agency (EMA), was merely another sign of its geopolitical loyalty to Moscow. Serbia and Moldova –two formally EU-aspiring nations– have also joined the short list of European countries who have approved Sputnik V. The Balkan nation, granted EU candidate status in 2012, has long maintained a façade of neutrality amid the growing rivalry between the West and Russia.³³ In the fight against COVID-19, offering a wider choice of vaccines to its citizens and not initially holding onto the EU and the international COVAX system for vaccine procurement, Serbia at one point had the second-fastest vaccination rate in Europe after the UK.³⁴ Meanwhile, Moldova's nominal gesture has been part of an 'appeasing' policy toward Russia, which still seeks to extend its influence over Chişinău through the separatist enclave of Transnistria and the autonomous region of Gagauzia.

In addition to the lack of European Medicines Agency authorization, which effectively barred Russians from traveling to most European capitals, Russia's controversial vaccine has also not been granted Emergency Use Listing by the WHO. The COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker funded by the McGill University Interdisciplinary Initiative in Infection and Immunity lists only 10 EUL-authorized

vaccines out of 36 available so far and approved in 197 countries in total. Had the WHO signed off on Sputnik V, the latter would be ranked 6th among the most widely recognized vaccines (following Moderna's Spikevax and ahead of Sinovac's CoronaVac) (Table 1). A study published in *The Lancet* journal has put the efficacy of the Russian vaccine on a par with those manufactured by Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech at 91.6 percent.³⁵ Until recently the official status of this SARS-CoV-2 vaccine within the WHO's EUL evaluation process was pending, with the anticipated decision date to be set "once all data is submitted and follow-up of inspection observations completed."³⁶ However, on March 16, 2022, the WHO indefinitely postponed the procedure due to the Kremlin's brutal war against Ukraine, and the sanctions leveled accordingly.³⁷ This is how Russia's hopes of expanding access to Sputnik V have been ultimately stymied.

Table 1: Rating of WHO EUL Granted SARS-CoV-2 Vaccines

	SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine	Manufactured In	Type	Approved In (Number of Countries)
1	Pfizer/BioNTech: Comirnaty	U.S./Germany	RNA	141
2	Oxford/AstraZeneca: Vaxzevria	United Kingdom	Non-Replicating Viral Vector	138
3	Janssen (Johnson & Johnson): Ad26.COV2.S	U.S.	Non-Replicating Viral Vector	108
4	Sinopharm (Beijing): Covilo	China	Inactivated	90
5	Moderna: Spikevax	U.S.	RNA	85
?	<i>Gamaleya Institute: Sputnik V</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>Non-Replicating Viral Vector</i>	<i>74</i>
6	Sinovac: CoronaVac	China	Inactivated	54
7	Serum Institute of India: Covishield (Oxford/AstraZeneca formulation)	India	Non-Replicating Viral Vector	47
8	Novavax: Nuvaxovid	U.S.	Protein Subunit	36
9	Bharat Biotech: Covaxin	India	Inactivated	14
10	Serum Institute of India: COVOVAX (Novavax formulation)	India	Protein Subunit	3

Source: Compiled by the author based on the COVID-19 Vaccine Development and Approvals Tracker's data retrieved from <https://covid19.trackvaccines.org/>.

There has always been a conspiracy over giving Moscow a geostrategic advantage with the help of Sputnik V, or as Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok described it, a "tool of hybrid war,"³⁸ fueled by Russian propaganda machinery. The 2-million-dose Sputnik V deal (of which 200,000 were delivered) even forced former Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič and Minister of Health Marek Krajčí to resign amid the government collapse that unfolded. Both had



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President of Democratic Republic of Congo Felix Tshisekedi pose for a photo as Türkiye donates 100,000 COVID-19 vaccines to the Democratic Republic of the Congo on February 20, 2022.

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secretly negotiated the vaccine purchase from Russia, which made Bratislava the second EU capital after Budapest to procure the jab even though it lacked EMA approval.³⁹ The misleading campaign went so far as to use distorted Slovak polling data to claim that 74 percent of Slovaks wanted the Sputnik V vaccine, according to the TASS Russian news agency.⁴⁰ In reality, Slovakia eventually sold –and at the same price as the initial purchase– most of the Russian Sputnik V coronavirus vaccines back to the country of origin due to the low public interest.⁴¹ Slovakia's adventure with Sputnik V, which lacked not only European but also worldwide regulatory and Slovak State Institute for Drug Control approval, remains an exemplary example of a vaccine-related political fiasco.

The relative success of Sputnik V across Europe has merely been a product of intensive public relations (PR) operations by the vaccine producer. Statistically negligible (Table 2), the portion of Sputnik V doses purchased for the populations of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia accounts for up to 10 percent. That is not the case for Hungary and Türkiye, however. Ankara's and Budapest's vaccine deals with Moscow have been rather nominal political gestures to placate Russia, a close ally of both. As Moscow failed to overcome global skepticism of its vaccine, there has been no particular evidence of the wide public use of Sputnik V in Türkiye or Hungary. Accused of being deployed abroad more as a Russian propaganda tool than out of genuine solidarity, Sputnik V also proved unpopular at home⁴²: by mid-May 2022, one and a half years into the campaign, only 73.6 million Russians of about 144

million –half of the population– have received two vaccine doses, a far smaller proportion than in most countries of the world.

Table 2: Sputnik V SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine Use in NATO Member States

Country	Population	Doses of Sputnik V Purchased	The ratio of Doses to Population
Albania	2,838,000	60,000	2.1 percent
Hungary	9,750,000	2,000,000	20.5 percent
Montenegro	621,718	52,000	8.4 percent
North Macedonia	2,083,000	200,000	9.6 percent
Türkiye	84,340,000	50,000,000	59.3 percent

Source: Compiled by the author based on the World Bank's and Reuters COVID-19 Tracker's data retrieved from <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/>.

In Türkiye, the Russian vaccine has been given little attention. President Erdoğan himself did not even mention Sputnik V alongside the two other foreign-produced vaccines available in the country in remarks on the mass production of Turkovac: “Our vaccine is a symbol of the efforts to protect our people from the pandemic in the most effective way. We will offer to our citizens Turkovac as a third choice along with the Sinovac and BioNTech vaccines. I know some of our citizens, despite all the risks, waited for our product to get vaccinated. I call on these citizens to make appointments as soon as possible and get their Turkovac jabs.”⁴³ To some extent, the Sputnik V deal was earlier ‘downplayed’ in Erdoğan’s rhetoric during his in-person Sochi meeting with President Putin on September 29, 2021. In a warm exchange after three hours of talks at a presidential residence in a Russian resort city, Putin, who broke two weeks of self-isolation to host his Turkish counterpart, advised Erdoğan to use a Russian vaccine for his next booster jab and also boasted of Sputnik V’s high antibody levels. In response, Erdoğan said he had already had a Pfizer booster jab and had an antibody level of 1,100 – to which Putin replied, “Next time then.”⁴⁴

Türkiye’s Vaccine Diplomacy in Africa

In its efforts to rise as a major player with geopolitical ambitions, Türkiye has intensively focused on Africa. The strategy of the Erdoğan Administration in Africa has been mainly a combination of friendly rhetoric and export development opportunities. In many cases, President Erdoğan himself has been voicing Türkiye’s rejection of all “contemptuous, peremptory and excessively orientalist perspectives towards the continent.” Concurrently, he has been the one to refer to the “equal partnership and win-win Türkiye-Africa coop-

eration.”⁴⁵ Within this framework, the trade between Türkiye and Africa grew in the past 20 years from \$5.4 billion to \$25.3 billion by 2020, whereas in the first 11 months of 2021 it reached \$30 billion, according to Erdoğan.⁴⁶ Today Türkiye has set an even higher target of increasing the bilateral trade volume to \$50 billion at the first stage, and then to \$75 billion.⁴⁷ Amid the coronavirus hardships in Africa, vaccine donation made it possible for Ankara to expand its soft power credentials and increase political prestige in the continent.

The strategy of the Erdoğan Administration in Africa has been mainly a combination of friendly rhetoric and export development opportunities

Ankara turned a new page in its relations with the continent by declaring 2005 the ‘Year of Africa.’ Since then, the progress made has demonstrated the vast potential for bilateral cooperation. Since 2008, Türkiye has been a strategic partner of the African Union (AU) (the former Organization of African Unity), an intergovernmental body bringing together 55 African states since 1963. This trans-continental partnership was formalized with the 2008 Türkiye-Africa Summit in İstanbul, Türkiye, and further evolved with the 2014 high-level gathering in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.⁴⁸ The 3rd summit, which was held in Türkiye in December 2021 under the motto ‘Enhanced Partnership for Common Development and Prosperity,’ has set a roadmap for Türkiye-Africa relations for 2022-2026 to cover five strategic cooperation areas. The largest to date, it was attended by 16 African heads of state and 102 ministers, including 26 top diplomats. The next Türkiye-Africa Summit is expected to be held in 2026 in a yet-to-be-determined African country.

Over the past decades, Ankara has invested heavily in developing both trade and political-diplomatic ties with the world’s poorest continent, particularly during Erdoğan’s rule. During his term as prime minister, the Turkish leader has so far paid 41 visits to 31 African states.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the number of Turkish embassies in Africa, which was 12 in 2005, increased to 42 by 2021. In the 2000s, one could count only 10 embassies of African countries in Ankara. That number has now reached 37 in 2022. Furthermore, the activities of Turkish organizations such as Maarif Foundation schools, Yunus Emre Cultural Centers, the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) have been strengthening the inter-societal bridges with the continent. Türkiye-Africa cooperation extends to what is being done with the African Union multilaterally and with individual African countries at the bilateral level.

Furthermore, Africa has been one of the main destinations for the Turkish vaccine. The ‘vaccine factor’ in Türkiye’s African strategy has echoed its no-

Türkiye has so far donated 4.87 million doses, including its national vaccine Turkovac, to 11 African countries since late February of this year

“The vaccine, our most effective weapon against the virus, is perceived to be a privilege for the countries from the ‘rich club,’ while there are still billions of people who have not had access to it yet.”⁵⁰ Illustratively, he announced at the latest Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit that 15 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines would be gradually donated to Africa as the cases were rapidly rising and vaccination rates were low. In line with this public pledge amid “global injustice in access to COVID-19 vaccines and the grievances suffered by Africa,” Türkiye has so far donated 4.87 million doses, including its national vaccine Turkovac, to 11 African countries since late February of this year. However, things happen for a reason, which in this case is to support the ambitious soft power agenda of Türkiye to make its military, political and economic bonds with Africa a quickly blossoming reality.

Türkiye’s increased leverage in Africa parallels its ambitions to deepen its defense sector presence in the continent. The country has already had a military base in Somalia and mine-clearing vehicles in Togo, while Morocco and Tunisia reportedly accepted their first delivery of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 combat drones in September 2020.⁵¹ Angola became the latest to express interest in the world-famous unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) during President Erdoğan’s first visit to this country in October 2021. Earlier in August, Türkiye also cut a military cooperation deal with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to provide war-torn Addis Ababa with Bayraktar TB2s.⁵² According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, rivals Morocco and Algeria have been the two largest arms importers in the region per se, whereas Ethiopia has been among the top five in sub-Saharan Africa along with Angola, Nigeria, Mali, and Botswana. Meanwhile, Russia was the largest supplier to Africa from 2017-2021, accounting for 44 percent of major arms imports to the region, followed by the U.S. (17.0 percent), China (10.0 percent), and France (6.1 percent).⁵³ The rapidly increasing interest in Turkish UAVs among African countries, looking to buy up affordable military hardware with high-profile performance, has paved the way for Türkiye to break into the African arms market.

Africa, which is known for its abundant natural resources, rapidly increasing population, and free markets, has become a battleground for competing players, including China, India, Brazil, and the Gulf states.⁵⁴ In addition, the continent has gained strategic value for Türkiye, which is seeking to expand

its geopolitical influence, gain allies, and increase trade and investment beyond neighboring countries. This parallels President Erdoğan's declared goal of tripling the annual trade volume with Africa to \$75 billion in the coming years, and also Türkiye's 2053 transportation and logistics master plan to turn the country into the logistics superpower of vast geography stretching from London to Beijing, from Siberia to South Africa. Türkiye seeks to establish new markets for its manufactured goods (generally of a higher quality than Chinese products and more competitive than European ones in terms of price) and have its construction companies further engaged in local infrastructure projects.⁵⁵

Wider Outreach of Türkiye's Vaccine Diplomacy

Türkiye has raised its profile as a generous nation over the past two decades through its extensive humanitarian efforts. According to the latest Global Humanitarian Assistance Report by the UK-based Development Initiatives,⁵⁶ the country ranks 2nd (after the U.S.) among the largest public donors of humanitarian assistance worldwide, with more than \$8 billion allocated in 2020. Türkiye also continues to spend the largest share of gross national income on international humanitarian aid (0.98 percent). Its very special place in the global financing landscape for humanitarian response keeps up with the enterprising and humanitarian foreign policy Türkiye has formally declared. The country has long advocated for global solidarity against the COVID-19 pandemic, and President Erdoğan has repeatedly called for fairness and equality in the distribution of vaccines. In the fight against the pandemic, Türkiye has so far donated 6.3 million doses of vaccines to 19 countries in total. Apart from the 11 African nations, the recipient countries of donations –mostly of Chinese CoronaVacF– range across Türkiye-recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Montenegro, Moldova, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and North Macedonia.⁵⁷ The TRNC received the most vaccines, 543,330 doses, ahead of Uzbekistan, which was given 200,000 doses.

Türkiye's vaccine aid recipients were purposefully selected as Ankara has been seeking to expand its geopolitical leverage in Eurasia. That is clear in relation to the TRNC, which remains solely recognized by and highly dependent on Türkiye. The vaccine donation to the disputed territory with its 300,000 residents has been accompanied by medical supplies and food aid, in addition to Türkiye's massive infrastructure investments and efforts to revitalize the TRNC's economy.⁵⁸ Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan are part of a Turkic pool of nations amid Türkiye's ambitions to exert considerable influence in Central Asia, claiming common ethnic and linguistic ties.⁵⁹ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are likely to be viewed as



Türkiye succeeded in preserving its status as one of the most generous donor countries with its contributions accounting for nearly a quarter of global humanitarian aid.

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‘gateways’ to the greater Balkan region with their enormous trade and logistics potential.⁶⁰ Moldova is of geostrategic interest as it lies in the Black Sea basin and hosts the Gagauzia small autonomous region mainly populated by Orthodox Christian Turkic people.⁶¹ These nations neither enjoy membership in the EU nor have strong ties with the other Eurasian geopolitical heavyweights –Russia and China (like Serbia in the Balkans or Kazakhstan in Central Asia). This provides Türkiye with a window of opportunity to grow as an alternative big power.

The World Is Bigger than Five

Türkiye’s vaccine diplomacy dovetails the nation’s resolve to further push for the UN Security Council reform, allegedly in the collective interest of all member states and the United Nations system as a whole. This long-lobbied ambition advocating fair and equitable regional representation is wrapped up in President Erdoğan’s famous manifesto “The World is Bigger than Five.” The Turkish leader himself has been calling for the reform since 2012 when he was prime minister amid the UNSC impotence to reach an agreement on how to respond to the bloody conflict in Syria.⁶² Still, Ankara stands against the ‘monopoly’ of the five UNSC permanent members having veto power –the U.S., the UK, Russia, France, and China– to bear primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The idea systematically articulated by Erdoğan is that a new global security architecture, which would serve all of humanity instead of prioritizing the interests of the five nations that emerged victorious from World War II, should be established.⁶³ With this in mind, Türkiye has been searching for like-minded ‘enthusiasts’ from across different regional groups to join forces with in this UNSC reform debate.

The African continent has been definitely among the top target regions for Türkiye in its quest for fair and balanced world order. Speaking at the 3rd Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit, President Erdoğan said it has been a grave injustice that Africa with its population of 1.3 billion does not have a say or vote at the UN Security Council: “We maintain the struggle we are putting up under ‘the world is bigger than five’ motto not just for ourselves but also for our African brothers and sisters. I believe that we should join forces for Africa to be duly represented at the Security Council.”⁶⁴ This is in line with the African Union’s proposal, introduced to the UN General Assembly back in 2005, on increasing the UNSC membership in both the permanent and non-permanent categories (from 15 to 26 in total), and also granting Africa two permanent and five non-permanent seats.⁶⁵ In the same address, the Turkish leader drew a parallel with the unjust response of humanity to the COVID-19 pandemic, having particularly denounced the “shameful fact” that only 6 percent of the African population had been vaccinated by the end of 2021. This echoes the commitment of Ankara to push for an “unavoidable reality” of reforming the UN Security Council amid the discrepancies in the global system.

Meanwhile, out of the top four vaccine-producing countries, three are UNSC permanent members –the U.S., the UK, and China. If one counts Russia with its Sputnik V, which has struggled to gain mass acceptance in and out of the country, the UN Security Council (without France) appears almost at full strength. India, another key vaccine manufacturing nation, is part of the Group of Four (G-4) along with Brazil, Germany, and Japan, all of whom are aspiring to become UNSC permanent members. The G-4 nations lobby for increasing the council’s composition from 15 to 25 by adding six permanent and four non-permanent members.⁶⁶ Türkiye is part of the 12-strong group of UN member states known as Uniting for Consensus (UfC), also bringing together Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Italy, Malta, Mexico, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea, San Marino, and Spain. The UfC agenda seeks equitable representation for African countries and also a greater voice for other developing regions, small states, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the UN Security Council.⁶⁷ In some way, Türkiye has sought to seize the opportunity to stand on the same level as the global and regional powers with its locally-made COVID-19 vaccines, as the effective response to the pandemic has become the new currency.

Apparently, with its vaccine diplomacy, Türkiye *inter alia* stands as both a good advocate for the weak and also as a regional heavyweight with beyond-regional

With its vaccine diplomacy, Türkiye *inter alia* stands as both a good advocate for the weak and also as a regional heavyweight with beyond-regional ambitions

Despite it having failed to emerge as an important vaccine producer, Türkiye succeeded in preserving its status as one of the most generous countries with its donor contributions accounting for nearly a quarter of global humanitarian aid

ambitions. This is in line with President Erdoğan's pledge to the nation in his 2022 new year message,⁶⁸ promising to place the "great and powerful Türkiye" among the top 10 economies in the world and to ensure secure, peaceful, happy, and prosperous days for its 85 million citizens. These goals have been dedicated largely to the centenary of the Turkish Republic, reflecting sentiment in the proclamation in 1923

heralding the birth of modern Türkiye from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. Likewise, preparations are already underway to build the Türkiye of 2053 and 2071, critical anniversaries for Turkish history, with an eye on success in political, military, and economic efforts spanning a large area from Syria and Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.⁶⁹ To get the full picture, the recent national and international 'rebrand' from the well-known English name *Turkey* to the historic *Türkiye* is a significant example of the government's grand plan. The move will better reflect the culture, civilization, and values of the Turkish people, according to President Erdoğan,⁷⁰ and has become another pillar of Ankara's vision to boost its well-deserved standing in the world, which is *more than five*.

Conclusion

Public health has emerged as a key issue of discourse among states since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in late 2019. As a result, the production and distribution of vaccines to combat COVID-19 have risen as a brand-new tool for global and regional actors to expand their soft power outreach. The COVID-19 crisis has therefore given birth to unconventional international diplomacy, with multiple nations promoting their homegrown SARS-CoV-2 vaccines abroad through tactical activism, political generosity, and even misleading PR campaigns. Likewise, Türkiye has not shied away from the race for global public health leadership. Its rather politicized decision to purchase Russian-made Sputnik V vaccines, whose deployment proved controversial in Europe and beyond, has highlighted the long coexistence of the multilateral Euro-Atlantic commitments of Türkiye and its efforts to maintain and increase its stake in the international system. In its vaccine diplomacy, Türkiye has remained consistent in pursuing a proactive multifaceted policy, in which the only criteria for a move to be legitimate would be matching the country's national interests. This is how the autonomous big politics player, the self-image of which has flourished under the rule of Erdoğan, has become

an important explanatory variable in elucidating Ankara's decision-making on the 'Freedom to Choose' principle. On the other hand, the undisputed regional heavyweight with far-reaching geopolitical ambitions, Türkiye has managed to consolidate its strength in the international arena through both skillful balancing in terms of vaccine deals and also its nicely packed humanitarian efforts. Delivering Turkovac, its first domestically developed vaccine in decades, along with the jabs procured from abroad to the regions that were hit the most by the pandemic helped grow Türkiye's audience and presence worldwide. Despite it having failed to emerge as an important vaccine producer, Türkiye succeeded in preserving its status as one of the most generous countries with its donor contributions accounting for nearly a quarter of global humanitarian aid. This is very much in line with Ankara seeking to expand through soft power via its geopolitical influence, particularly in the African continent, where it has been fostering new horizons of military-political and trade-economic discourse. ■

Endnotes

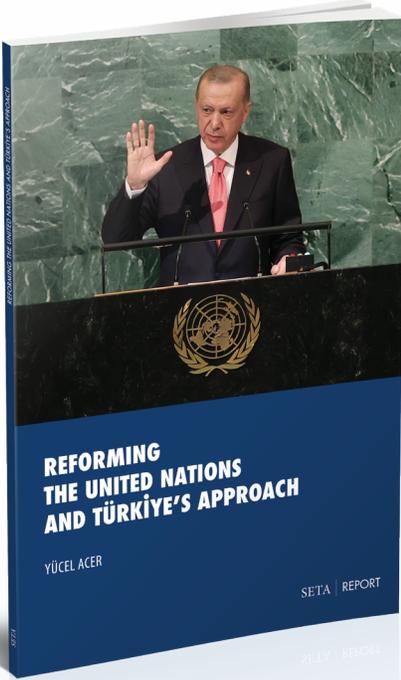
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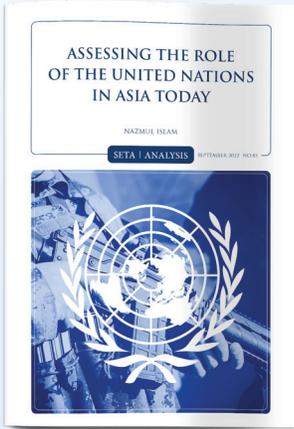
Reforming the United Nations and Türkiye's Approach

Yücel Acer

The ongoing reform efforts have made some modest achievements but have so far failed on major issues, such as reforming the Security Council in terms of membership and voting. Türkiye feels obliged to participate in discussions and contribute to reform efforts and proposals toward better global governance.



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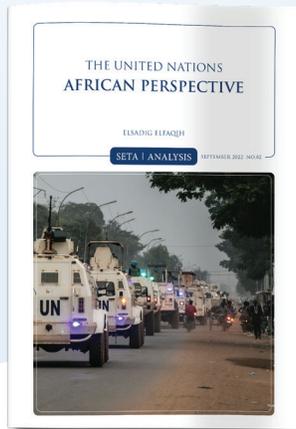


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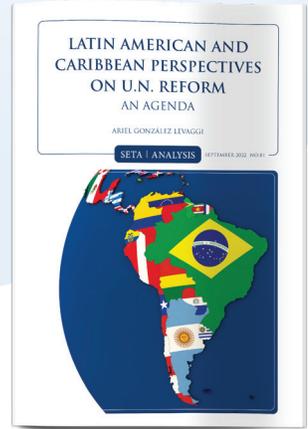


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