

## Politics of Covid-19: A Study of the Role of the Global Powers in Combatting the Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic, having convincingly proved its deadliness, has become the most significant global calamity experienced to date in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Covid-19 virus outbreak besides affecting the health of people across the world seriously has also badly disrupted the economies of all countries, and the livelihoods of their citizens. The most recent data from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) has indicated that most of the lower to upper-middle-income countries have been significantly impacted by the rampaging COVID-19 pandemic. This has prompted a concerted effort by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the major world powers to combat the spread of the Covid-19 global pandemic. In combating this pandemic, the world powers have a responsibility to collaborate with the WHO, as they wield a lot of power in the decision-making process at a global level. The aim of this study is to examine the international cooperation that has been taken forward to combat the 'Covid-19' pandemic in the context of management of major calamities by the global powers. The study focuses on the 18-month period from December 2019 when the pandemic first broke out, to June 2021. The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from the reports and documents of involved organizations and the media. The leaders and people of the USA and some Western countries did not provide adequate support to contain the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the early stages. They used the disparaging term 'Chinese Virus' to refer to the deadly virus, which President Trump wholly underestimated and treated as a minor irritant. Further, avoidable mass gatherings contributed to repeated outbreaks of the virus, which spread from country to country. Mass rallies were held protesting the lockdowns by raising the issues of liberal democracy and individual freedom. Although several high-income Western countries developed vaccines to arrest the pandemic, the distribution of vaccines was not done in a fair and equitable manner. The WHO policy on the distribution of vaccines was undermined due to the "Vaccine Politics" of the world powers. The other aspect of Covid-19 politics was that the pandemic had given rise to a 'cold war' between the major Western powers and the burgeoning Chinese power and influence at the global level. Finally, it must be understood that the global cooperation required to combat the Covid-19 pandemic was badly hampered due to the politicization of the programs planned for this purpose during the first year of the pandemic.

### 1. Introduction

The USA, UK, and some Western European countries have been mainly involved in managing the conflicts, political issues, and crisis situations arising at the global level in the post-World War II era. During this era, the contemporary balance of power in International Relations was controlled by two major power blocs that emerged on the world political stage then. The capitalist

power bloc headed by the USA and the socialist power bloc headed by Soviet Russia played significant roles in addressing prickly global issues. Much of the time, their approaches were mutually antagonistic in dealing with international issues. However, there were some rare occasions when both power blocks worked together cooperatively and with mutual understanding. That scenario changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its socialist republics in 1990. Since then, the USA and the Western capitalist power bloc have played an important and leading role in global politics. Washington emerged as the key decision-maker in the spheres of politics, military strategy, economics, global development and environmental issues. That is clearly evident from the fact that Washington was able to easily influence the direction and decisions of the United Nations and the various UN bodies over the last three decades. The high-income countries also formed a group known as the "G7", which has commanded a lot of power in terms of decision-making in world political, economic, and social affairs. "G7" includes seven of the higher-income countries in the world, including three from Western Europe. However, it must be mentioned here that the Russian Federation has regained a significant amount of its earlier power under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The People's Republic of China has also emerged as an economic power after following Deng Xiaoping's free economic policy from 1978. The prospect of China becoming a global economic giant is seen as a huge threat by the USA and so this matter has received more attention in recent decision making and in the formulation of its foreign policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China has adopted an aggressive approach in dealing with the developing and less developed countries in the Asian and African regions in order to successfully implement its multi-strategy "Belt and Road" project. Chinese strategy has been to provide more loans and development assistance to the poorer nations. Therefore, the influence that China wields is facilitated by providing soft skills to the less developed countries. This has enabled it to form a new global power bloc that can compete against the power of the industrialized western capitalist countries. In short, Russia has been emerging as a world power again, with China as an alternative global power as countervailing forces against the "Western Bloc." Today, all these forces are involved in the political, social, and economic affairs of the world and in competition with each other.

The global community faced an unprecedented challenge near the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There was an outbreak of the Corona Virus or "Covid-19" disease, which spread rapidly and was soon recognized as a global pandemic by WHO. It threatened the survival of human beings and showed signs of going out of control by finding its way to all countries around the globe. The Covid-19 pandemic was first reported in Wuhan Province in China at the beginning of December 2019, and then it became a global pandemic with several outbreaks in the Western European countries as well as in the USA, during the first quarter of 2020. Then, it spread to the other corners of the world within a short period, resulting in infections to millions of human beings and causing the death of large numbers. The imposition of lockdowns led to an economic downturn everywhere due to the shutting down of commercial activities. Millions of others lost their livelihood as well and social life was completely disrupted all across the world. A rapidly increasing death toll was reported daily, and millions of people tested positive for the virus. Because of this pandemic, hospitals in the developed and developing countries overflowed with patients, and the health services were overwhelmed. The World Health Organization (WHO) did its part to control the Covid-19 pandemic by issuing warnings and publishing health guidelines to assist the affected countries. The WHO also kept track of the disease and maintained statistics. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic became rather politicized in certain aspects rather than being dealt with as a dangerous pandemic that should be defeated by the concerted efforts of all the people.

## **2. Research Problem**

During the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the USA and Western European countries were badly affected compared to other areas. These were industrialized countries with high personal incomes. The WHO and epidemiologists were concerned about preventing the spread of the Covid-19 virus, which had turned out to be the biggest health threat to human beings in recent global history. In order to halt the spread of the virus further, the WHO emphasized the importance of good health practices that should be followed by people. It took the necessary measures to develop a vaccine against the virus and distribute it on a fair and equitable basis throughout the world. During the first wave of the pandemic, the Western European countries had suffered badly as they were unprepared to cope with the rapid spread of Covid-19. Hence, they felt a great need to protect their citizen's health against the pandemic. Further, these high-income industrialized Western countries were very well equipped to develop a vaccine against the Covid-19 virus. However, a second outbreak of the pandemic occurred in the other parts of the world soon after that. Therefore, a fair doubt arises as to whether the world powers had acted adequately to combat the pandemic.

## **3. Aim of this paper**

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of the global powers in collaborating with the WHO to combat the ravages of the 'Covid-19' pandemic. It has focused greater attention on the time period of the first and second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which lasted 18 months from December 2019 to June 2021.

#### **4. Data, Data Collection and Data Analysis**

This research is based entirely on secondary data, which was collected from recent reports published by the WHO and relevant institutions, other published articles, electronic media reports, websites, as well as printed media of the contemporary period. The method of descriptive analysis was used to analyze the collected data.

#### **5. The Role of the WHO in controlling the Covid-19 pandemic**

The World Health Organization (WHO) was established in 1948 as a special agency of the UN to coordinate the international response to infectious disease outbreaks at the global level. In the interest of keeping up with the latest developments, the WHO revised the International Health Regulations in 2005. The intention of the WHO was to lay the groundwork for a rapid and effective response to protect public health in global pandemic situations (Harman, 2012). It plays a key role by collaborating with all intergovernmental organizations involved in tackling pandemics and serves as the only source of legal authority. The core functions of the WHO as related to pandemic prevention and control include the following activities: supporting the Member States to develop the national capacity to respond to pandemics, supporting training programs, coordinating with the Member States for pandemic and seasonal influenza preparedness and response, developing guidelines, and strengthening biosafety and biosecurity (WHO, 2020).

In the recent past, the WHO had faced a number of emergency situations such as an outbreak of pandemics at the regional level. For example, some researchers have noted that the recent outbreak of Ebola viral infection first emerged in the 1970s in the African Region. Likewise, the first human cases of Zika virus infection can be traced back to the 1950s, with a major Zika pandemic unfolding over the past few years. Corona-viruses are not strangers either. The first cases in humans were identified in the 1960s, with variants appearing as SARS in 2003, Swine flu (H1N1) in 2009, MERS in 2012, and the latest, as COVID-19 (Khubchandani J., Jordan R.T., & Young T., 2020). During those situations the WHO had responded adequately and managed to control the outbreaks of those diseases and protect public health at a global level satisfactorily. However, there were also many critics who commented adversely on the weak role played by the WHO in pandemic prevention (Greer S., King E.J., Fonseca E.M., & Santos A.P., 2021).

In the matter of preventing pandemics, the role of the WHO can be described as follows. First, the organization shares scientific information and provides guidance to governments and the public on how to deal with the pandemic. Issuing guidance to the public is the most important task because the coronavirus spreads mainly through the air in the form of fine droplets. Therefore, the WHO issued appropriate public health safety guidelines to deal with these risks as a key strategy to prevent and mitigate the outbreak of this pandemic. The most important precautions advocated by the WHO were to wear face masks and maintain physical distancing between people in public places and crowded environments while also limiting the movement of people from affected areas to uninfected areas (WHO, 2019).

The second role of WHO was to assist and motivate the developed countries to research and produce a vaccine to confer immunity to humans against the Covid-19 virus. In order to achieve the second objective WHO implemented a collaboration program with the help of other organizations. WHO then pointed out that developing a vaccine against Covid-19 is the most pressing challenge of our time – and nobody wins the race until everyone wins (WHO, 2019 i). As for the vaccine distribution, WHO stressed that it should be conducted fairly, equitably, and efficiently across the globe. WHO paid special attention to the health aspects of the poor communities in the less developed countries of the world. Equitable access to an effective vaccine, while paying special attention to protecting healthcare workers and those most at risk was the only way to mitigate the public health and economic impact of the pandemic. WHO engaged with the COVAX program to administer the development and distribution of a vaccine with the help of UNICEF and some other bodies. COVAX was co-led by Gavi, Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and WHO. Its aim was to accelerate the development and manufacture of Covid-19 vaccines and to ensure fair and equitable access to every country in the world. In order to fulfill this COVAX objective, doses were to be made available for at least 20% of the population of every country, by producing a diverse and actively managed portfolio of vaccines. Necessary action was taken to deliver the vaccines as soon as they were prepared, in order to end the acute phase of the pandemic and help to rebuild the weakened economies (WHO, 2019 ii).

#### **6. The role of the global powers in mitigating the Covid-19 pandemic**

In order to prevent a fresh outbreak of the pandemic WHO stressed the importance of following public health measures such as wearing a face mask and observing physical distancing whenever moving in a public place and avoiding gatherings. The governments of many countries urged their public to observe those health measures. For example, China, New Zealand, and Australia, which earnestly required their citizens to follow strict health practices experienced a lesser impact from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some Western countries exhibited a careless attitude in terms of following safe health practices. The most lamentable incidents were reported from the USA during the tenure of President Donald Trump. The US President lightly dismissed the Covid-19 pandemic as an infection that was not any more serious than the common cold and further, he did not consider it important to wear a face mask (BBC, 2020). President Trump's policy on the Covid-19 disease was influenced by his foreign policy on China. During the pandemic period, Sino-US relations had become strained as the trade war between the two countries had

intensified and was turning acrimonious. President Trump would refer to the Covid-19 virus as the “Chinese Virus” during his public appearances across the country, especially after his US presidential election campaign had started. The Washington Post reported Trump’s attitude as follows – “A single word scrawled in black marker stood out among the prepared remarks President Trump planned to deliver during Thursday’s White House press briefing on the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic. In the president’s notes, “*Corona*” had been crossed out and replaced with “*Chinese*” (Chiu, 2020).

In the matter of politicization of the Covid-19 pandemic, US President Trump played a starring role in blaming China by always stressing that China should be held fully responsible for giving rise to the pandemic. In addition, the US President tried to start a campaign of hate politics targeting China by fomenting ‘American Nationalism’ among his supporters. First, the extreme nationalist policy of Trump gave rise to a hate relationship between Washington and Beijing, which led to the build-up of an anti-China mania that he believed would favor him in his election campaign to be conducted in November 2019. Second, the USA tried to build an anti-China ideology among the rest of the world. President Trump’s attitude was highly criticized by some scholars.

“It’s racist and it creates xenophobia,” Harvey Dong, a lecturer in Asian American and Asian diaspora studies at the University of California in Berkeley, told The Washington Post. “It’s a very dangerous situation” (Chiu, 2020).

The rapidly growing economy of China at the global level had always proved to be a huge headache to Washington. Therefore, President Trump used the Chinese origin of the Coronavirus pandemic to advance his national and international political agenda while destroying China’s prestige among the global community. A notable development must be mentioned here, and that was the US’s withdrawal from the WHO after President Trump accused the WHO of playing a political role and misleading the USA on the Covid-19 pandemic (Sabbagh & Stewart, 2020).

The other significant trend reported from the USA and many Western European countries was the practice of freely violating Covid-19 preventive health practices by the people. The governments of many affected countries had locked down the entire country or a few selected areas to prevent the public movement of people to check the spread of the virus. However, several protest movements emerged in certain countries across the world protesting the imposition of lockdowns and other health practices. People even refused to wear face masks in public areas in certain parts of the USA and Europe. Several mass rallies were conducted against their governments’ decision on lockdowns and other health practices. These protests took place in several European countries, including Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom as well as the United States of America on several occasions in 2020 and 2021. The protesters charged that the decisions of their governments violated their human rights and constitutional rights on the freedom of movement, besides hindering their economic activities. Meagan reported on the situation in the USA as,

“Protesters, many without face masks, opposed the shelter-in-place orders in their states for various reasons. Many said they want businesses reopened so they can go back to work. Many others displayed pro-Trump banners, signs, and MAGA hats” (Meagan, 2020).

Although the Police did arrest protesters in many European cities, the situation was more volatile in some cities. Leading news agency “France 24” reported the angry behavior of protesters in the cities as follows:

“Demonstrators took to the streets in several European cities on Saturday to protest the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, and clashes between demonstrators and police erupted in the German city of Kassel, as authorities tried to grapple with the third coronavirus wave” (France 24, 21 March 2021).

Another media team reported the situation in the United Kingdom, describing how people protested by adopting a sarcastic approach towards the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The first protests against the mandatory national lockdown in the United Kingdom took place in April 2020, and these extended into the following month before abating as lockdown restrictions were gradually eased. As local area lockdown measures were reintroduced towards the end of summer, followed by stricter national lockdown measures, there was a resurgence of anti-lockdown protests across the country beginning from September 2020. More than 55 protesters had been arrested during those events as of October 2020. Some protesters claimed that COVID-19 was a hoax, and many refused to wear masks or practice social distancing” (Huff Post, 2020).

The rationale behind the anti-lockdown demonstrations was based on the concepts of fundamental rights and human rights that are enshrined in the national constitutions. The Western Liberal democrats believe these rights confer unfettered freedom to people to engage in political, economic, and social activities. Most of those rallies had been organized by civil society groups and the Liberal social organizations whose avowed policy was to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens in their societies (BBC News, 2021 i).

Although the pandemic was spreading fast in Germany, the protests were held as their aim was to object to the violation of the constitution by the country's lockdown measures. BBC news agency reported from Germany that the people were more concerned about the freedom of their rights vested in the constitution rather than in arresting the spread of the pandemic.

"Since April 2020 numerous protests were held in several German cities against government policies intended to control the COVID-19 pandemic. A protest in Berlin that was held on 29 August was estimated by the authorities to have drawn 38,000 participants. Many of the protests in Germany, like the one held on 29 August, were organized by a group calling itself *Querdenken 711*, based in Stuttgart. This group considers the German corona restrictions to be disproportionate to the risks, but its main objective is to ensure the violation of nine articles of the German Constitution by the measures imposed by the government to deal with the corona pandemic (BBC News, 2020 ii).

Mass gatherings that disregarded health practices were reported not only in Europe but also in Asia. Media reported that mass rallies had been organized for state elections in India, with religious festivals also being conducted throughout the country with the participation of large gatherings. All this was brought to a stop when the second wave of the pandemic began its onslaught in April 2021. The critics blamed the ruling government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that allowed these events to take place without considering the implications they had for the spread of the pandemic in crowded Indian cities.

### 7. The attitude of high-income countries on developing a vaccine against the pandemic

Another important aim of the WHO was to motivate the world's most developed countries to produce a vaccine that would confer immunity to humans against the Covid-19 virus. A number of industrialized countries conducted experiments and development work to complete that task. Finally, some pharmaceutical companies in the European Union and the USA were able to produce a few vaccines, often after conducting joint programs. China and Russia too produced three vaccines after conducting their own research. For example, Russia produced the first Covid-19 vaccine, and it was approved by Russia's national medical authority on 11 August 2020 (Reuters, 2020).

Although a number of vaccines were available for emergency use, the WHO approved only a few vaccines for public use in the first round. Among the WHO-approved vaccines were 'Pfizer BioNTech', 'Oxford-Astra Zeneca' and 'Moderna', which were used in the first round of the immunization program. These vaccines were produced through collaborative efforts by the USA, UK, Germany, Sweden, and Belgium. The vaccine made by 'Johnson & Johnson' in the USA was utilized for its domestic vaccination program by USA. In the beginning, WHO did not approve the 'Sinovac' and 'Sinopharm' vaccines from China and 'Sputnik-V' from Russia. The WHO pointed out that complete clinical experimental reports on the effectiveness of the Chinese and Russian vaccinations were not available. Anyway, in June 2021 the WHO approved the Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines for emergency use (WHO, 2021).

Table 1: Effectiveness of Various Covid-19 Vaccines

Vaccine	Country	Effectiveness %
Pfizer/ BioNTech	USA + Germany	95
Moderna	USA	95
Oxford/AstraZeneca	UK + Sweden	70
Johnson & Johnson	USA	66
Sinovac	China	50
Gamaleya (Sputnik)	Russia	92
Sinopharm	China	79

Source: Bloomberg Vaccine Tracker [online] downloaded from <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-vaccine-tracker-global-distribution/>

However, the major challenge faced by the WHO was to ensure the fair and equitable supply of vaccines to each and every country in the world. The WHO pointed out that the distribution of the vaccines should be done equitably among the developed as well as developing countries. The WHO was particularly concerned about the poorest countries in the African Sub-Saharan region, where a majority of the population faced economic difficulties and suffered malnutrition. It has been estimated that over 70% of global poverty is concentrated in the African Region (Tong, 2020). WHO then decided to distribute doses to vaccinate 20% of the population of all developing countries under the COVAX program (WHO, 2019 ii). Beyond that, every country was to be provided with the opportunity to buy the necessary number of doses from the vaccine manufacturers in the producing countries.

### 8. Discussion on the role of the global powers in fighting the pandemic

This study aims to examine the contributory role of the world powers towards mitigating the Covid-19 pandemic. Two aspects of the cooperation needed to mitigate the pandemic have to be examined. One is the role played by world powers to enforce the public health measures required to prevent the spread of the disease. The other is the role played by world powers to develop an

effective vaccine and distribute it in a fair and equitable manner throughout the world to stop the pandemic. It could be clearly seen that the attitudes of the leaders and people of some countries were not at all conducive towards fighting this global pandemic effectively. Many leaders and some people in these countries refused to follow the safety health practices and tended to treat this matter lightly. They were more interested in doing politics than in fighting this global pandemic. This usually resulted in that country being besieged by a second wave of the pandemic. According to the statistics, many countries were able to manage the first and second waves of the pandemic, which lasted from December 2019 to May 2021. For example, although the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic began in Wuhan city in Hubei Province, China, they managed to bring it under control and keep the death toll low compared to some Western European countries and the USA. The Chinese government implemented a number of preventive measures such as locking down the country, getting the people to maintain social distancing, and practicing other safety health measures. The Chinese Government’s attitude was strict and cautious towards the pandemic. Further, many countries followed the WHO guidelines as safety measures for controlling the disease. Meanwhile, those countries that disregarded the health practices recommended by the WHO faced bad experiences, such as new outbreaks of the disease in other, hitherto unaffected areas. The data in Table 2 indicate the pandemic situation in selected countries.

Table 2: Covid-19 Positive Cases and Death Toll up to 20 June 2021

COUNTRY	Covid-19 POSITIVE CASES	Covid-19 DEATHS
USA	33175399	595591
Brazil	17628588	493693
India	29762793	383490
France	5643756	109743
Germany	3720031	90270
United Kingdom	4600627	127945
Italy	4249755	127190
China	117051	5343

Source: WHO [online] downloaded from <https://covid19.who.int/table>

According to Table 02, the highest Covid-19 positive cases and death tolls were reported from the USA, Brazil and India, and some European Union members. According to the available information, some of these countries had violated the prevention measures on a large scale. Frequent public gatherings were reported from the USA, Europe, Brazil, and India where the crowds had not maintained social distancing or worn face masks. In India especially, the second wave of the corona pandemic proved to be a national disaster. The failure to follow physical health practices had resulted in the rapid spread of the pandemic in some European countries as well as the USA. Anti-lockdown demonstrations were held in the USA and some European countries that were supposedly aimed at protecting individual freedoms and maintaining a five-star liberal democracy. Anyway, there is no question the prolonged lockdown process affected large numbers of people seriously by not allowing them to pursue their livelihood and other income-generating activities. This had affected not only the individuals but also the entire economy of countries. Table 03 presents the sectoral impacts on the economy caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 3: Sectoral Impacts on the Economy caused by Covid-19 pandemic in 2020

Sector	Impact Expressed as Percentage Drop
World Trade	9.2%
Remittances	7%
FDI Follow-ups	42%
World Tourism	72%

Sources: UNCTAD (2021); UNWTO (2020); WTO (2020)

The anti-lockdown demonstrators raised issues about the restrictions on individual freedom, economic activities, and freedom of movement. But those anti-lockdown demonstrations would have been influenced at the individual level as well as at the collective level in the context of human security in a society during a pandemic era. The pandemic situation also raises a number of questions on Western democratic politics in terms of values and practices. Can Liberal democratic theories on individual freedom be applied in a pandemic situation at the risk of jeopardizing public health? Can the right to participate in mass gatherings in public places be justified in the context of the global pandemic? If so, how far can the values of liberal democracy be justified in the Covid-19 pandemic era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Did the governments of liberal democratic countries violate their constitutions by enforcing rules and regulations according to the WHO and epidemiologists in order to mitigate the effects of the virus in the affected countries?

For the answers and justification of the answers to these questions and issues, scholars will have to re-contextualize the concept of “Democratic Freedom and Rights” in the scenario of a raging Covid-19 pandemic.

**9. Politics of Administering the Covid-19 Vaccine**

The second important aspect was the administration of vaccines around the world. Although the WHO pleaded for the fair and equitable distribution of vaccine doses across the globe, the position of the developed countries in connection with vaccine distribution was unfair and biased. During the first 18 months, the USA and Western European countries took steps to buy the required doses and vaccinate their population on a large scale. The USA stressed that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine would be limited for local use only and not be exported. Due to the great demand for vaccines in the developed Western countries, there was a huge bottleneck in the supply of vaccines by the pharmaceutical companies that are mostly located in the European Union. In the distribution of millions of doses of vaccine, there seem to be wide disparities between the developed and developing countries of the world. The whole process appears to be influenced by power politics. The highly developed western countries have purchased and stockpiled vaccines on a large scale that is more than enough to meet their health needs. For example, the UK has purchased a number of vaccine doses that exceed the actual quantity required by the UK. According to media reports,

“The British media have reported that the UK has ordered 517 million doses though it requires only around 160 million doses to vaccinate all adults and give them booster jabs too in the autumn, as planned” (Don Manu, 2021).

In June, international media reported that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa had expressed his strong disapproval of the redundant vaccine stockpiling policy of the world powers (Rupavahini Sivu Desa, 2021).

Likewise, the high-income countries could purchase the most effective vaccines (according to the efficiency of the vaccine) directly from the producers without any difficulty. In connection with purchasing the vaccine doses, a conflict had arisen between the Western European countries and the suppliers in respect of their priorities. The tension between the UK and the European Union over the supply of vaccines arose in March 2021 in the wake of the UK’s exit from the EU in 2020 (The Wall Street Journal, 21 March 2021). However, it was confirmed that the high-income and upper-middle-income countries had secured more vaccine doses than the lower-middle-income and low-income countries. According to Chart 01, it can be seen that there are extreme disparities between the quantities of purchased vaccine doses available for the adult populations of higher-income countries and the adult populations of the lower-income countries. Richer countries have far more vaccine doses than they actually need whereas the poorer countries only have access to a much smaller number of vaccine doses than they need to protect their populations.

Table 4: Vaccine Doses Purchased by Income Level Compared to Share of Global adult Population (Up to 15 March 2021)

Income Level of the Countries	Percentage of Global Adult Population (above 18 years) %	Percentage of doses purchased
High income	19%	54%
Upper middle income	37%	18%
Lower middle income	37%	12%
Low income	7%	3%
		13%(Purchased under Covax programme)

Source: Global COVID-19 Vaccine Access: A Snapshot of Inequality, KFF [online] downloaded from <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/global-covid-19-vaccine-access-snapshot-of-inequality/>

Whereas high-income countries found it easy to purchase vaccine doses far beyond their needs, low-income countries faced great difficulties in implementing their vaccination programs. These disparities were rather unfair because the high-income developed countries had enough doses to vaccinate one in four people, on average. But in respect of the low-income countries, this figure dropped to about one in 500 (Abeykoon, Rabbat, Nabarro, Sunday Times, 16 May 2021). On one occasion the WHO announced there was a shortage of two billion doses for the countries in the African Region. According to some reports, the bulk of the adult population in advanced economies would have been vaccinated by mid-2022. For middle-income countries, this timeline may stretch to late 2022 or early 2023, while for the poorer countries, mass immunization will stretch into 2024, if it happens at all (Duke Global Health Institute, 2020; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021).

Table 5: Vaccination rates by continent – Doses administered per 100 people up to May 2021

<b>Continent</b>	<b>Doses administered per 100 people</b>
North America	64
Europe	52
South America	31
Asia	27
Oceania	14
Africa	3

Source: New York Times [online] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>.  
[https://www.google.com/search?q=statistics+of++vaccine+distribution+in+the+world+by+regions&rlz=1C1GCEA\\_enLK839LK839&sxsrf=ALeKk02Qpp6RdbEj1dDO-AA0zuV](https://www.google.com/search?q=statistics+of++vaccine+distribution+in+the+world+by+regions&rlz=1C1GCEA_enLK839LK839&sxsrf=ALeKk02Qpp6RdbEj1dDO-AA0zuV)

Although industrial countries imposed many conditions over the supply of Covid-19 vaccines, China, Russia, and the BRICS countries were more willing to supply vaccines to the low-income and middle-income countries of the world. First, China and Russia said they are ready to distribute their vaccine products, namely Sinopharm, SinoVac, and Sputnik-V, for the use of low-income communities in the world. As such, many of the lower-income countries depended on China and Russia to fulfill their vaccine requirements.

“As COVID-19 continues to rage throughout Europe, China and Russia seem to be giving the European Union lessons in soft power on its home ground. Several EU members and countries nearby are turning to Beijing and Moscow for additional supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, being discontented as they are with the slowness of the EU’s own vaccination rollout, supply shortages, delivery bottlenecks, poor communication and concerns about vaccine safety” (Leigh, 2021). Further, China’s vaccine deliveries came with soft-power messages. Beijing pointed out that it was providing its vaccine free to Chinese citizens and to 53 other countries (Leigh, 2021). According to the statistics, China had shipped 115 million doses worldwide while the EU had exported only 58 million by the end of March. Likewise, Russia’s Sputnik-V vaccine is gaining ground in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. More than 40 countries have reached deals for the supply of this vaccine with its makers (Guenot, 2021).

While projecting Chinese soft power diplomacy, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that global cooperation should be at a higher level over the Covid-19 pandemic and that he worried about the unequal distribution of vaccines in the world (Rupavahini Sivudesa, 07 June 2021). The Chinese President further observed that it is essential to enhance solidarity, brotherhood, and humanity at the global level to combat the prevailing pandemic and reject the politicization of the battle against the pandemic. China then agreed to supply three billion doses of vaccines to the poor nations of the world (Rupavahini Sivudesa, 07 June 2021).

Various conditions are imposed by the Western developed countries when the poorer countries approach them to obtain vaccines. To avoid this problem, China and Russia have both agreed to work together with the developing countries to produce the vaccine in sufficient quantities to meet the supply shortage faced by the low-income countries. BRICS is another grouping that came forward as an alternative to Western Europe as a vaccine supplier during the first 18 months of the pandemic period. China agreed to share the resources such as know-how, guidance, training, tools, and advocacy materials to support the production and distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine within the BRICS countries. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced this proposal while speaking at the 12<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit (ANI, 18 November 2020).

Whereas the Covid-19 prevention policies and global vaccination distribution policies of the high-income countries were highly debatable and politicized, there have been significant policy changes too, recently. New US President Joe Biden’s attitude is quite different from that of earlier President Trump. Hence, their policies are also different. First, President Biden was highly concerned that the US society should strictly follow the Covid-19 prevention health policies. He has directed that a formal and rapid vaccination program be conducted throughout the USA. President Biden also wanted to expand the global vaccination program to cover more countries, especially the lower-income countries that did not have enough opportunities to secure the needed vaccine supplies. Focusing on the high demand for vaccines and their current shortage, President Biden agreed to give up the ‘US Patent Rights’ in respect of vaccination production so that other countries would be able to manufacture those vaccinations for their use (Shalal, Mason, & Lawder, 2021). However, President Biden’s proposal was criticized by other European leaders. After revising the vaccine policy of the US, President Biden agreed to distribute the excess vaccine doses among the poorest countries



of the world, free of charge. Further, in June 2021 the US media reported that the US administration will send 500 million doses of the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine to about 100 countries, over the course of the next two years. As an initial step, about 200 million doses would be distributed in 2021, with the remainder being delivered in 2022 (New York Times, 09 June 2021). The main reason for this change in approach was because the US wanted to use its vaccination policy as a diplomatic tool in order to establish itself as the core leader in the global pandemic prevention program. This was proved by the US President's response when he was asked by media just before he started his first foreign visit to the United Kingdom on 09<sup>th</sup> June 2021, whether the US government had a vaccination strategy for the world. President Biden said, "I have one, and I'll be announcing it," before boarding Air Force One (BBC News, 2020 iii).

On the other hand, revision of policy on the vaccine diplomacy of the USA can be interpreted as a counter program for eclipsing the soft power of China and Russia by taking the lead over them in producing and distributing vaccines to the low-income countries. China and Russia strongly criticized the Western policy of administering vaccine doses mostly within the EU. The positive approach adopted by China and Russia on the distribution of vaccines has caused the Western countries too to make a policy change. The leaders of seven of the world's wealthiest countries, known as the G-7 group, met for their annual summit on 09<sup>th</sup> June 2021 in the United Kingdom. The leaders of the G-7 agreed to buy and distribute one billion vaccination doses to the poor nations of the world. Further, they wanted to revive the economies that were affected by the global pandemic (Associated Press, 2021). According to the World Bank, the growth of the global economy may be negative because of the pandemic and the extreme poverty level may increase in the developing countries. The World Bank points out,

"At the same time, it is clear that failure to meet these challenges will jeopardize global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and limit the integration of developing countries into the global economy. There is also evidence that delays in vaccine roll-out will deepen inequalities both within and between countries, with estimates that an additional 150 million people have already been forced into extreme poverty due to COVID-19" (World Bank, 2020).

Therefore, the active involvement of the high-income industrial countries is necessary to combat the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic in the developing as well as lower-income countries at the global level. There is another reason also for adopting this approach. Although the developed world managed to keep the Covid-19 pandemic in check by means of vaccination, these countries have to connect with the rest of the world (middle-income and lower-income countries) in order to carry out their economic activities. The high-income economies engage in continuous relations with the markets in the developing areas in order to carry out their trade activities in the current globalized environment. But this can only be accomplished if the global environment is free of the Covid-19 menace.

The vaccine distribution policy of G-7 can be perceived as a project that is designed to counterbalance the Chinese vaccine distribution policy. In other words, it can be defined as a collective strategy of the G-7 in order to build a bulwark against Chinese power and expansion, which have been on the rise since the 2000s. As mentioned above, the growth of China as a global power in the Euro-Asia region is proving to be a huge threat and challenge to Europe and the USA, which have been the traditional global powers. The Chinese mega project "Belt and Road Initiative" has already covered 150 nations in the Euro-Asia region. Further, under the 17+ program, China has built extensive relations with 12 EU countries. In this context, Russia has also been building a close relationship with China and thus there is the potential for the formation of a new power bloc against the G-7 power bloc. This can be proved by the fact that G-7 has decided to challenge China's non-market economic practices and call on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms (Associated Press, 2021). The Leaders of the G-7 have declared for the first time in their 2021 summit held in the UK that China is a common threat to them. The Chinese reaction to that was sharp when a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in London said, "The days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone" (BBC News, 2021).

## 10. Conclusion

The WHO expected the mutual cooperation of global powers and the international community to combat the Covid-19 pandemic as it plays an official role and bears responsibility for preventing global pandemics. Apart from the role of the WHO, the developed countries too have to share the responsibility to confront and mitigate world calamities. In the present situation, those countries have the money, technology, expert scientists, and other facilities to carry out experiments and develop a vaccine against the virus. Therefore, the high-income developed countries have an important role to play in combatting the Coronavirus disease.

The WHO paid attention to two proposed programs to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. One was to draw up guidelines for standard health practices to be followed by the world community. Unfortunately, for quite some time after the outbreak of the disease, many developed countries had shown a negative attitude towards the health practices recommended by the WHO. Many people in the USA and some Western countries violated those prevention practices in the name of asserting their right to enjoy individual freedoms and Liberal democracy. Likewise, the anti-China political approach of the US weakened the fight against the

dangerous Covid-19 virus. Therefore, the negative attitudes of these global powers led to the rapid spread of the pandemic in the USA and in many parts of Western Europe in 2020.

In terms of developing effective Covid-19 vaccines, the role of the developed countries was successful. However, the WHO policy of fair and equitable distribution of the vaccine was an utter failure because of the "Vaccine Politics" of the high-income Western countries. The policy of these countries on administering the vaccine had violated the terms of the WHO's first and priority policy on vaccine distribution. Because of the conditions imposed on vaccine supply and distribution by the global powers, the capacity of developing countries to bring the Covid-19 pandemic under control had been seriously compromised. Although China and Russia worked against the "Vaccine Politics" of Western powers, the issue had caused more politicization between the two power blocs. As long as "Vaccine Politics" prevail, it will take a very long time for the developing countries to bring the Covid-19 pandemic under control and eventually eradicate it.

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