**[Pandemic diplomacy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1639584/pandemic-diplomacy)**

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THERE is [dismay](https://www.dawn.com/news/1638941) that Pakistan has not been removed from the UK’s travel ‘red list’, even though India has. Some say it’s the science: Pakistan’s Covid-19 infection rates are increasing, and its vaccination rates are lower than its neighbour’s. Many believe it’s the politics: India offers more inducements to a post-Brexit UK. Either way, the example highlights the need for countries to develop a pandemic foreign policy.

A post-Covid world order is emerging. The US hinted it would require all international visitors to be fully vaccinated; the UK transport secretary said full vaccination would likely be a travel requirement “for evermore”. The Covid apartheid described by the WHO is becoming entrenched. The world is split between a broadly defined ‘West’ awash with vaccines and booster shots, where travel and normal life are starting to resume, and a ‘developing world’ struggling to catch up, while facing prospects of political, social and economic isolation.

In this context, discourse on pandemic foreign policies has focused on vaccine providers, not recipients. Much has been written on the power of vaccine diplomacy, and the race between the US, China and Russia to win friends and satellite states in exchange for vaccine supplies. There is an emerging consensus that vaccine providers should not over-securitise their pandemic foreign policies, emphasise multilateralism and link vaccine diplomacy with climate change.

There are fewer views on how vaccine recipients — countries like Pakistan reliant to varying degrees on the largesse of vaccine-producing powers — should frame pandemic foreign policies. The topic deserves more attention.

The integration of health and climate policies is essential.

To start with, vaccine-receiving countries should closely monitor the vaccine diplomacy tussle between greater powers, and exploit the competition not only to procure the best vaccine supply and travel agreements, but also in service of broader foreign policy goals.

A key goal should be to avoid becoming beholden to one country. A good pandemic foreign policy should pursue engagement with multiple potential influencers. Pakistan should seek a vaccine deal with one power, discuss increased foreign investment to boost laboratory capacity with another, and investigate licences for medical production facilities with a third. Such a multipronged effort will help balance foreign policy considerations and diversify alliances while taking advantage of new themes in pandemic-linked diplomacy.

But a good pandemic foreign policy should be more than opportunistic. This topic will be a lens through which bilateral and multilateral ties are framed for many years to come, and Pakistan should be ready to engage on this basis. This means recognising that health policies previously perceived as national are in fact global, and require integration with foreign, trade, security and other policies. It also requires the creation of new government bodies able to address these issues and prioritise, and comprising health experts and politicians, groups that do not organically mix.

**Read:** [*The politics of Covid vaccines*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1635746)

Pakistan should also be ready to make requests that align with global pandemic priorities. Take, for example, the growing recognition that health inputs — eg increasing diagnostic capability, upskilling and growing the health workforce — are similar across diseases, including emerging threats. Post pandemic, broad investments in health representing a shift from vaccine diplomacy to health diplomacy present a win-win for allies.

For this to work, Pakistan needs a robust healthcare policy, including increased healthcare expenditure. Former SAPM health Zafar Mirza in these pages pointed to the trend of increasing federal and provincial healthcare budgets, but these are still inadequate, with healthcare representing 0.4 per cent of the total 2021-22 budget. Such numbers will raise the question among vaccine or other health support-providing powers why they should fund health aid for a nuclear power that neglects the issue itself. Diffuse healthcare strategies, with provision split between public and private sectors, for example, will also deter potential partners.

The integration of health and climate policies is also essential. It is accepted that the rate of pandemics is increasing due to climate change and its consequences, such as the destruction of animals’ natural habitats leading to greater comingling with humans. Of late, Pakistan has attempted to add a climate lens to its trade and security policies, particularly in the context of water scarcity. This thinking now needs to extend to the link between Pakistan’s climate vulnerability and pandemics or other adverse health trends.

Pandemic handling is now a barometer for a government’s efficacy, credibility, resilience and popularity, and will inform how states deal with each other in diverse contexts. An effective foreign policy must therefore necessarily be a pandemic policy too.

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