

# THE GEOPOLITICS OF VACCINE DIPLOMACY: NAVIGATING SINO-JAPANESE COMPETITION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## **Abstract**

The intensification of Sino-Japanese antipathy in Southeast Asia through competitive vaccine diplomacy is a significant development, given the region's geopolitical importance to both rivals. Despite this, there has been a lack of research on the geopolitical dimensions of Japan and China's vaccine contestation in Southeast Asia. Thereby, this study aims to examine the influence of geopolitics on Sino-Japanese competitive vaccine diplomacy in the region, using online-based secondary data. The study argues that both China and Japan have donated millions of vaccine shots to Southeast Asian countries to reinforce their relationships with the region, driven by their respective geopolitical interests. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between geopolitics and vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Vaccine diplomacy, Southeast Asia, China and Japan, BRI, FOIP

## **Introduction**

In International Relations, 'geopolitics' is commonly understood as the study of the implication of "geography on power dynamics." According to Owens (2015), to develop actionable strategic prescriptions, geopolitics investigates the connections between spatial settings and global political influence. In post-WWII international politics, geopolitics has appeared as one of the main determinants in the international affairs of any country, particularly of powerful ones. However, amid deadly humanitarian crisis emerged in the post COVID-19 period, it has dominantly influenced inter-state relations. In fact, geopolitical consideration

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has seemingly taken precedence while big powers have pursued their vaccine diplomacy.

While sustaining the ominous prevalence of the pandemic-led 'new-normal' epoch, COVID-19 vaccines have been accredited as the most exigent strategic commodity owing to the mismatch in between its universal demand versus limited supply worldwide. Thereby, due to prevailing geopolitical and geo-strategic significance, the Southeast Asian sub-system has rationally been top-most prioritized while supplying vaccines bilaterally or through the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access program (COVAX), predominantly by China and Japan. China's pledge to disseminate vaccines to Southeast Asia demonstrates its long-fostered regional great power aspiration for decades. Thus, China has attempted to bolster its image as a responsible global power by circulating its vaccines within the region. China's vaccine outreach has been aided by its first-mover advantage and consistent deliveries. However, after Japan and Western countries released their surplus vaccine inventory, this edge started to erode significantly. While since the genesis of the pandemic led health crisis, most Southeast Asian countries have relied on China for vaccine supply, in parallel they have also dazdled to ensure alternative vaccination portfolios. First, due to Beijing's assertion of hard power, particularly in the South China Sea, Southeast Asia has always generated sceptical views regarding Chinese soft power projection through its supply of vaccines. Thereby reciprocating with the escalating demands for vaccines, Southeast Asia has always encountered a lack of strategic confidence with the Chinese vaccination program intending to explore alternative supply sources. In this connection, Japan, another umbilical stakeholder of the region, has also endeavoured to donate vaccines bilaterally and multilaterally (Ha & Storey, 2022) and offered millions of doses as an alternative to Chinese vaccines. Eventually, China and Japan have become the pioneers of vaccine donations across the Southeast Asian region. The geostrategic location of the region is crucial in signifying the current Sino-Japanese vaccination race. The region's maritime routes have grown vital to the economies of both China and Japan (Akon, 2020). The area is also strategically significant for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Regarding its thriving sphere of influence, China has promoted vaccines in the region through the BRI program. In a bid to set itself apart from China, Japan has utilized its position in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to encourage equal vaccination distribution. In Southeast Asia, the escalating Sino-Japanese strategic competition in supplying vaccines has moved into the global spotlight. A good number of research have extensively studied China's and Japan's vaccine

diplomacy in Southeast Asia. However, a little research has shed light on China and Japan's competitive vaccine diplomacy in the region stemming from geopolitical interests. Thereby this research aims to examine the nexus between Sino-Japanese geopolitical interests and vaccine distribution-led competition in Southeast Asia. To underpin the objective of the research, this study attempts to answer the following question - To what extent geopolitical factors has contributed to the Sino-Japanese competitive vaccine diplomacy in the Southeast Asian region?

This research provides a detailed account of the Sino-Japanese vaccine diplomacy efforts in Southeast Asia, and it demonstrates how these efforts are shaped by geopolitical factors such as politico-economic interests, territorial disputes, strategic alliances, etc. For instance, the article highlights how China and Japan have used vaccine diplomacy as a tool to gain support in favor of the smooth implementation of their BRI and FOIP projects. In this context, the authors argue that China and Japan's vaccine diplomacy efforts are not just driven by a desire to promote public health, but also by a broader geopolitical agenda. It also stresses that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the geopolitical competition between China and Japan in the region, and vaccine diplomacy has become a crucial tool for these countries to expand their influence and advance their strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Above all, the article offers important insights into the complex interplay between geopolitics, public health, and vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

The study follows qualitative mode of enquiry and analyzes secondary data to underpin the objective of the research and address the research question. The study highlights China's BRI and Japan's FOIP while discussing the geopolitical contexts of the two countries in Southeast Asia. The findings and discussion of this study are presented from China's and Japan's perspectives. It excludes Southeast Asian nations' viewpoints regarding China and Japan's vaccine diplomacy in the region.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Vaccine Diplomacy and Great Powers' Geopolitical Game in Southeast Asia***

Diplomacy refers to leading the relationship between the governments of sovereign states with the use of tactics and intelligence (Rashid, 2005). It contributes to the growth of political, economic and cultural linkages between countries in the global community as an instrument of conducting official relations at the international level (Antwi, 2019). And, when it comes to global health diplomacy,

vaccine diplomacy refers to the use or distribution of vaccines. Hotez (2014) claims, to advance a country's foreign policy as well as diplomatic relations with antagonistic countries, it provides new chances. In post-COVID-19 world politics, vaccine diplomacy has emerged as the strategic use of vaccine to gain influence in other countries or regions and strengthen diplomatic ties as a whole (Guerrero, 2021). Existing research argues that in post COVID-19 era, geopolitics has gained momentum in vaccine diplomacy. (Fetahu, 2021) claims, recently, vaccine is having an unparalleled ascendancy on the geopolitical stakes of both state and non-state actors worldwide. Leng et al. (2022) stress, in the post-COVID-19 era, the global political landscape has changed, and vaccine diplomacy has evolved as a new apparatus with which great nations particularly the rivals have been striving to alter the world environment to their advantage. As a result, there has always been a greater emphasis on geopolitical considerations than on necessity or equity when it comes to vaccine donation or vaccine production technology.

Several research has unveiled that the vaccine diplomacy battle is raging fiercely in Southeast Asia. For example, Beijing is attempting to confirm that Southeast Asian countries opt for China as their first and foremost choice through bilateral involvement with various gifting, preferential and conditional agreements, which is promoted in disguise of long-lasting friendly relations (Byrne, 2021). To reclaim its influence in Southeast Asia, the vaccine diplomacy of the US is in full force (Sullivan, 2021). Russia has now increasingly been delivering Sputnik-V vaccine as greater sales in the same way that the US and China are using their own vaccine diplomacy in the region (Murphy, 2021). Japan to promulgate its humanitarian image and counterbalance Chinese influence has come up with millions of vaccine doses (Beaty, 2021). The Australian government has also committed to providing support for safe and effective vaccinations to the region as part of shared recovery effort, which is also beneficial for Australia's economy (DFATA, 2020). Other countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK) and India have shown their intent to provide vaccines to expand regional ties and promote self-interest in the region (Byrne, 2021). Central European nations like Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary have also made a foray into Southeast Asia to pursue their vaccine diplomacy (Hutt, 2021).

Reviewing the existing literature, this research concludes that in the aftermath of COVID-19, vaccine diplomacy has emerged as a strategic tool for strengthening bilateral or multilateral engagement with countries or regions. In addition, geopolitical dimensions of vaccine diplomacy have become a reality of great power rivalries. It acknowledges, while millions of individuals have urged for vaccines

as a life-saving commodity, existing major powers have contested to utilize of vaccine as a naive strategic tool for regulating the existing health security equation. Thereby, vaccine development and distribution have just been a continuation of geopolitical combat among major powers in different countries or regions. Thus, in post-pandemic global politics, Southeast Asia has become a battleground for ongoing geopolitical competition between rivals, particularly China and Japan. And vaccine diplomacy has emerged as a means of asserting its influence in the region. However, the study finds that there is a lack of comprehensive studies exploring this issue.

### **Research Methodology**

This research investigates the contribution of geopolitical factors toward Sino-Japanese vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Thereby, it follows the qualitative method and inductive approach to underpin the objective of the research. Although this study is secondary data-based, careful attention has been paid to the ethics of research. The required data for this research has been collected via web surfing techniques from journals, newspapers and other articles, blogs, and other relevant sources. To find relevant literature and data, “Geopolitics”, “Vaccine Diplomacy”, “Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia”, “Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy”, “Japanese Vaccine Diplomacy”, “China’s Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia”, “Japan’s Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia”, China’s BRI”, “Japan’s FOIP”, “China’s BRI and Southeast Asia”, “Japan’s FOIP and Southeast Asia” have frequently been inserted in search engines like “Google” and “Google Scholar”. To track China and Japan’s vaccine donations in Southeast Asian countries, the websites of BRIDGE (China’s COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker database) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) have been visited. For Chinese vaccines, data up to 12 September 2022; and for the Japanese vaccines, data up to 10 September 2022 have been considered. To underpin the objective of the study, mainly qualitative data have been analysed, and to address the research question two broad themes and two sub-themes have been developed.

### **Findings**

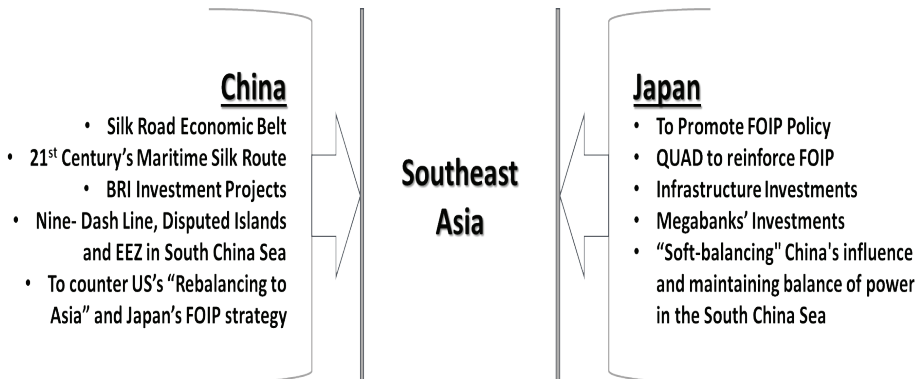
#### ***Sino-Japanese Competitive Geopolitical Interests in Southeast Asia***

Southeast Asia is a major hub of global supply chains in the Asia-Pacific. However, in the recent decade, it has been vital to implement both China’s BRI and Japan’s FOIP. Due to China and Japan’s contradictory goals and policies, as well as their common desire to exert influence in the region, Southeast Asia remains a key

focus of strategic conflict between these two rival powers. Academia claims, with the steadily emergent economic and geopolitical prominence, Southeast Asia has turned into the core of evolving “regional security architecture of the Asia-Pacific” in the last decade (Harding, 2017). As a result, the region has become strategically crucial for both the East Asian Giants to reinforce their engagement with and pursue their own immediate and long-term politico-economic dividends.

According to the available literature, China, and Southeast Asian countries have gained prominence for the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Maritime Silk Route of 21<sup>st</sup> century” under BRI (Sharifli, 2020); the running BRI investment projects (Yan, 2018); claimed “nine-dash lines”, disputed islands and “Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ)” in the South China Sea (Deutsche Welle, 2021a); countering US’s “Rebalancing to Asia” and Japan’s FOIP (Kuik, 2021). On the contrary, for Japan, the region has become vital to promote its FOIP vision; QUAD forum to support FOIP objectives (JMOD, 2020; Koga, 2019); increasing infrastructure (Pajon, 2019) and megabanks’ investments (Rosario & Sun, 2019); and “soft-balancing” of Chinese influence and power asymmetry in the South China Sea (Pajon, 2019).

**Figure 1: China and Japan’s Geopolitical Concentration in Southeast Asia**



Source: Illustrated by authors based on various sources

In Southeast Asia, China advances to pursue its BRI projects, forging ahead with a bold move in geopolitics in order to build and strengthen cross-border trade routes (Baker McKenzie, 2021); while Japan persuades to FOIP for stimulating “regional stability” and “prosperity” by enhancing Asia-African interconnectivity (JMOD, 2021). BRI program is designed to substantially impact China’s

“political and economic relations” with the world including Southeast Asia, which incorporates vital investment and trade destinations along the BRI routes (Yan, 2018). In contrast, FOIP is considered as a geopolitical strategy aiming at forming a maritime alliance with QUAD partners to challenge Chinese strength and influence while Southeast Asia is perceived as a strategically vital region for creating “a stable, prosperous, and rule-based regional order” (Satake, 2019). In this regard, Japan promotes “new security engagements” and “alternative connectivity” efforts, predominantly strengthening the marine capacity of Southeast Asia (Pajon, 2019).

### ***Sino-Japanese Competitive Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia***

#### **China’s Vaccine Diplomacy: First-Mover Advantage**

Until the first half of 2021, the Western block’s stockpiling of vaccines created a hunger for China-manufactured vaccines worldwide, including in Southeast Asia (Karambelkar, 2021; Zaini, 2021). While the Western block was hoarding vaccines, China announced that it would deliver safe and effective vaccines, particularly in developing countries. Thus, in contrast to the US and Europe’s “vaccine nationalism”, Chinese vaccine diplomacy emphasized the idea of “global public good” (Heydarian, 2021; Karambelkar, 2021). It also incentivized China to appear as the “first-mover” in the vaccination race in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian nations’ hunger for China-manufactured vaccines was sparked by a lack of alternatives. Furthermore, India’s suspension of vaccine supply because of mounting domestic demand, and the cost-effectiveness and unceasing delivery of Chinese vaccines bolstered China to take the full advantage of being the “first-mover” (Zaini, 2021). For example, Indonesia’s mass vaccination program would not have been inaugurated without Chinese vaccines (Tani, 2021). The accessibility of Chinese vaccines in Myanmar coincided with the depletion of the Indian supply (The Jakarta Post, 2021). Due to the slugging mode of current vaccination efforts, Sinopharm vaccines were welcomed in Vietnam to tackle the country’s critical situation (Onishi, 2021). After obtaining vaccines from China, Cambodia launched its vaccination campaign (Xinhuanet, 2021). Ten percent of Thailand’s population had been vaccinated (as of mid-July 2021) with Sinovac and Sinopharm doses (Bangkok Post, 2021). In Southeast Asia, the Chinese vaccine supply boomed in absence of Western counterparts and so as Japan’s. China-manufactured shots, either in sales or gifts, have been dispatched to all the Southeast Asian countries (See Table-1). Consequently, Japan’s standing as a

regional leader had been diminished by its low-profile approach to working with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the pandemic (Choong, 2021). During the pandemic-led lacuna of the soft-power regime, China could better sell its soft-power-based idea of “global public good” successfully drawing the full attention of almost all the countries of Southeast Asia towards China. Thus, as the “first mover,” China had been able to conduct all its business – economic and politico-strategic through selling and donating vaccines– at breakneck speed. As a result, China won the first round of the strategic game by strengthening its relationship with Southeast Asia through sky-rocketing vaccine supply till the first half of 2021.

Southeast Asia has become a “key target for Chinese vaccine diplomacy” (Zaini, 2021) which is at the heart of BRI in terms of spatial setting. China’s BRI map locates Southeast Asia at the centre of gravity. One of the six economic corridors of BRI runs through Mainland Southeast Asia (Kuik, 2021). The BRI Sea Route, known as “One Road”, spans the whole Southeast Asian region (Ao, 2019). Additionally, BRI necessitates top-level leadership, mostly from Southeast Asia nations (Chirathivat et al., 2022). Thus countries of Southeast Asia has a vital role in implementing BRI as the whole region is integral to China’s one road scheme (Ao, 2019). Thereby, to implement BRI, China has invested in almost all Southeast Asian countries (Chirathivat et al., 2022). China’s key BRI Projects in ASEAN countries include- two airports in Philippines, six coal power plants in Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam; five hydropower plants in Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar; five renewable energy projects in Philippines and Vietnam; seven economic cooperation zone in Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam; four industrial parks in Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia and Thailand; five ports in Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand; one energy transmission line in Myanmar; 13 railways in Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam; one road in Indonesia; development of three smart cities in Myanmar and Philippines; and one Education and Cultural Collaboration project in Malaysia (Tritto et al., 2020). Moreover, geopolitically, Southeast Asia has been a “strategic throat” of China’s rise as a global power, whereas neutralizing Obama’s “rebalancing to Asia” and Japan’s FOIP strategy (Kuik, 2021). Thereby, since the outbreak of COVID-19, strengthening the relationship with Southeast Asian countries have grown more vital to China’s BRI (Yu, 2021), which, indeed, made Beijing take the advantage of its vibrant presence in the region through mass vaccination drive in absence of other counterparts.



**Table–1: China’s Bilateral Vaccine Assistance to Southeast Asian Countries [In Million]**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Vaccine Sales &amp; Delivery</i>		<i>Total Pledged Donation &amp; Delivery</i>		<i>Total Doses Delivered</i>	<i>Manufacturer</i>
	<i>Sold</i>	<i>Delivered</i>	<i>Donated</i>	<i>Delivered</i>		
<i>Indonesia</i>	272.579	265.279	3.00	3.00	268.279	Sinovac, Sinopharm
<i>Philippines</i>	55.05	55.00	5.00	5.025	60.025	Sinopharm, Sinovac
<i>Myanmar</i>	34.7	33.7	23.9	22.64	56.34	Sinopharm, Sinovac, Undisclosed
<i>Vietnam</i>	36.2	36.2	10.8	5.3	41.5	Sinopharm, Sinovac
<i>Cambodia</i>	34.5	28.5	36.303	13.303	41.803	Sinovac, Sinopharm
<i>Thailand</i>	45.6	26.5	3.4	3.4	29.9	Sinovac, Sinopharm, Undisclosed
<i>Malaysia</i>	19.5	8.4	2.5	2.5	10.9	CanSino, Sinovac, Sinopharm
<i>Laos</i>	-	-	9.102	9.102	9.102	Sinopharm Undisclosed
<i>Singapore</i>	0.5326	0.3326	-	-	0.3326	Sinopharm, Sinovac
<i>Brunei</i>	-	-	0.152	0.152	0.152	Sinopharm
<i>Timor-Leste</i>	-	-	0.2	0.2	0.2	Sinovac
<b>Total</b>	<b>498.6616</b>		<b>94.357</b>		<b>518.5336</b>	

Source: BRIDGE, 2022 [As of 12 September, 2022]

Japan’s Vaccine Diplomacy: An Alternative to Chinese Vaccines Japan’s vaccine footprint in the Southeast Asian region has been advanced by inefficacy, inadequacy, and debate over Chinese vaccines; cut off in India’s vaccine supply,

and, most significantly, Japan's soft power. Compared to US-manufactured vaccines, China's Sinovac offered barely more than fifty-percent protection (Wee & Londoño, 2021). Due to lower-than-anticipated production levels, China had dispatched fewer vaccines than expected to the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Heydariyan, 2021). Meanwhile, during the first half of 2021, China's "Health Silk Road" ambition, which involved Indonesia as a significant destination for vaccination clinical trials, had been stalled. Furthermore, the legacy and public confidence in China-manufactured vaccines in the entire Southeast Asian region was shaken by the sudden increase in COVID-19 cases and the demise of 10 doctors in Indonesia (Ramani, 2021). In addition, Beijing's "global public good" idea was criticized as its "self-serving politics of generosity" (Zaini, 2021). As faith in Chinese vaccines dwindled, the QUAD nations undertook a vaccination push throughout the region as part of their strategy to supply safe and effective vaccine doses across the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, since India-led vaccine supply got thwarted with the increase in its domestic infection rates, Japan gained the opportunity to take over.

In reaction to China's failures to provide vaccines during the first half of 2021, Japan started supplying vaccines in Southeast Asia. In fact, Japan continued its footstep in the region to pawn Beijing's influence; and, despite the domestic crisis, Japan emerged as the region's vaccine-donation leader (Beaty, 2021). When Japan inaugurated its voyage in Southeast Asia, domestic vaccination touched only 23% of its total population, the lowest proportion amongst the developed countries (Ramani, 2021). On 16 June 2021, Vietnam has the received one million doses of AstraZeneca vaccines from Japan (Kyodo News, 2021) as the first Southeast Asian recipient. Afterwards, the country offered two million extra doses of AstraZeneca vaccines to Vietnam and one million doses each to the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia (Reuters, 2021). However, except Myanmar and Singapore, rest of the countries of Southeast Asia have now received vaccine donation from Japan (See Table-2). In addition, all the countries have received in total two billion yen as "Last One Mile Support" for safe vaccine delivery through developing cold chain system (MOFA, 2022a).

China's vaccine outreach in Southeast Asia was glorified from its "first-mover advantage" though, China could not monopolize subsequently. Furthermore, China's assertive initiatives in other areas like South China Sea disrupted the soft power effect of its vaccination outreach (Zaini, 2021), which established a method to encroach on Japan's footprint in the region. Japan, in order to boost its image as a humanitarian aid contributor and to capitalize on China's failure in enhancing

its worldwide reputation, has prioritized its vaccine diplomacy approach (Beaty, 2021). Even though Japan's vaccine diplomacy has received relatively far less attention, Chinese diplomatic goals has evidenced serious bottlenecks (Ramani, 2021). Japan has pressed over "apolitical and equitable distribution of vaccines", while China pushed vaccine recipients over their ties with Taiwan (Harrison, 2021; Beaty, 2021). China preferred the allied countries; and Japan has advocated vaccine delivery independent from diplomatic gains instead, irrespective of whether the receiving countries were in a friendly alliance or otherwise (Ichihara & Yamada, 2021). Consequently, Japan's image has been ameliorated as a trusted partner to Southeast Asian countries (Ramani, 2021) compared to China's, which Japan tempted for long.

**Table–2: Japan's Vaccine Donation to Southeast Asian Countries [In Million]**

Country	Japan's Vaccine Donations	Donation Type	Shipment from Japan	Manufacturer
<i>Vietnam</i>	7.35	Bilateral	16 June – 26 Jan 2022	AstraZeneca
<i>Indonesia</i>	6.88	Bilateral	1 Jul 2021 – 19 Jul 2022	AstraZeneca
<i>Philippines</i>	3.08	Bilateral	8 July – 30 October, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Thailand</i>	2.04	Bilateral	9 July – 15 October, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Cambodia</i>	1.32	COVAX	23 July – 18 December, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Malaysia</i>	1.00	Bilateral	1 July, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Laos</i>	0.94	COVAX	3 August – 21 December, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Timor-Leste</i>	0.17	COVAX	11 August, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Brunei</i>	0.10	Bilateral	24 September, 2021	AstraZeneca
<i>Singapore</i>	-	-	-	AstraZeneca
<i>Myanmar</i>	-	-	-	AstraZeneca
Total	22.88			

Source: MOFA, 2022a [As of 10 September 2022]

However, the Japanese approach also does not seem to be an embryonic one, rather the continuation of serving its long-sustained politico-economic and strategic goals in the region. For example, Southeast Asia owing to its geographical location is the key to Japan's FOIP (Choong, 2020) and has a crucial role to advance the country's vision (JICA, 2021). In addition, FOIP emphasizes on "ASEAN

unity and centrality.” Japan’s connectivity projects under FOIP incorporates developing Thilawa Special Economic Zone, and improvement of East-West Economic Corridor and Yangon-Mandalay Railway in Myanmar; construction of Hai Van Tunnel and Cai Mep-Thi Vai International Port, and improvement of Da Nang Port in Vietnam; construction of Second Mekong International Bridge and improvement of National Road (No.9) in Laos; construction of Neak Loeung Bridge, improvement of National Road (No.1 and 5) and development of Sihanoukville Port in Cambodia; and development of Patimban Port and outer islands in Indonesia. On the other hand, Japan’s peace and stability projects in Southeast Asia under FOIP involves maritime security and safety activities in the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Myanmar and Brunei; disaster risk reduction works in Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand; counterterrorism programs in Philippines and Thailand, and counterpiracy program in Singapore (MOFA, 2022b). Japan’s assistance to Timor-Leste is intended to facilitate the country’s integration into ASEAN and its following development efforts (JICA, 2021), possibly in an effort to bolster FOIP. Thus every country of Southeast Asia is central to Japan’s FOIP connectivity and peace and stability projects in the Indo-Pacific. On top of that, Japan needs ASEAN’s approval and assistance in order to successfully implement its FOIP vision (Choong, 2020). In Southeast Asia, FOIP attempts to ensure safe sea lanes, free navigation, and safe overflight in a peaceful South China Sea (JMOD, 2021) whereas China is engaged in maritime boundary disputes with several countries. Thereby, against China’s rising influence through BRI, Japan has bolstered its bilateral and multilateral ties with Southeast Asian countries (Shigenoi, 2022). And, it has been reinforced through Japan’s vaccine diplomacy in the region. Japan has targeted the countries where China entered into with millions doses of vaccines, escalating their already-existing rivalry “for infrastructure projects and access to regional manufacturing sectors” (Beaty, 2021; Ramani, 2021).

## **Discussion**

The international system has gravely collided with the eruption of irrepressible pandemic worldwide. While such a global issue necessitates international coordination and partnerships, the epidemic has initiated “another vector of competition” among the world’s superpowers indeed (Le Thu, 2021). At the outset, medical supplies were at the forefront of the competition, and later vaccines replaced the centre of gravity- which is regarded as vaccine diplomacy. Eventually, to donor countries, vaccine diplomacy has been a strategic apparatus to reward

the allies as well as to reap “immediate and long-term diplomatic dividends” (Karambelkar, 2021), especially by the major powers. Consequently, Southeast Asia has become a buffer region for vaccine contestation as well as emerged as the centre of geopolitical rivalry between the contending nations China and Japan.

Data shows, China has provided vaccine assistance to 114 countries of Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and Europe bilaterally and via COVAX, whereas Asia-Pacific contained 938 million of total sales, 141 million of total pledged donations and 890 million of total delivery. In contrast, Southeast Asia encompassed 498.6616 million sales, 94.357 million pledged donations, and 518.5336 million deliveries (BRIDGE, 2022), estimated 53.16% of total sales, 66.92% of the total pledged donations, and 58.26% of total delivery to the entire Asia-Pacific region. On the other hand, Japan donated 44.03 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccines to thirty-two countries in total, while Southeast Asian countries received 22.88 million through bilateral donation and COVAX facility (MOFA, 2022a), estimated 52% of Japan’s total donation. All the Southeast Asian countries have been integral to China and Japan’s vaccine support. It makes evident that the rivals have targeted Southeast Asia, which is central to successfully implementing both China’s BRI and Japan’s FOIP. Remarkably, Both China and Japan have delivered the highest number of vaccines to the Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia and Vietnam, respectively. Data also reveals, the two contending nations targeted almost the same countries in the region to pursue their vaccine diplomacy. For example, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam were in the top ten amongst 114 countries where China delivered the highest number of vaccine doses. On the contrary, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia were the first ten out of thirty-two countries that received the highest number of vaccine donations from Japan. (See Table-3).

**Table–3: Top Ten Receivers of Sino-Japanese Vaccines Worldwide and Southeast Asian Countries [In Million]**

No.	<i>Top Receivers of Chinese Vaccines Donations in Southeast Asia (Delivered)</i>	<i>Top Recipients of Japanese Vaccines in Southeast Asia (Delivered)</i>
1	<i>Indonesia (268.3)</i>	<i>Vietnam (7.4)</i>
2	<i>Iran (114.1)</i>	<i>Indonesia (6.9)</i>
3	<i>Pakistan (111.4)</i>	<i>Bangladesh (4.6)</i>

4	Brazil (101.0)	Iran (4.3)
5	<i>Philippines (60.0)</i>	Taiwan (4.2)
6	<i>Myanmar (54.3)</i>	<i>Philippines (3.1)</i>
7	Morocco (45.5)	<i>Thailand (2.0)</i>
8	Mexico (42.1)	Nepal (1.6)
9	<i>Cambodia (41.8)</i>	Sri Lanka (1.5)
10	<i>Vietnam (41.5)</i>	<i>Cambodia (1.3)</i>

Source: BRIDGE, 2022; MOFA, 2022a

Data also presents, amongst these top six Southeast Asian nations, except Malaysia, other top-five receivers of Japanese vaccine donations were also the top five buyers of Chinese counterparts. It also shows, the vassals Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos have been prioritized in Chinese vaccine donations. Amongst them, Myanmar has ranked number one (See Table-4). Myanmar is vital to China's ability towards reaching the Bay of Bengal network. In addition, China is increasing its influence in the country by bolstering the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor as a BRI project, which involves trade, aid, investment and infrastructural development (Chatterji, 2021). Cambodia has also been another top recipient of Chinese vaccine donations. Surprisingly, Japan has recently extended its assistance to Cambodia and pledged to restore all the development works in the post-pandemic period, especially by increasing FDI inflows (Vanyuth, 2021).

China and Japan both donated vaccines to Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei – which are in dispute with China over the claim of the South China Sea, while Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines have received the highest consideration from Japan (See Table-4). Existing research shows, while Southeast Asian nations are concerned about China's military exercise and expansion in the South China Sea (Choong, 2020), Japan reiterates its resolve to protect South China Sea freedom of navigation through resources for maritime law enforcement, capacity building projects and confidence building measures (Koga, 2019) since after the initiation of FOIP. On the contrary, China has promised that it will not “bully” weaker countries of the region at the thirtieth anniversary of their relationship (Deutsche Welle, 2021b). It has also been keen to work on the “peaceful resolution of disputes” in the South China Sea and “early conclusion of an effective and substantive code of conduct” as his rival US is again gaining diplomatic momentum under Biden administration (Jennings, 2021), and so as US allied Japan. Thailand has also been one of the top recipients of Japanese vaccine

donations worldwide, which is perceived as Chinese accommodator (Dunst, 2020). Moreover, Thailand has leaned toward China after West chastised them for their internal issues (Chang, 2021). The military and royalist elites of the country consider China as a friend. In addition, the Thai government is eager to ensure China’s cooperation in securing 5G technology and AI backing for increasing Thailand’s surveillance capabilities (Chatterji, 2021). The Chinese ally Myanmar has been excluded from Japan’s vaccine donations, however, the country received “Last One Mile Support” from Japan (MOFA, 2022a) and two million of vaccines from the Nippon Foundation (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2022) as it is the host of several FOIP projects. All the data indicate, geopolitics has played a catalytic role behind Sino-Japanese competitive vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

**Table-4: Top Receivers of Chinese and Japanese Vaccines among Southeast Asian Countries**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Top Buyers of Chinese Vaccines in Southeast Asia</i>	<i>Top Recipients of Chinese Vaccines Donations in Southeast Asia</i>	<i>Top Recipients of Japanese Vaccine Donations in Southeast Asia</i>
1	Indonesia	Myanmar	Vietnam
2	Philippines	Cambodia	Indonesia
3	Thailand	Laos	Philippines
4	Vietnam	Vietnam	Thailand
5	Myanmar	Philippines	Cambodia
6	Cambodia	Thailand	Malaysia
7	Malaysia	Indonesia	Laos
8	Singapore	Malaysia	Timor-Leste
9		Timor-Leste	Brunei
10		Brunei	

Source: Based on Table 1 & Table 2.

Through COVAX facility, China donated vaccines to four countries of Southeast Asia – Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam (See Table-5). While having the maritime issue, Indonesia is vital for BRI due to its geopolitical location and Vietnam sees BRI projects as a main source of its development works (Ao, 2019). On the contrary, Indonesia and Vietnam both countries have strategic partnership with Japan (Shigenoi, 2022). In this connection, it is implied that, perhaps, China wanted to strengthen its relationship with its geopolitical rival Japan’s partners

through vaccine donation. On the other hand, Cambodia and Laos, which are China-allied countries for years (Chang, 2021) received vaccine donations from Japan through COVAX facility (See Table-5). In these countries Japan has several FOIP projects for improving connectivity and promoting peace and prosperity in Indo-Pacific (MOFA, 2022b). The Chinese vassal Cambodia has been the Southeast Asian leading recipient of Japanese vaccines through COVAX facility. Notably, Cambodia is concerned about its increasing reliance on China which may reduce the country's strategic autonomy and make more difficult for it to negotiate the complex dynamics of the great power competition (Shigenoi, 2022). This approach of Japanese vaccine diplomacy has apparently escalated the Sino-Japanese rivalry in the region.

**Table-5: China and Japan's Vaccine Supports in Southeast Asia through COVAX Facility [In Million]**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Chinese Re- cipients</i>	<i>Number of Doses</i>	<i>Japanese Re- cipients</i>	<i>Number of Doses</i>
1	Indonesia	12.012	Cambodia	1.32
2	Myanmar	04.240	Laos	0.94
3	Cambodia	0.4248	Timor-Leste	0.17
4	Vietnam	0.0612		

Source: BRIDGE, 2022; MOFA, 2022a

The vaccine diplomacy engagement of China and Japan in Southeast Asia has been characterized by a competitive posture, which reflects their enduring geopolitical rivalry and respective efforts to shape the regional order in their favour. China's vaccine support to countries with whom it has territorial disputes can be seen as a strategic move aimed at improving bilateral relations and mitigating tensions. Meanwhile, Japan's prioritization of its vaccine donation efforts to countries that are in maritime disputes with China, those that have recently moved closer to China, and those that are allied with China can be viewed as an attempt to counterbalance China's growing regional influence. This approach to vaccine diplomacy is a manifestation of the long-standing Sino-Japanese geopolitical rivalry in Southeast Asia, which is taking on a new form.

### **Future Implications of Sino-Japanese Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia**

Owing to the shifting focus of world politics towards Indo-Pacific, the big powers,



including China and Japan, are currently consolidating their position in the region. Southeast Asia, as the centre of this region, is vital to chase their geopolitical goals. Thereby, the potential implication of Sino-Japanese vaccine diplomacy could be manifold. Firstly, the provision of vaccines by China and Japan to Southeast Asian countries could potentially lead to stronger relationships and greater trust between the countries involved. This could help to enhance regional stability and security and to foster greater cooperation in other areas, such as trade and economic development. Secondly, the competition between China and Japan in vaccine diplomacy could continue to intensify in the future, as both countries seek to enhance their influence in the region. This could lead to greater tensions and competition between the two nations, which could in turn affect the stability and security of the region. Thirdly, the competition between China and Japan could also force Southeast Asian countries to navigate a delicate balancing act, as they seek to benefit from the provision of vaccines while avoiding taking sides in the geopolitical competition. This could be challenging, particularly if the competition between China and Japan becomes more intense or if it is perceived as being driven by other geopolitical considerations. However, the future is uncertain, and that the situation is likely to continue to evolve. Nevertheless, the competition between China and Japan in vaccine diplomacy is an important development that is worth paying close attention to as the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the relationship between China and Japan's geopolitical interests and their competing vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia. It unveils, Southeast Asian nations initially struggled to obtain vaccine supplies. However, the region's geopolitical importance and significant need for vaccines prompted China to act quickly and Japan to serve as an alternative, solidifying their relationships with the region in the soft-power vacuum created by COVID-19. As Southeast Asia plays a significant role in China's BRI and Japan's FOIP, both nations sought to strengthen their positions in the region through vaccine diplomacy. To achieve their respective geopolitical objectives, China and Japan delivered millions of vaccine doses, hoping to improve their image as the region's most trusted partners. As a result, geopolitical interests have been the driving force behind the Sino-Japanese competition in vaccine diplomacy, intensifying their long-standing rivalry in a new form.

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