

THEME 01

A liberating vaccine

CORONA

VACCINE

GEOPOLITICS

Insofar as there can ever be a definitive end to the corona pandemic, a vaccine will probably play the most substantial role in this. This is not just a matter of whether there will ever be a vaccine and if so, when, but also of who will be the first to develop it and subsequently who will get access to it. It's highly likely that this will be a lengthy process, with countries partaking in an extreme form of vaccine diplomacy, and the choices they make will reverberate for years, if not decades, to come in international politics.

Our observations

- Many dozens of [candidate vaccines](#) are currently being developed. Testing and approval procedures are being accelerated and carried out simultaneously as much as possible (e.g. operation [Warp Speed](#) in the U.S.). A number of vaccines is now being tested on humans and companies are already investing in production capacity in case their vaccine is approved.
- An eventual vaccine will not immediately be available to the entire [world population](#). Not even now that major pharmaceutical companies and NGOs are investing tens of millions of dollars to prepare for the large-scale production of vaccines that have yet to be tested. Depending on the type of vaccine that is developed, several factors will determine the [production speed](#). This could pertain to specific equipment, the availability of well-trained personnel and, of course, the availability of high-grade raw materials. Even something as seemingly banal as the availability of medical glass in which to package the vaccine, could be crucial to the speed at which production can be increased.
- Most vaccines will be developed by large pharmaceutical corporations, possibly in cooperation with universities. These corporations are currently promising that they'll do their part to achieve a fair, global distribution of their vaccines. This is important to their reputation, and revenue, and they want to avoid becoming a pawn on the geopolitical stage (e.g. by becoming nationalized).
- Meanwhile, governments will involve themselves specifically in the distribution of scarce doses and they will initially take national societal, economic and geopolitical interests into account when doing so. During the [swine flu](#) outbreak in 2009, it became clear that a number of rich countries were only concerned with protecting their own populations and were impervious to appeals for international solidarity. The fact that the Chinese Academy of [Military Medical Sciences](#) is involved in the development of a highly advanced vaccine highlights once again the geopolitical importance of a corona vaccine.
- It's not surprising that countries believe themselves to be co-owners on the vaccines. Be it directly or indirectly, the state is always involved in processes of innovation: as financier, educator, custodian of infrastructures, etc (i.e. "the [entrepreneurial state](#)"). This legitimizes the role of the state as divider on a national scale, but also enables it to primarily utilize the technology for its own population (although every vaccine will have partly been facilitated by knowledge from the scientific community). From a moral perspective, one could, however, also argue that any vaccine is always the result of previous efforts from, and data shared by, the international scientific community and no country could ever be the sole owner of the final vaccine.
- At the initiative of the European Commission, an international consortium of mainly European countries – the U.S. did not participate at all – and NGOs, has raised \$8 billion dollars for, among3 other things, [global collaboration](#) in the development of a corona vaccine. The WHO is also developing guidelines for an effective and fair distribution of an eventual vaccine.
- Not everyone is enthusiastic about the advent of a corona vaccine. The [anti-vax](#) movement has campaigned against vaccines in general for years and is also up in arms already over a possible corona vaccine. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those advocating to make these vaccines [compulsory](#).



Connecting the dots

An effective vaccine could definitively end the corona crisis. Worldwide, many dozens of vaccines are being developed and some are [hopeful](#) that the first vaccines will be approved this year. This would, however, be unprecedentedly fast and chances of this happening are slim, if only because vaccines can also have serious side-effects (e.g. dengue fever and SARS). Moreover, there are doubts about the actual degree and duration of the protection a vaccine can offer, and mutations of the coronavirus could lead to an existing vaccine becoming less effective. Nonetheless, even if a vaccine doesn't get approved until next year, or even later, this would be an enormous victory for modern (multidisciplinary) science and would liberate us from the pandemic that's disrupting our society.

It's worthwhile to speculate on the question how this process of liberation will take place. In our collective imaginations, there seems to be a notion of a vaccine being hailed as a liberating army that will abruptly end a drawn-out war. This image ties in with the [war rhetoric](#) that has been applied to this crisis with abandon (e.g. we're at war with an invisible enemy and healthcare professionals are on the frontlines). In reality, the approval of a vaccine will be much more like D-Day; the beginning of the end of the battle, but hardly an immediate cease-fire.

This D-Day will probably only take place in the country of origin of the vaccine and, because of its scarcity, it will initially only reach part of the population there, presumably groups such as healthcare workers and the elderly. From that moment, it will still be months, if not years, before both the entire population has been vaccinated and there is herd immunity. This period will be characterized by debates on who is most in need of the vaccine (e.g. nursing staff), who deserves it the most (e.g. based on lifestyle) and, depending on the local care system, who is willing to pay the most. As in the current phase of containment of the pandemic, the

debate will oscillate between the importance of public health (i.e. vulnerable groups first) and that of the economy (e.g. hospitality workers first).

On a global level, the question will then be which other countries will get access to the vaccine. Initially, it's highly likely that the country that developed it will keep production entirely to itself, something Trump seems to be aiming for, but at a certain point, part of the production will also become available to other, friendly or high-paying, countries. By means of licenses, other countries will also be enabled to start their own production. India and China are currently the biggest producers of medicine, mostly developed in the U.S. or Europe, and will be particularly well-poised to start their own production lines. Furthermore, international [hackers](#) also seem to be engaged in attempts to ascertain the required recipe.

Depending on which country will be the first to develop an effective vaccine - China and the U.S. seem to be the frontrunners - there will be an extreme form of vaccine diplomacy. Especially China is likely to deploy a possible vaccine to strengthen ties (i.e. soft power) with other countries around the world and possibly also to gain more direct advantages (e.g. better terms in trade agreements). Building on the comparison with World War II, the distribution of the vaccine could even determine the sphere of influence of global power blocs. After the war, Europe was divided up among the allied powers. This could also happen to countries or regions that, for example, become dependent on an American or Chinese vaccine, which would place these countries under more direct influence from their vaccine donors.

It's no wonder then, that the WHO and European Union are placing such emphasis on global cooperation in the development of the potential vaccines and are attempting to come to agreements about fair distribution in this early stage.

Implications

- **The availability of a vaccine could mean that the economy can go full steam ahead. If several countries are able to "open" much sooner than others, this will lead to large disparities in wealth, which will also impact power relations between these countries. This could result in vaccine nationalism, but at the same time, countries also have an economic and medical interest in a global or regional "liberation" from the pandemic (e.g. in terms of international value chains).**
- **The development and distribution of a corona vaccine will have considerable consequences for both national as well as international societal cohesion and cooperation. The eventual vaccine will probably be used as a vector of soft power and possibly also as a more direct means of power.**
- **The distribution of a vaccine will also be a stress test for European unity and solidarity. There are several explicitly European development projects, but it remains to be seen whether a possible vaccine resulting from them would in fact be regarded as such or as a national product, with producing countries vaccinating their own populations first after all.**