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Covid Diplomacy in the Era of Pandemic Response: The Case of United Arab Emirates

By Osman Antwi-Boateng¹

Introduction

As the world grapples with the appropriate response against the COVID-19 pandemic with mixed results, a new opportunity for soft power influence in the form of COVID diplomacy has emerged. Countries such as the UAE that have embraced soft power as a foreign policy tool and have done relatively better in combating the pandemic have seized the initiative to provide bilateral and multilateral support in the form of COVID-19 related aid to struggling countries and international agencies, dubbed COVID-diplomacy. The UAE can engage in COVID diplomacy due to the following internal attractions: a long commitment to humanitarianism, a resilient economy, a well-managed COVID-19 response strategy, a national soft power strategy, a strong health care system, and logistical capacity. Bilaterally, UAE's COVID contributions are as follows: provision of medical supplies and health personnel to needy countries, acceptance of critically ill COVID patients, and direct economic assistance to countries whose economies have been adversely impacted by the pandemic. Multilaterally, the UAE has made major financial and medical supply donations to the WHO and other international aid agencies and serve as a transportation and logistical hub for the distribution of vaccines and medical supplies. The success of COVID diplomacy in the global fight against the pandemic will offer a template for bilateral and multilateral response towards future pandemics. Furthermore, it will create more opportunities for countries desirous of burnishing their soft power credentials via international humanitarian assistance.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, COVID-19, COVID diplomacy, Vaccine diplomacy, Soft power

Introduction

Power is a highly contested idea, and no single definition fits all purposes. Within the international relations contexts, power has been defined in resource and relational terms (Nye, 2011). The most used definition is that power is the ability to influence others to achieve your desired outcome (Nye, 2014). The behavior of people, organizations, or countries can be influenced through threats, payments, or inducements. Hence, power is generally classified as hard power and soft power, and this paper focuses on the UAE's soft power. Soft power is an important element in international relations and political science. Globalization and information technology revolutions have led to increased use of soft power in foreign policies (Khan, 2012). A country's global influence can be strategically and systematically created through soft power strategies.

The UAE has actively used diverse strategies and foreign policies, such as foreign aid/humanitarian assistance, to create a positive brand image of the nation and/to enhance global and regional standing (Saber, Paris & Marochi, 2018). Apart from projecting itself as a regional power, the UAE seeks to gain influence as an emerging global power. Soft power has been instrumental in attracting international tourists, foreign investment, and creating the UAE's reputation as a great destination to live and work. However, there is currently no comprehensive

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research on how the UAE has used a combination of foreign aid and COVID assistance as a new source of soft power.

This paper aims to explore how foreign aid and COVID-19 assistance, including medical supplies and COVID-19 vaccines' supply, have created a new source of soft power for the UAE. The remainder of this paper presents an overview of UAE's history of humanitarianism, conceptual and theoretical framework, methodology, factors enabling UAE's COVID diplomacy, and the UAE's contribution towards fighting COVID worldwide.

Literature Review: UAE's Legacy of Foreign Aid/ Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian assistance or foreign aid is tied to the founding of the UAE. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, UAE's founder, is acclaimed as the initiator of foreign aid in the UAE. The main theme of Zayed's foreign policy was to contribute to the Islamic world positively (Alzaabi, 2019). In the early years after its founding, the UAE targeted Arab countries through its foreign aid policy.

Most of the countries that received UAE's humanitarian aid, such as Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, were involved in the Israeli-Arab conflicts (Alzaabi, 2019). In fact, the Arab states got approximately half of the UAE foreign aid in the initial years of the federation. By 1975, only four years following its founding, the UAE offered nearly 9 percent of its GDP as humanitarian aid (Alzaabi, 2019). The UAE's foreign aid continued to evolve significantly in the subsequent years.

Based on the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development's (ADFD) annual report of 1975, the UAE had expanded its foreign aid to more countries, such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Republic of Mali, and Bangladesh (Alzaabi, 2019). As of 2003, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) had offered 152 loans worth 11399.85 million Dirhams to 45 nations. Further, the ADFD annual report of 2003 showed that the Arab countries had received the largest share of the humanitarian aid at 77.18%, African nations got 4.67%, Asian states got 15.78%, and other countries across the world received 2.37% (Alzaabi, 2019). Reports show that the UAE's humanitarian aid evolved remarkably in recent decades.

According to Saberi et al. (2018), the UAE is the world leader in foreign aid. Reports show that the UAE offered foreign aid worth \$8.8 billion to 155 nations in 2015 alone. By 2018, the UAE had increased the share of foreign aid to most parts of the world. Asia received AED 8.28 billion (43%) and African received AED 5.44 billion (28%) of the total development aid (Emirates News Agency, 2018). Yemen received the largest share of development assistance in Asia at AED 2.97 billion, representing about one-third of the foreign aid distributed to Asian countries (Emirates News Agency, 2018).

Evolution has also been witnessed in the kind of foreign aid offered to different states. Approximately 94% of the UEA's foreign aid is meant for development programs and is offered to public aid programs (Emirates News Agency, 2018). This assistance is meant to help countries maintain balances of payment, strengthen infrastructure enterprise/development, maintain financial stability, focus on areas of renewable energy, transportation, education, and health (Emirates News Agency, 2018).

In 2015, the UAE announced that it would be a global logistics distributor of humanitarian assistance as of 2021 (The National Staff, 2015). Dubai hosts the International Humanitarian City, which brings together nine UN agencies and over 40 companies and NGOs that provide urgent aid and support development (The National Staff, 2015).

The UAE uses foreign aid as a tool for soft power to increase the country's global reputation and broadcast its culture, contributions, heritage, and identity to the world (Gulf News, 2017).

However, the UAE has indicated that it hopes to increase its humanitarian assistance to impact weak and fragile communities. The UAE wants to ensure the beneficiaries of its foreign aid attain sustainable development, peace, and prosperity (Emirates News Agency, 2018). It has provided humanitarian assistance to countries experiencing disasters, crises, peace, and security issues.

Beyond helping countries to develop, the UAE has several vested interests. According to Khan (2012), the UAE uses diverse soft power techniques to attain its socioeconomic growth targets. The UAE has become a global hub for different productive activities like expos, conferences, exhibitions, seminars, and fairs. Presently, the country is among the most preferred destinations for service-oriented projects, medium and small enterprise ventures, FDI, and human interaction (Khan, 2012).

Another critical goal of the UAE's foreign aid is to create global attraction for its education, governance, enterprise, and digital infrastructure. There is a need to improve the country's image in the global arena. According to Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2021), the ultimate goal of UAE's soft power is to create opportunities for global engagements and partnerships in the domains of event hosting, multilateralism, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and philanthropy.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Soft power has been defined as the capacity to influence others to get an outcome that one desires through attraction instead of payment or coercion (Nye, 2008). However, there is probably not a unanimous definition of soft power. Nye (2011) has described soft power as attractive power, the capacity to reshape or shape preferences without using payment or force, and the capacity to cause others to do what you want.

Saeed Mohammad Al Eter the Director-General of UAE'S Public Diplomacy Office described soft power as the ability to make others love your culture, values, leaders, and way of life (Masudi, 2019). He added that soft power is shaping how the world views you and how this view affects others' decisions about you (Masudi, 2019). Joseph Nye coined the phrase 'soft power' in 1990 after examining American economic and military power resources (Nye, 2014). European leaders and the Japanese and Australian governments later used soft power to delineate their power sources (Nye, 2014). During the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress, President Hu Jintao expressed the need for China to expand its soft power (Nye, 2014).

The primary sources of soft power are culture, foreign policies, and political values (Nye, 2014). Notably, military conquest and force have become less potent sources of power in the international scene (Nye, 1990). Countries use diverse approaches to increase their soft power. The primary contributors of soft power are mass media, conferences and fairs, exhibitions, and seminars (Khan, 2012). For example, the government of Qatar launched Al Jazeera TV to be one of its sources of soft power. China has established Confucius Institutes across the world to teach others Chinese culture and language and is expanding its TV and radio broadcasting (Nye, 2014).

The US has dominated using hard power but also stands out in expanding soft power through universities, civil society universities, companies, churches, and foundations (Nye, 2004). US culture, values, and ideas have helped Washington attract supporters and partners. Soft power is valuable because it can boost human resources, attract more tourists, and develop the service and hotel industry (Khan, 2012). Even though countries implement different soft power activities, their basic themes are exhibiting friendly gestures, attracting foreign direct investments (FDI), tolerance, and respect for humanity.

Countries treat soft power as their foreign policy resource and a tool for influencing international processes. States can establish foreign policies around media, intergovernmental

organizations (IGOs), and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Nye, 2008). Soft power enables countries with limited traditional influence resources to shape international processes. Any country with efficient soft power resources can shape international processes in a certain region or globally. The case of the UAE shows that any nation can deliberately develop soft power despite its location, size, type, and racial or religious background (Antwi-Boateng & Alhashmi, 2021). A prerequisite for developing soft power is first to put domestic affairs in order.

Foreign aid is an essential element of foreign policy. An essential objective for allocating foreign aid is to advance foreign policy (Apodaca, 2017). For instance, Norway has a huge aid budget that complements its theme of promoting global peace with a focus on Colombia, the Middle East, and Sri Lanka (Nye, 2008). According to Apodaca (2017), foreign aid helps to support geostrategic interests, create and sustain foreign bases, maintain allied regimes in power, or strengthen alliances. Foreign aid can be applied to retain relations with foreign powers, facilitate cooperation, and build and maintain strong allies (Apodaca, 2017). Nations continually use foreign aid to pursue foreign policy rather than targeting development and poverty reduction.

In 2017, the UAE established a Soft Power Council to create a thorough strategy to strengthen the country's global position (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and the Future, 2017). The Soft Power Council was also tasked with creating a consolidated plan to communicate the country's values and culture across the world. This Council reports to the UAE Cabinet and has been tasked with creating an integrated national approach that consolidates the private and public sectors' roles in attaining soft power. An integrated strategy would help to convey the UAE's history in new ways (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and the Future, 2017). The Soft Power Council ensures that the soft power strategy is consistent with humanitarian aid, economics, science, technology, and culture to ensure it establishes a relationship with the Arab nation and global partners.

The UAE has developed several resources of soft power, such as governance, education, and aid (Masudi, 2019). Foreign aid is among the major sources of soft power in the UAE. Masudi (2019) attests that UAE is the biggest humanitarian donor globally in relation to its GDP. In 2018, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development's committee named the UAE as the globe's biggest foreign aid donor relative to its GDP for the 5th year running (Emirates News Agency, 2018).

In 2017, the UAE surpassed the UN's target of 0.7 percent official development donation relative to its Gross National Income (GNI) by donating approximately AED 19.32 billion (Emirates News Agency, 2018). Nearly 54% of total foreign aid by the UAE are non-refundable grants meant to support development projects in the 147 nations, with 40 beneficiaries being some of the least developed nations in different continents (Emirates News Agency, 2018). The UAE has plans to increase its foreign aid, which clearly shows the country's attempts to promote its foreign policy through soft power.

The emergence of COVID-19 affected nearly every way of life globally but created an opportunity for some countries to advance their foreign policy. In particular, vaccines are being used as a tool or source of soft power in what has been termed vaccine diplomacy or COVID diplomacy (Woertz & Yellinek, 2021; Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). Countries have integrated vaccine supplies to pre-existing foreign policy priorities and politics (Woertz & Yellinek, 2021). Vaccines have thus become a powerful tool of foreign policy.

Russia and China are increasing their soft power across the world by presenting vaccines donation as benevolent actions. The Chinese and Russians use their vaccines to forge new partnerships, strengthen relations with allies, and humiliate Western nations for their failure to act

(Woertz & Yellinek, 2021). Hence, Russia and China attempt to portray themselves as strategic global powers and saviors of developing countries.

The strategies of these countries are clear attempts to boost their international reputations. Even non-vaccine-producing countries, such as the UAE, have joined vaccine diplomacy (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). The UAE entered vaccine diplomacy due to its strong economic status, small population and size, and low rate of COVID-19 infections. Soft power is mainly playing by donating resources to nations with inadequate medical resources, facilities, equipment, and economic resources to those economically impacted.

Although there is vast literature about the UAE foreign aid and soft power, past studies have not explained how COVID-19 assistance is linked to soft power in the context of the UAE. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative analysis of secondary data and primary data. Secondary data analysis involves the collection and use of already existing data on the topic of study. For this paper, the topic of study was the UAE's soft power through foreign aid and COVID assistance. The first step in this methodology is an in-depth literature review to identify what other writers have written about soft power and foreign aid. In this case, data were collected from secondary sources. These sources include scholarly journals, government documents, media sources, and newspaper articles. A wealth of literature is available online regarding the UAE's humanitarian aid and relations to soft power.

The advantages of using secondary data are economic savings in terms of labor, time, and money (Wickham, 2019). Secondary data analysis is convenient as opposed to primary data collection, which is time-consuming. The disadvantages of secondary data analysis are significant because the collected data might not suit the current study, and research does not have control over the study population, study design, and variables being tested (Wickham, 2019). The UAE government documents are primary data sources. A major advantage of primary data is a high level of accuracy because it has not been manipulated but collecting this data can be time consuming.

The search criteria developed for this paper were effective in ensuring the inclusion of appropriate sources. Sources were included if they were published within the last five years and mentioned the UAE's foreign aid/ humanitarian assistance, soft power, or COVID-19. In relation to COVID-19, a broad discretion was adopted to include sources about medical supplies, such as personal protective equipment, screening kits, test kits, and COVID-19 vaccines. Sources were excluded if they were older and did not talk about the core elements of study, including soft power, foreign aid/ humanitarian assistance, and COVID-19.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Bryman (2012) indicates that thematic analysis is among the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis. This method involves identifying themes in the collected data and grouping themes based on relevance and similarity. The advantage of thematic analysis is that it can analyze different types of qualitative data. Also, this method is flexible because it can be applied in different contexts. The primary disadvantage of thematic analysis is that it lacks a clear outline procedure. It does not offer a procedure for starting and organizing the analysis (Bryman, 2012).

For the current paper, the main themes that were identified in the analysis are the history of the UAE's humanitarian assistance/foreign aid and the contribution of the UAE towards combating COVID worldwide, with several subthemes, including bilateral responses, multilateral

responses, and cooperation with international foundations and NGOs. The following section will present a detailed analysis of the findings.

Factors Aiding UAE's Covid Diplomacy

Effective Pandemic Response

A major factor enabling the UAE to actively engage in COVID or vaccine diplomacy is the fact that the country has been very successful in managing the pandemic in the home front. This is evidenced by the fact that the UAE is the most vaccinated country against COVID-19 in the world. According to data available on September 16, 2021, 81% of all residents in the UAE are fully vaccinated (Our World in Data, 2021) with booster shots actively ongoing. Indeed, the success of the country has not gone unnoticed by the international community.

According to a world ranking of the "Safest cities during the COVID-19 pandemic for the Second Quarter of 2021" by the London based Analytics Consortium, Deep Knowledge Group, Abu Dhabi and Dubai were the first and fifth best COVID-19 response cities among 50 cities in the world (Maxwell, 2021). UAE's record of effective pandemic response has given the country the reputational legitimacy both at home and abroad to engage in COVID diplomacy. In addition, UAE's successful pandemic management has made it an international role model and an attractive country to emulate by other countries in need of assistance to manage their respective pandemic responses.

Commitment to Soft Power via Philanthropy

The UAE has been able to engage in COVID diplomacy because of a deliberate foreign policy of soft power projection via philanthropy. This is evidenced by the fact that between 2010-2021, the total value of UAE foreign aid was \$56.14 billion. Out of this amount, about 59.1 percent was in the form of grants where recipient countries were not required to repay (Emirates News Agency, 2021). In order to institutionalize international philanthropy as a major foreign policy tool, the UAE government established a "Soft Power Council" in 2017 constituting top ranked cabinet ministers and officials and launched the "UAE Soft Power Strategy" in 2017. The aim of this Strategy is "to increase the country's global reputation abroad highlighting its identity, heritage, culture and contributions of the UAE to the world" (The United Arab Emirates' Government Portal, 2021).

In furtherance of this objective, the UAE has embraced public diplomacy to effectively reach and engage more people globally. Hence, the UAE has identified humanitarian diplomacy as one of its six pillars of public diplomacy. Therefore, it was not surprising that in times of an unanticipated pandemic such as COVID-19, the country was already institutionally primed to play a leading role globally in fighting the pandemic via COVID diplomacy.

Resilient Economy

While the utility of soft power in foreign policy is universally acknowledged, it is not cheap and requires a strong economy to cultivate it. According to Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2021:16) "Soft power requires long-term commitments that demand considerable political and financial capital" which the UAE has built up over the years. In addition, a commitment to international philanthropy requires a strong and resilient economy that can withstand global shocks such as pandemics. Indeed, the UAE's economy has proven to be resilient in the midst of the pandemic as proven by its 9th ranking as the most competitive economy in the world and the most

competitive economy in the Middle East, according to a 2021 survey by Switzerland's International Institute for Management Development (Nair, 2021).

A major COVID diplomacy asset of the UAE is its outstanding infrastructure where the 2019 Global Competitive Report ranked the country “first in road quality, third in airport infrastructure and means of air transport quality, fourth in seaport infrastructure quality, third in mobile phone subscriptions per 100 users and fourth in overall infrastructure quality” (Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2021:9). The infrastructural capacity of the UAE has enabled the country to play a vital role in the global supply chain of COVID-19 vaccine transportation and distribution, thereby boosting its COVID diplomacy.

In addition, the UAE has expanded its health care capabilities and improved the quality of care it provides, thus attracting medical tourists while also engaging in collaborations with international organizations, such as the World Health Organization and other NGOs. Such partnerships raise the global profile of the UAE as a positive contributor to solving global health problems and achieving sustainable development goals related to health and well-being (Mcbride, Hawkes, Buse, 2019).

International Engagement and Reputation

For any country to successfully engage in soft power under which COVID diplomacy falls, it must have the tangible and intangible capacity to do so in the form of a vast diplomatic footprint and necessary international reputation to pull it off. Tangibly, the UAE has increased its diplomatic footprint around the world by opening embassies around the world. Currently, the UAE has 100 embassies overseas, 21 consulates, and a representative office. It also hosts 125 embassies, 76 consulates, and six diplomatic representative offices in its capital city of Abu Dhabi (EmbassyPages, 2021). These increased diplomatic missions at home and overseas offer the UAE the physical space for diplomatic networking and engagement with countries in need of vaccines or any other forms of assistance necessary to augment their respective COVID strategies. Diplomatic missions also offer a forum for joint coordination during COVID diplomacy or assistance.

Another tangible piece of evidence of UAE’s increased international reputation and global engagement can be viewed in the increased number of countries where UAE citizens are not required to obtain advance visas. This was achieved via a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements with countries and the European Union. According to the Passport Index issued by Arton Capital in 2018, a UAE passport can now be used to travel to 167 different countries without obtaining a visa in advance. Marco Gantenbein, Director at Henley and Partners Middle East, stated that “there are multiple factors that cause the upward trajectory in a passport’s ranking on the index. [...] One important attribute of a powerful passport is the effectiveness of its soft power in the face of mounting international challenges” (Gornall 2018). Less visa restrictions facilitates easy travel for UAE officials coordinating and facilitating humanitarian assistance such as vaccine supplies, which facilitates COVID diplomacy.

The enhanced reputation of the UAE on the international scene because of the values it promotes at home and abroad constitutes its intangible capacity to conduct COVID diplomacy. Once a country is seen by the international community to be committed to and promoting desired values and norms, its reputation is likely to be enhanced in the international community and thus likely to be engaged diplomatically by more international actors. Antwi-Boateng and Binhuwaiden (2017) have observed that the UAE has embraced several norms and values at home and abroad. These include religious tolerance whereby it allows residents of different faiths to freely worship

and even assist in building religious places of worship for them, a rarity in the Arab Gulf. In addition, the UAE is a Norm Entrepreneur when it comes to women's rights/empowerment and environmental conservation by financially supporting multiple international organizations working on the aforementioned issues. These are desired values and norms with universal appeal that enhance the reputation of the UAE for internalizing and promoting them. Norm Entrepreneurships increase the likelihood of more diplomatic engagement for the UAE with respect to COVID or vaccine diplomacy as more countries are amenable to engaging the UAE due to the attractiveness of the values that it espouses.

UAE's Contributions Towards the Global Covid Fight

Bilaterally

The UAE provided medical supplies to needy countries and even developed nations, such as the US and UK. As of July 2021, the UAE's help amounted to 80% of the international assistance to nations impacted by COVID-19 (Salim, 2021). The UAE distributed 2,154 tons of medical aid, personal protective equipment, ventilators, testing kits, and screening equipment to 135 nations (UAE Government, 2021a). A 2021 government report shows the UAE dispatched 196 medical aid flights, set up six field hospitals in Jordan, Sudan, Conakry, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, and Lebanon, and a mobile clinic in Turkmenistan (UAE Government, 2021A).

The UAE donated about 200,000 test kits to the United States, which were used to launch a mass COVID-19 testing station in Las Vegas (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2020). Besides, the Children's National Hospital got donations from the UAE Embassy in Washington that helped to establish a walk-up/drive-up COVID-19 testing site for young patients and children (Relief Web, 2020).

The UAE provides health personnel to needy countries and even accepted critically ill COVID-19 patients from other nations. For example, Emirati doctors supported and worked alongside Americans to treat COVID patients in US medical institutions and hospitals (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2020). The UAE supported the treatment of British nationals by turning ExCeL London, a conference and exhibition venue belonging to Abu Dhabi Government, into a field hospital for COVID patients with a 4000-bed capacity (Relief Web, 2020). As part of COVID-19 assistance, the UAE offered ExCeL London for free and covered the operations costs.

Furthermore, the UAE offered direct economic assistance to nations whose economies were negatively affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) was among the stakeholders that contributed to a \$10 billion kit by the Arab Coordination Group meant to assist developing nations to rebuild their economies (UAE Government, 2021a). ADFD also postponed debt repayments by emerging economies to allow them to recover from the devastating economic challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

When vaccines became available, the UAE collaborated with China to manufacture COVID vaccines in the country. The UAE established a production site for the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine. Agreements between Abu Dhabi-based G42 and Sinopharm CNBG made the UAE the first country in the region to launch a COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing facility (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). This joint venture seeks to manufacture 200 million doses yearly (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). The vaccines produced in the UAE were branded "*Hayat-Vax*" which means "life vaccine" in Arabic, for ease of marketing in the Arab states (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). Evidently, the UAE is seeking to increase its soft power by upgrading from a buyer and distributor of vaccines to a provider of vaccines.

Multilaterally

The UAE has made major medical supply and financial donations to the WHO and other international aid agencies. Government data shows that the UAE had donated about USD 10 million worth of COVID test kits to the WHO (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2020). The WHO Operations Supply and Logistics Hub is found at the Dubai International Humanitarian City (IHC) and has been important in facilitating the supply of protective equipment and medical supplies to different countries. Working with the WHO, the UAE dispatched a flight carrying WHO experts and 7.5 tons of medical supplies to Iran to help the country fight COVID-19 (Relief Web, 2020).

More importantly, the UAE served as a transportation hub for transporting COVID-19 vaccines and as a logistical hub for distributing medical supplies and vaccines globally. The UAE is among the 80 nations that presented interest in working with the Gavi (Vaccine Alliance) COVAX facility (WHO, 2020). Its strategic location between East and West and advanced logistics industry enabled it to serve Middle East, South Asia, and Africa (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021).

Apart from distributing Chinese vaccines, the UAE has agreements to distribute Western medical supplies and vaccines like Pfizer. Vaccines arrive in the UAE from the production hub and are stored before redistribution to other nations (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). Because of their aviation and cutting-edge logistical infrastructure, Dubai and Abu Dhabi have become pivotal transport hubs for COVID-19 supplies.

Hope Consortium made the distribution of medical supplies and equipment possible. Hope Consortium is a private-public partnership based in the UAE established to offer comprehensive supply chain solutions to ensure COVID-19 vaccines are availed globally. The partnership comprised the Department of Health-Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi Ports Company, Etihad Cargo, Rafed (Abu Dhabi-based healthcare company), Company PJSC-ADQ, SkyCell (a Switzerland company that specializes in making temperature-controlled containers), and other freight partners (UAE Government, 2021b). Its objective is to deliver about 18 billion vaccine doses across the world by the end of 2021 (UAE Government, 2021b).

Approximately 2,062 tons of pharmaceutical supplies had been delivered to 135 nations as of July 2021 (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2021). Almost 1 in every 20 COVID vaccine doses administered globally has passed via Dubai and flown on Emirates flights (Gulf News, 2021). Emirates SkyCargo led the global air cargo sector in transporting COVID vaccines and other vital medical supplies during the pandemic. These efforts have made the UAE a leader in the distribution of medical supplies and COVID-19 vaccines.

Public-Private Partnerships

The UAE has collaborated with international foundations and NGOs to boost the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide. In particular, the UAE has established strong cooperation with the Gates Foundation. In March 2020, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan talked with Bill Gates about the partnership to fight the novel coronavirus (Reuters Staff, 2020). They discussed the significance of improving cooperation between private entities, organizations, and multilateral institutions in fighting COVID 19.

During the conversation between Sheikh Mohammad and Bill Gates, Gates commended the UAE's efforts to support other nations battling the virus through protective equipment and medical supplies (UAE-US Relationship, 2021). Bill Gates and Sheikh Mohammad also noted the

importance of cooperation in supporting medical institutions and research centers in their quest to develop solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mark Suzman, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Chief Executive, noted that the cooperation between the Gates Foundation and the UAE prioritizes the need to protect life and prevent economic decline (Suzman, 2021). This objective has been achieved by joint efforts to deliver COVID vaccines to all nations without prioritizing wealthy countries.

As the UAE continues supplying vaccines and medical supplies worldwide, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been involved in initiatives to build an inclusive recovery and cushion the effect of the pandemic on the poorest. Through these efforts, Mark Suzman indicated that the Gates Foundation allotted \$1.75 billion to COVID responses (Suzman, 2021).

Further, the Gates Foundation was involved in vaccine development and delivery to ensure equitable access. Mark Suzman noted that the Gates Foundation was established to ensure fair access to all life-saving vaccines (Suzman, 2021). Both the UAE and Gates Foundation worked with Gavi (Vaccine Alliance) to ensure vaccines reached low-income countries across the world.

Other NGOs involved in this cooperation are the WHO, Unicef, and CEPI. Most of these organizations are partners in the Covax facility, an initiative whose aim is to extend COVID vaccines access to the 92 poorest nations in the world (Suzman, 2021). The Gates Foundation, the UAE, and other NGOs have ensured that Covax is funded and organized in a manner that increases vaccines' access worldwide.

The UAE has a critical role in the cooperation through the International Humanitarian City. When vaccines arrive in the UAE, they are packed with syringes and needles and flow to the destination. About 25% of the syringes and needles for the Covax facility are manufactured by Abu Dhabi Medical Devices Company (Kumar, 2021).

According to Alsuwaidi et al. (2021), Abu Dhabi Medical Devices Company is offering approximately 500 million needles and syringes for COVID-19 vaccines in collaboration with different international entities and NGOs. Therefore, the UAE has shown its ability to collaborate with international NGOs and foundations to accelerate the fights against the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

The UAE has learned the art of using foreign aid as a tool for soft power. Since its founding, the UAE has often used a substantial value of its GDP to fund development projects, peace programs, and provide food for vulnerable people in different countries worldwide. Based on this background, the UAE grasped the opportunity to use COVID-19 assistance as a new tool for soft power. The UAE has achieved great milestones in the use of COVID-19 medical equipment, supplies, and vaccines to create international relations, form new alliances, and create a positive image of the country. Most developed and developing countries perceive the UAE as an indispensable partner in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic and economic recovery. From 2020 when coronavirus started spreading globally, the UAE has assisted hundreds of countries worldwide. The assistance has gone to both poor and wealthy countries, such as the US and the UK. In addition, the UAE also offered economic assistance to vulnerable countries and delayed debt repayments.

However, the extent to which the use of COVID-19 assistance will increase the UAE's soft power is unclear. Soft power is financially costly, and the UAE has already spent millions of dollars and resources to assist countries impacted by the COVID pandemic. Despite these uncertainties, it is notable that the UAE has already boosted its soft power globally through

COVID-19 aid and vaccines' supply. Soon, the UAE is likely to reap from the soft power created through COVID-19 assistance in terms of increased FDI, tourists, international exhibitions, expos, and global events.

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