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Analysis
Paper

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISES. THE REACTION OF THE MIDDLE POWERS AND MEXICAN FOREIGN POLICY

OCTOBER 2021

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Foreign policy strategies are plans based on national needs and capabilities seeking the rational reaction of the State to the international environment and that, therefore, establish parameters for the decisions of countries outside their territory. According to Hans Morgenthau, these guidelines for action must distinguish "between what is desirable in every place and time and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of place and time".^[1]

This analysis paper examines how middle powers react^[2] to global events that simultaneously threaten their national stability and the international order. Specifically, it explains the international scenario Mexico faced at the beginning of the pandemic, the interests of the great powers and their room for maneuver in multilateral forums and bilateral negotiations in order to

understand the strategy designed by the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some of the questions guiding this analysis are: what has been the international environment Mexico has encountered during the COVID-19 crisis? What role has the Mexican State played in the international system during this crisis? How has Mexico dealt with the internal problems caused by the pandemic through its foreign policy tools?

National capabilities and the international environment

At the end of 2019, Mexico, the fifteenth largest economy in the world (with a gross domestic product of USD 1.258 trillion), stood out for being the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nation with the lowest health expenditure (USD 1150 per capita)^[3] and for being one of the seven members with population medical coverage below 95% (89.3% of the Mexican population has access to basic health

[1] Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1985, p. 7.

[2] "States that are neither great powers nor minor powers in terms of their power, capacity and influence in the international arena. These are States with a propensity to promote the cohesion and stability of the global system". Eduard Jordaan, "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers", in *Politikon. South African Journal of Political Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, November 2003, p. 165.

[3] The United States, the country with the highest healthcare spending, invested USD 10 000 per capita in 2019. OECD, *Health at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, París, OECD Publishing, 2020, p. 11, at <https://doi.org/10.1787/4dd50c09-en> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

services).⁴ In addition, in the four aspects that, according to the OECD, make up the main indicators of the quality and extension of people's lives (life expectancy, preventable mortality, morbidity due to chronic diseases and self-assessed health), Mexico — together with Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia — consistently obtained figures below the average of OECD members.⁵ Since 2018, the technology and science budget has been reduced in Mexico. According to the Global Innovation Index (GII), as of 2019, innovation in Mexico is in the expected ranges for upper-middle-income economies⁶ and, after Chile and Costa Rica, is the third highest in Latin America.⁷ This capacity for innovation is reflected in the specialization characteristics of the patents produced by the Mexican pharmaceutical industry.⁸ In the same year, Mexico was the second fastest growing upper-middle income economy in terms of biotechnology patent publications (8.8%), the third in pharmaceutical patents (10.8%) and the fourth in medical technology patents (7.9%).⁹ However, a weakness of the Mexican technological and scientific development system is its accentuated dependence on state investment — in 2018, 76.8% of its resources

came from government sources.¹⁰ For the 2019 federal budget year, the budget of the National Council of Science and Technology (Conacyt) was reduced by 12% and, in May 2019, In May 2019, the funds allocated by this Council to all research centers decreased between 30% and 50%.¹¹ By the end of 2019, Mexico's scientific and technological capacity was facing a complicated scenario. This is how Mexico arrived to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since before the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, the United States and China have established themselves as the preeminent powers in the interstate system. On the one hand, Chinese capabilities to influence global structures and international actors have strengthened and diversified; on the other, U.S. influence in the world has not waned since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, these two economies have established themselves as the world's largest economies — in 2019, U.S. GDP reached 21 374 trillion (15.9% of global GDP), while Chinese GDP reached USD 14 343 trillion (17.31% of global GDP).¹² The strength of these countries and the prosperity of their public and

[4] The other six OECD countries with the lowest levels of population coverage of basic health services are Chile (94%), Estonia (94.1%), Hungary (94%), Poland (92.6%), Slovakia (94.6) and the United States (90.8%). *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[6] Soumitra Dutta, Bruno Lanvin and Sacha Wunsch-Vincent (eds.), *The Global Innovation Index 2019: Creating Healthy Lives—The Future of Medical Innovation*, Ithaca/Fontainebleau/Ginebra, Cornell University/INSEAD/OMPI, 2019, p. xxii, Tabla A “Innovation performance at different income levels, 2019”.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[10] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Science, Technology, and Innovation: GERD by Source Funds”, in http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS&lang=en# (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[11] Hon. Congress of Mexico City-Commission on Science, Technology and Innovation, *Dictamen a la proposición con punto de acuerdo por el que el Congreso de la Ciudad de México expresa su solidaridad con la postura de las comunidades de los centros públicos de investigación Conacyt*, Mexico City, July 10 2019, p. 4, available at <https://congresocdmx.gob.mx/archivos/com-ciencia/CCT-DIC-PDA-CONACYT-10-07-2019.pdf> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[12] World Bank, “GDP (Current US\$) – United States, China, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom”, in World Bank Data, at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2019&locations=US-CN-JP-DE-GB&start=2008> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).



private sectors are reflected in their healthcare systems and research capabilities. The United States is the OECD country with the highest spending on health, with an investment of USD 10 000 per capita in 2019;^[13] however, its population's access to health services (90.8%) is lower than the OECD average (95%).^[14] In China, 95% of the population had, in 2019, access to the basic health coverage system,^[15] although health spending per capita in that country (USD 688) was 17.22% of the average figure in OECD countries (USD 3994).^[16] The growth of the Chinese pharmaceutical industry before the pandemic had been remarkable; annual

investment in this sector, in 2019, reached 0.07% of GDP which, compared to 2010 figures, has implied an increase of 250%. Meanwhile, in the United States, state funding for pharmaceutical research and development reached 0.19% of GDP that year.^[17] In both countries, dependence on government funds is low compared to the rest of the world; state participation in science, technology and innovation in the United States is 23% and in China it is 20.2%;^[18] nevertheless, these two countries are among the ten most innovative in the world — sixth and fifth place, respectively.^[19] Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing political and economic rivalries between these

[13] OCDE, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

[15] OMS, "Universal Health Coverage and Health Reform in China", at <https://www.who.int/china/health-topics/universal-health-coverage> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[16] OCDE, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 214. In Europe, the average government investment in this sector was 0.06% of GDP, in 2019.

[18] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *op. cit.*

[19] S. Dutta, B. Lanvin and S. Wunsch-Vincent (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. xxxviii.



two countries had already triggered heightened scientific and technological competition that, while accelerating the development of global science and technology, has divided academic and technological communities around the world into politicized blocs. The United Kingdom and the European knowledge and innovation industries have aligned themselves with U.S. policies of scientific containment of China, while Russia and several Southeast Asian countries have joined the Chinese alliance for scientific and technological primacy.²⁰ Under these

circumstances, at the end of 2019, the first outbreak of COVID-19 appeared in Wuhan.

What appeared to be a new containable alert — as had been with SARS-CoV-1 in 2003, A H1N1 in 2008 and MERS in 2012 — spread rapidly around the world. In January 2020, the Chinese government confirmed human-to-human transmission of the virus,²¹ and by the middle

[20] Sirish Paudel, "Analysis of the US-China Tech Competition from a Theoretical Perspective", in *Modern Diplomacy*, August 30, 2020, en <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/08/30/analysis-of-the-us-china-tech-competition-from-a-theoretical-perspective/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Graham Allison, "The U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Clues from History", in Belfer Center, febrero de 2020, at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/us-china-strategic-competition-clues-history> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Julien de Trouilloud, "U.S.-China Rivalry: When Great Power Competition Endangers Global Science", in *Bulletin of the*

Atomic Scientists, October 16, 2020, at <https://thebulletin.org/2020/10/us-china-rivalry-when-great-power-competition-endangers-global-science/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); G. Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making", in *The National Interest*, December 14, 2018, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Ehsan Masood, "How China Is Redrawing the Map of World Science", in *Nature*, May 1, 2019, at <https://www.nature.com/immersive/d41586-019-01124-7/index.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[21] Lily Kuo, "China Confirms Human-to-Human Transmission of Coronavirus", *The Guardian*, January 21, 2020, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/20/coronavirus-spreads-to-beijing-as-china-confirms-new-cases> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

of that month, new cases had been confirmed outside Wuhan, though still on Chinese territory. By mid-March, the virus had spread alarmingly throughout Europe and the United States, in what the United Nations Secretary General called the world's "worst crisis" since World War II.²² As of September 2021, the pandemic has not ceased. There are more than 4.6 million deaths from COVID-19 in the world and more than 225.5 million cases have been confirmed. Among the countries most affected by the virus are the United States, Brazil, India, Mexico, Peru, Russia.²³ In addition, the World Bank reports that most countries went into recession as a consequence of the pandemic and that the loss of per capita income in 2020 will have been the largest since 1870. The global economic system is facing its greatest crisis since 1929 and, if the trend of contagions continues, a catastrophic scenario is projected — banking and financial crises, debt problems for public and private entities and an 8% reduction in world GDP.²⁴ Faced with this scenario, states are reacting according to their individual and collective interests, taking into account their national and international

needs and taking advantage of their capabilities to escape the effects of the pandemic and influence international efforts against COVID-19.

The pillars of the international system and the pandemic

In the global system of the 21st century, states, economic groups and societies are not only interconnected, but also dependent on each other in their actions, intentions and destinies. As Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye put it, interactions in this web of interdependence have "costly effects", relevant consequences which shape and constrain the behavior of those involved.²⁵ Events such as the emergence of new viruses — in 2020, SARS-CoV-2 — in addition to accelerating and intensifying under the circumstances of globalization, have repercussions on the stability and dynamics of the entire system of interdependence.

The virus that had been found in humans in a Chinese province, in just a few months, burst into the economic, social and political normality of the planet, and reminded us that, in interdependent relationships, the most dependent are the most vulnerable and those who occupy the central positions of globalization influence the world's reaction to the crisis, as the others are dependent on them. At times, the great powers group together to implement mechanisms to contain threats to the global system — for example, the Group of Six (G6), established in the 1970s to deal with the economic effects of the United States' departure

[22] Tom Mitchell, Sun Yu, Xinning Liu and Michael Peel, "China and COVID-19: What Went Wrong in Wuhan?", *Financial Times*, October 17, 2020, at <https://www.ft.com/content/82574e3d-1633-48ad-8afb-71ebb3fe3dee> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); "Timeline: How the New Coronavirus Spread", in Al Jazeera, September 20, 2020, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/20/timeline-how-the-new-coronavirus-spread> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[23] According to Coronavirus Resource Center-Johns Hopkins University data (September 14, 2021).

[24] World Bank, "The Global Economic Outlook during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World", June 8, 2020, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[25] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, Boston, Longman, 2012, pp. 232-233.



from the gold standard and the OPEC oil embargo; sometimes, the major powers form broader platforms that involve middle powers and non-state actors in efforts to restore stability to globalization — as happened, for example, in 2008, when the G7 expanded into the Group of Twenty (G20).^[26] However, in 2020, there was no single, coordinated response by the preponderant nations; on the contrary, competition to demonstrate strength and greater resilience, response and aid capacity has marked the current health crisis.

In 2020, the first reaction of the major powers was to implement unilateral tactics aimed at reducing their vulnerability to the

rapidly advancing pandemic.^[27] To avoid contagion from abroad, in January, the United States banned entry into its territory to foreigners from China and Hong Kong;^[28] at the beginning of March, flights to the United States from Europe were suspended;^[29] days later, the country's borders with Mexico and Canada were closed to non-essential travel. On March 28, once the epidemic was under control in the country, China announced the restriction of flights to its territory and suspended the entry

[26] International Research Center (CII), *Order, Containment, and Change: The Group of Twenty, Mexico, SRE-IMR* (Analysis Paper 4), November 2019, at https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/data/file/508161/Nota_4_G20_ingles_3.pdf (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[27] R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

[28] Geoff Whitmore, "When Did President Trump Ban Travel from China? And Can You Travel to China Now?", in *Forbes*, October 19, 2020, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/geoffwhitmore/2020/10/19/when-did-president-trump-ban-travel-from-china-and-can-you-travel-to-china-now/?sh=1101c7a07484> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[29] "Coronavirus: Trump Suspends Travel from Europe to US", en *BBC News*, March 12, 2020, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51846923> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

of foreign travelers and residents.³⁰ The race to limit the effects of the spread of the virus led to the hoarding of medical supplies. According to information from U.S. intelligence agencies, during the outbreak in Wuhan and before reporting the contagions, China purchased a significant part of the world's production of protective and medical care instruments, and imposed restrictions on the export of medical products from its ports.³¹ The United States, for its part, invoked the Defense Production Act and limited the exit of critical medical material from its territory.³² As for measures to reduce vulnerability to the economic effects of the pandemic, the Chinese central bank eased financial regulations and reduced banks' reserve requirement rates — which introduced 70 billion euros into China's economy — and lowered interest rates; also, construction activities suspended during the first outbreaks were resumed and companies' social security contributions in Chinese territory

were deferred.³³ Thus, China avoided falling into a technical recession by growing 3.2% in the second quarter of the year.³⁴ In the meantime, some of the various economic strategies of the U.S. government to counter the effects of the crisis included using 312 billion dollars from its disaster fund to help the unemployed, deferring workers' tax payments, investing 510 billion in measures to prevent the bankruptcy of corporate groups and granting 349 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses.³⁵ The result of these unilateral containment policies was the growth of the U.S. economy by 33.1% in the third quarter of 2020.³⁶ On March 11, 2021, President Joe Biden signed into law a bill allocating 1.9 trillion to continue the economic recovery efforts initiated during the Donald Trump Administration.³⁷

[30] James Griffiths, "As Coronavirus Cases Spike Worldwide, China Is Closing Itself Off", in CNN, March 27, 2020, en <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/27/asia/china-coronavirus-foreigners-intl-hnk/index.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[31] Isabel Togoh, "China Covered Up Coronavirus to Hoard Medical Supplies, DHS Report Finds", in *Forbes*, May 4, 2020, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/isabeltogoh/2020/05/04/china-covered-up-coronavirus-to-hoard-medical-supplies-dhs-report-finds/?sh=2887ff411dba> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Betsy Woodruff Swan, "DHS Report Accuses China of Hiding Coronavirus Info So It Could Hoard Supplies", in *Politico*, May 3, 2020, at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/03/dhs-china-hiding-coronavirus-info-supplies-233185> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[32] Kerry B. Contini, Alexandre Lamy, Eunkyung Kim Shin and Laura Klick, "United States Invokes Defense Production Act to Limit Exports of Critical US Medical Supplies", in *Sanctions & Export Controls Update*, April 6, 2020, at <https://sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/united-states-invokes-defense-production-act-to-limit-exports-of-critical-us-medical-supplies/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[33] "China: Government and Institution Measures in Response to COVID-19", in KPMG, June 17, 2020, at <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/china-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[34] "Coronavirus: Chinese Economy Bounces Back into Growth", in BBC News, July 16, 2020, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53399999> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[35] International Monetary Fund, "Policy Responses to COVID-19", at <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#U> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[36] "U.S. Economy Grew at an Unrevised 33.1% Rate in the Third Quarter", in CNBC, November 25, 2020, at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/25/us-gdp-q3-2020-second-reading.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[37] The White House, "President Biden Announces American Rescue Plan", January 20, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2021/01/20/president-biden-announces-american-rescue-plan/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); The White House, "Bill Signing: H.R. 1319", March 11, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2021/03/11/bill-signing-h-r-1319/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); The White House, "Remarks by President Biden at Signing of the American Rescue Plan", March 11, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/11/remarks-by-president-biden-at-signing-of-the-american-rescue-plan/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).



However, despite efforts to reduce their vulnerability to the pandemic, by the spring of 2021, the effects of COVID-19 have lingered in both powers. The only way to end the crisis affecting not only the societies of these powers, but the entire system of globalization has been to obtain a vaccine that can contain the advance of the virus.

In addition to the efforts to contain the damage caused by the pandemic and to appear strong and resilient, there has been competition between the two great powers to confirm scientific supremacy and to reiterate the need for dependence on the other participants in the globalized system, as has been evident in the efforts of both countries to provide medical supplies to the rest of the world once their needs have been met and to present the most precious international public good: the vaccine against SARS-CoV-2.

Two months after the start of the pandemic, China increased its medical material production capacity and, by March 2020, was manufacturing 116 million face masks per day

(1200% more than in October 2019) for export.³⁸ In August, it was reported that global demand for medical equipment resulted in 7.2% growth in Chinese exports;³⁹ while, in October, the U.S. Congressional Research Service reported that the supply of these products was conditioned by political calculations.⁴⁰ The United States has

[38] Chad P. Brown, "COVID-19: China's Exports of Medical Supplies Provide a Ray of Hope", in Peterson Institute for International Economics, March 26, 2020, at <https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/covid-19-chinas-exports-medical-supplies-provide-ray-hope> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[39] Shalini Nagarajan, "China Exports Jump a Surprise 7.2% in July Driven by Rising Demand for Medical Supplies, despite Trump's 'Tech Grenade'", in Markets Insider, August 7, 2020, at <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/china-july-trade-data-exports-jump-despite-tensions-with-us-2020-8-1029481540> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[40] Karen M. Sutter, Andres B. Schwarzenberg and Michael D. Sutherland, *COVID-19: China Medical Supply Chains and Broader Trade Issues*, Washington D. C., Congressional Research Service (CRS) (CRS Report R46304), December 2020, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46304> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).



been more restrictive in the export of medical supplies; however, the U.S. government and companies have delivered more than 1.4 billion ventilators around the world — more than any other exporter.⁴¹ China has complemented its diplomatic advances during the pandemic with the development of its COVID-19 vaccine. As *Science* magazine has reported, the Chinese military and CanSino Biologics, based on a technique

invented in 1930 that uses the inactivated virus to acquire immunity, have developed the main instrument of Chinese foreign policy for 2020 and 2021.⁴² Chinese vaccine diplomacy "It is a very carefully executed and carefully thought out strategy [...]. A strategic goal of the Chinese government is to achieve hegemonic influence in the bioeconomy within the next decade," according to Stephen Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.⁴³ The United States, on the other hand, with Operation Warp Speed, led by its military, has prioritized the distribution of its RNA vaccine within its territory and has established political controls for the international

[41] Faiz Siddiqui, "The U.S. Forced Major Manufacturers to Build Ventilators. Now They're Piling Up Unused in a Strategic Reserve", *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/08/18/ventilators-coronavirus-stockpile/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); 3M, "Helping the World Respond to COVID-19", at https://www.3m.com/3M/en_US/company-us/coronavirus/ (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Jiayue Huang, "Chinese Companies Ramp Up COVID-19 Ventilator Exports amid Acute Global Shortage", in S&P Global Market Intelligence, April 24, 2020, at <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/chinese-companies-ramp-up-covid-19-ventilator-exports-amid-acute-global-shortage-58139185> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[42] Jon Cohen, "China's Vaccine Gambit", in *Science*, vol. 370, no. 6522, December 11, 2020, pp. 1263-1267, at <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/11/global-push-covid-19-vaccines-china-aims-win-friends-and-cut-deals> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[43] Cited in *idem*.



distribution of doses from Pfizer and the German company BioNTech, Johnson & Johnson and Moderna.⁴⁴

[44] IANS, "ASEAN Distances from China's Covid Vaccine Diplomacy", *The Economic Times*, November 28, 2020, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/asean-distances-from-chinas-covid-vaccine-diplomacy/articleshow/79466795.cms?from=mdr> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Sidney Lupkin, "Pfizer's Coronavirus Vaccine Supply Contract Excludes Many Taxpayer Protections", in NPR, November 24, 2020, at <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/11/24/938591815/pfizers-coronavirus-vaccine-supply-contract-excludes-many-taxpayer-protections> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); U. S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), "Fact Sheet: Explaining Operation Warp Speed", at <https://www.hhs.gov/coronavirus/explaining-operation-warp-speed/index.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); HHS, "U.S. Government Engages Pfizer to Produce Millions of Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine", July 22, 2020, at <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/07/22/us-government-engages-pfizer-produce-millions-doses-covid-19-vaccine.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

While China has sought to strengthen its image as a potential supplier of international aid products, the U.S. government has taken advantage of its allies' dependence and the world's need to reiterate its central role in the development and distribution of international public goods. Russia has attempted to participate in the contest between China and the United States to lead the response to the COVID-19 crisis; however, its limited capacity for scientific research and international aid delivery, as well as the opacity of its efforts, have relegated it to a secondary place in pandemic-era diplomacy.⁴⁵

[45] Stanislav Budnitsky, "The Politics of Russia's Vaccine Promotion", in CDP Blog, September 29, 2020, at <https://usc-publicdiplomacy.org/blog/politics-russias-vaccine-promotion> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

The rivalry between the United States and China has been reflected in the lack of forceful responses by the main international organizations to the health crisis. As has occurred with other issues of global urgency in which the major powers have conflicting interests — such as climate change and nuclear proliferation —, the will of international bureaucracies and less powerful countries has not been enough to achieve genuine efforts against the threats facing humanity. Against this backdrop, international organizations have served as meeting points for the middle powers to discuss the possibilities of common fronts.

The competition between great powers, which has to some extent relegated multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization, during a crisis that affects not only the normality of the globalized international system, but also the lives of people in all countries, how do middle powers, such as Mexico, with limited medical, scientific and political capabilities, react?

The reaction of the middle powers to the COVID-19 crisis

In other critical situations for the globalization system, as in the 2008 economic crisis, the great powers have turned to the middle powers to strengthen international containment efforts. As was the case with the founding of the G20, the great powers use these relevant countries, albeit with lesser capabilities, as regional stabilizers and accelerators of policies aimed at mitigating the crisis.^[46] However, in the global emergency of 2020, competition between the

United States and China has prevented a coordinated response in the world, and the middle powers have not achieved the results of earlier times and have been mired in rivalries over medical supplies and vaccines. By the end of the year, instability has continued and the end of the global fallout from COVID-19 has not entered into sight.

The rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 has resulted in the collapse of health systems in developed and developing countries and, unlike the major powers, States with less extractive and managerial capabilities have been unable to implement adequate unilateral containment tactics. In Mexico, the lack of medical instruments, the lack of personal protective equipment and the insufficiency of ventilators have been constant since the beginning of the pandemic and have led the country to occupy the primary places in the world regarding deaths of patients and health personnel.^[47] The need has led different countries to compete for international aid supplies, and accusations of hoarding

[46] CII, *op. cit.*

[47] David Agren, “Understanding Mexican Health Worker COVID-19 Deaths”, in *The Lancet*, vol. 396, no. 10254, p. 807, September 19, 2020, at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31955-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31955-3/fulltext) (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Samantha Demby, “‘No One’s Looking Out for Us’: Mexico Medical Workers Beg for PPE”, in *Al Jazeera*, April 30, 2020, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/4/30/no-ones-looking-out-for-us-mexico-medical-workers-beg-for-ppe> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Christopher Sherman, “Médicos en México denuncian falta de equipo y capacitación”, *Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 2020, at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/espanol/sns-es-coronavirus-medicos-denuncian-falta-equipo-en-mexico-20200413-7hfattfelfutgqkc3v6ss7urm-story.html> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Marcos González Díaz, “Coronavirus en México: por qué es uno de los países con más muertes de personal sanitario por covid-19 en todo el mundo”, in *BBC News*, September 24, 2020, in <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-54276312> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).



medical supplies and appropriating donations have highlighted the lack of coordination in the response to the pandemic.⁴⁸ Facing significant

budgetary limits and not adequately increasing its capacity to produce health inputs, Mexico — like some other middle powers and under-developed countries — has tried to solve the deficiencies of its public health system through its foreign policy and has entered the competition for international aid. The Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs has approached different countries with greater capacity to deal with the emergency and has tried to obtain from them the instruments scarce in Mexico, ranging from shipments of medical material from China to ventilators obtained in the United States and European scientific equipment. However, as in countries that have not been able to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2 — such as the United States, Brazil, India, Peru or Argentina —, the only solution to overcome the crisis in Mexico seems to be the distribution of the vaccine among the population.

[48] Anna Nagurney, "The Raging Competition for Medical Supplies Is Not a Game but Game Theory Can Help", in *The Conversation*, August 4, 2020, at <https://theconversation.com/the-raging-competition-for-medical-supplies-is-not-a-game-but-game-theory-can-help-143514> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Fernando Leibovici and Ana Maria Santacreu, "Import Dependence on Essential Medical Goods during a Pandemic", in *VoxEU*, June 14, 2020, at <https://voxeu.org/article/import-dependence-essential-medical-goods-during-pandemic> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Kimberly Ann Elliot, "Fighting over Limited Medical Supplies Is No Way to Respond to COVID-19", in *World Politics Review*, April 7, 2020, at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28662/fighting-over-limited-medical-supplies-is-no-way-to-respond-to-covid-19> (date of reference: August 30, 2021); Lauren Chadwick, "Medical Supply Shortage Spurs Global Scramble for Materials", in *EuroNews*, April 5, 2020, at <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/04/medical-supply-shortage-spurs-global-scramble-for-materials> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).



Two factors condition the middle powers in obtaining the vaccine against covid-19: the limits of their scientific development capacities and the international over-demand for this public good — the most precious of 2020 and 2021. Unlike China and the United States, governments such as those of Mexico, Brazil, South Africa or some members of the European Union do not yet have the technological resources needed to develop their own vaccines or the capacity to invest in scientific research like the major powers. In Latin America, scientific institutions have seen their funding diminished during the pandemic and, because of the heavy dependence of academic communities on government budgets, research has stagnated in the region.^[49] Thus, the middle powers have concentrated their efforts on obtaining the necessary doses from the major powers and multilateral initiatives to achieve immunity for their populations; however, these strategies that seek to take advantage of the advances of other scientific communities to overcome the emergency at the lowest cost are confronted with the rivalry

between the two predominant powers of the moment and the limits of global vaccine production capacity. How have countries like Mexico managed to overcome the confrontation between China and the United States during the pandemic and obtain doses for their populations in the midst of international competition for vaccines?

While China has a significant presence in sub-Saharan Africa,^[50] in Southeast Asia, the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have rejected Chinese aid and have rushed to agree with the United States to deliver vaccines from the pharmaceutical company Pfizer.^[51] In Latin America, the middle powers have remained cooperative and have been able to circumvent the rivalry between the Chinese bloc and the United States, and the race for the vaccine to obtain doses from these great powers. Similar to the States that take advantage of the confrontation between two great powers to

[49] Rodrigo Pérez Ortega and Lindzi Wessel, “For Science in Latin America, ‘a Fascinating Challenge’”, in *Science*, vol. 369, no. 6505, August 14, 2020, pp. 753-754.

[50] Ray Mwareya, “Vaccine Diplomacy and the US-China Rivalry in Africa”, in *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2020, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/7/africa-vaccine-diplomacy-and-the-us-china-rivalry/> (date of reference: August 30, 2021).

[51] IANS, *op. cit.*

place themselves in the middle of the contest and thus obtain benefits,⁵² countries such as Mexico and Brazil have exploited the "vaccine diplomacy" of China and Russia, and have offered to collaborate in the final stages of their studies in exchange for participating in their scientific discoveries. This, at the same time, has attracted the attention of the United States, which, to counter the influence of its rivals, has also agreed to share the results of Operation Warp Speed with these middle powers.

European countries, in an attempt to reduce their dependence on U.S. scientific results, have established multilateral alliances, such as GAVI, for the development of their own vaccines that can also be distributed in the developing world. These initiatives have been joined by middle powers, such as Mexico, which, with the aim of obtaining more doses for its population, has contributed financially to these efforts and is seeking to play a regional intermediary role in the distribution of vaccines. Another way in which the middle powers have sought to ensure access to vaccines and treatments against SARS-CoV-2 and have attempted to present themselves as alternative forces to the major powers has been to support General Assembly resolution 74/274 on international cooperation to ensure global access to the drugs, vaccines and medical equipment needed to confront the COVID-19 pandemic.

Final considerations

The effects of crises in globalization are felt throughout the system of interdependence, but they are not felt in the same way. The great powers are able — to a certain extent — to limit their vulnerability to critical international events and can concentrate efforts on advancing their political interests during global emergencies; the middle powers, on the other hand, have limited containment capacities in the face of events in the international system and react to difficulties with foreign policy strategies that take advantage of the confrontation of the major powers and the need for stability in other countries to obtain international goods that will enable them to mitigate the damage to their internal social structures.

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[52] Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, Londres, Continuum, 1978, cap. xv "The Pattern of Power".