

OPINION

Canada can't rely on other countries to supply our vaccines**JAMIE LEVIN AND SIMON FRANKEL PRATT**

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 20, 2020

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 20, 2020

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With the encouraging news from Pfizer and Moderna about the development of effective vaccine candidates, and the electoral victory of Joe Biden, Canadians have reason to be cautiously optimistic. The world seems ready to come together and move forward from the ravages of COVID-19. However, the geopolitics of vaccine sourcing and production will likely present significant challenges, and in our current position we are vulnerable to coercion, even from our allies.

From the Peloponnesian Wars of antiquity to the present, disease has threatened to break societies, determine military outcomes and constrain economic possibilities. States have long recognized this, seeking on the one hand to collaborate on matters of global health and on the other to weaponize disease. Today, the countries of the world are rushing to develop a vaccine. This has occurred largely through co-operative efforts, but we have also seen inklings of competition and conflict. We argue that Canada should significantly increase its support for a domestically produced vaccine as a defence against the possibility of other countries exploiting our needs as leverage for policy concessions.

Canada has adopted a co-operative approach to the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, relying on international co-ordination and free market forces. The federal government has struck international deals to purchase tens of millions of doses of the most promising vaccine candidates and has joined the global Covax consortium, along with 183 other countries. Covax is a World Health Organization-led initiative to co-ordinate worldwide vaccine research and eventual licensing in order to guarantee “fair and equitable” distribution worldwide.

Researchers in Canada are attempting to develop our own vaccines. Quebec-based Medicago recently announced successful results from its Phase I trial, and the federal government has announced a \$214-million support package for domestic production. But this is probably not enough and has come rather late in the process of vaccine development. It shows that our government has the right idea, but should go further.

Our current approach relies heavily on co-operation between countries, an open

trading system and respect for international law. Given the monumental challenges involved in producing a viable vaccine candidate and ramping up production for worldwide distribution, this is a prudent approach for Canada. Global co-operation has borne fruit in the past. Smallpox was successfully eradicated after a decades-long effort led by the WHO, in which the Soviet Union and the United States sent millions of dollars in aid and technical assistance to the global south. Their co-ordinated efforts resulted in a global public good: The last reported case of smallpox was in 1977.

But global health co-ordination is often unreliable. Surveillance mechanisms failed to work as intended at the beginning of the current pandemic, as China hid information and border closings and travel restrictions were largely unco-ordinated. Today, some states are poised to monopolize the distribution of their own early vaccine candidates. For example, China and Russia have already fielded vaccines domestically in a go-it-alone approach to the coronavirus.

Recall, also, the U.S.'s attempts to block the export of N95 respirators at the beginning of the pandemic. Though that crisis was averted, an "America First" approach might raise concerns about an eventual vaccine. The Biden administration is unlikely to continue with such an approach, but with the transition of power contested, Canada should not count on a smooth partnership. Three of the four companies that Canada has brokered agreements with are U.S.-based (Novavax, Moderna and Pfizer), and they have taken or are planning to take U.S. government funds as part of the Operation Warp Speed program.

Furthermore, Russia and China have engaged in espionage, attempting to steal vaccine research from major pharmaceutical companies and research institutions in the U.S., Britain and Canada. And the U.S. has begun the process of withdrawal from the WHO, further jeopardizing international collaboration on health.

American self-interest and the spying by Russia and China imply limits to co-operation. Indeed, those countries all approach vaccine development as a strategic matter, building domestic capacity to ensure they have the independent ability to protect their populations. If these countries have their way, vaccines will be used as tools of coercive foreign policy or, worse, withheld altogether.

The ultimate resolution of the pandemic, and the restoration of open borders for travel and the movement of goods, will require a global solution. Canada must prepare for these risks and develop measures to mitigate them. We can do so by developing strategies in partnership with our European allies, such as Germany, whose co-operation has been more consistent and reliable. But we should also prepare for vaccine production within our borders. Intellectual property should be protected, but in a worst-case scenario, we should be able to make what we need if the U.S. government delays access to a vaccine.

Canada should continue fostering our relationships with international partners, but we should also be cautious about putting our complete trust in them, given the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. Nationalist domestic pressures and political opportunism in the United States could cost us lives and livelihoods.

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