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Increased South Korean and American contributions to COVAX will help many countries like North Korea accept aid and also help prevent the emergence of worse mutant coronavirus strains.

by Troy Stangarone

Despite the confrontation between the international community and Pyongyang over its nuclear weapons program, ensuring that North Korea is vaccinated needs to be a global priority. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it is in the interest of the global community to ensure that a new variant of the coronavirus does not develop in North Korea. Such a development would lessen the effectiveness of the world's current vaccination efforts.

South Korea is leading discussions on how to vaccinate North Korea. Proposals from Seoul have ranged from providing North Korea with excess vaccines produced for South Korea to buying Russian vaccines produced at a South Korean facility. But there is a better way to vaccinate North Korea. One which could benefit not just North Koreans, but the populations of other low and middle income countries.

While North Korea's claim that there had not been a single case of the coronavirus remains unverified, at a minimum the lockdowns imposed by Pyongyang appear to have prevented a significant outbreak domestically.

But rather than accept assistance extended by South Korea, Pyongyang has so far indicated a preference for international assistance and perhaps hacking its way to a solution.

With Pyongyang reluctant to accepting bilateral assistance from South Korea, the United States, or others, an international solution is the best path to vaccinating North Korea.

Many wealthy nations have reserved doses of coronavirus vaccines beyond the amount needed for their populations. The United States, for example, has contracts for 1.2 billion doses of the roughly nine billion vaccine doses that have been reserved to date. Enough for slightly less than twice its population.

Canada and Norway were among the first countries to announced that they would donate excess vaccines, with Norway specifically offering to donate them through the World Health Organization's COVAX program to ensure equitable distribution to low and middle income countries.

The G-7 pledged to increase their support for COVAX to \$7.5 billion at the recent leaders meeting. French President Emanuel Macron also put forward a proposal to send 5 percent of U.S. and EU vaccines to Africa during the vaccination process in Europe and North America, but disagreements remain on donating excess vaccines to low and middle income countries.

South Korea could play a role in this process. The United Kingdom has invited South Korea to take part in this year's G-7 and Seoul should work with London and Washington to reach an agreement among the world's wealthy nations on the donations of any excess vaccines to COVAX and encourage them to pledge to send 5 percent of their current vaccine stock to COVAX.

Donations of existing vaccines could be politically difficult for countries, as demonstrated by America's reluctance to donate any vaccines before its population is fully vaccinated. Concerns about vaccinating the domestic population also exist in South Korea. In this environment, donating a small percentage of vaccines to a global effort might be politically more manageable than direct aid to North Korea. Caveats about vaccinating a country's most vulnerable populations first could be added to any agreement to help ease any political opposition against the donation of vaccine stocks to vulnerable nations abroad.

These donations could play an important role internationally. COVAX currently only expects to vaccinate 20 percent of the populations of low and middle income countries this year. Donations of a small percentage of existing vaccines and a pledge to donate excess vaccines from wealthy countries would give COVAX additional capacity. Just 5 percent of existing contracts from the world's wealthy nations would mean millions of additional doses for COVAX.

However, more will be needed. Countries should also look to increase their financial contributions to COVAX and take steps to help pharmaceutical companies speed up vaccine production and distribution.

Despite the praise that South Korea has received for its domestic handling of the coronavirus, it has significant scope to contribute more to COVAX. Prior to the recent G-7 meeting the projected gap to fully fund the program's test, drugs, and vaccines was estimated at over \$23 billion. The additional donations by countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany will help fill the gap, but South Korea could do more as well.

In 2020, the coronavirus likely cost the global economy \$5.6 trillion, with South Korea and the United States both seeing their GDPs decline. Ensuring that COVAX is fully funded is a relatively small price compared to the economic and human costs of extending the pandemic.

Vaccinating the North Korean population has additional resonance in South Korea. Donating a small percentage of existing vaccines, pledging to donate excess vaccines, and providing additional support for COVAX isn't the quickest way to vaccinate North Korea, but it is likely the best way to ensure that North Korea accepts the aid that is being provided. It also has the advantage of helping the billions of people who live in low and middle income countries and face a more extreme risk of exposure to the coronavirus than the average North Korean. In the end, the best way to help North Koreans is to help others.

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