Four Tests of U.S. Resolve in Global Health in 2024
In many important respects, the United States is looking impressively strong—indeed, it is getting stronger—providing good reason to be hopeful. At the same time, high caution is in order. Multiple geopolitical crises dominate, and, as seen in 2023, these can crowd out high-level attention to global health priorities.

As 2024 opens, the picture is decidedly mixed—almost bipolar—as to whether the Biden administration in its global health diplomacy will be successful in both managing its geostrategic rivals and in strengthening its partnerships in Africa and Asia through 2024 and into 2025 and beyond.

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Sources of Hope

The Biden administration is steadily gaining greater capabilities to lead in global health, particularly in managing China and repairing its damaged credibility and standing in the Global South. Anger and skepticism among partners in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere is the result of the raw sovereign nationalism that dominated the calculations in Washington and the capitals of the other major powers during the most acute and harrowing periods of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. The healing season has begun.

A new generation of leaders has taken the reins at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense, the United States Agency
for International Development’s (USAID) Bureau for Global Health, and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). A very able envoy currently leads the U.S. delegation to the pandemic instrument negotiations. These ambitious, dynamic leaders are unburdened by the Covid wars, pragmatic and results-based, and focused on building relations across the aisle to sustain the bipartisanship that has undergirded U.S. global health leadership in the past few decades. In the global arena, they are pushing an activist diplomacy focused upon a new form of partnerships and alliances that strengthen both regional and national capabilities, combining traditional global health with health security.

The United States is actively building new institutional assets while undertaking serious reform of existing institutions. Inaugurated in 2023 were the White House’s Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy, the new Department of State’s Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy, and the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H), modeled after the Department of Defense’s (DOD) experimental agency, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). Undergoing overhauls are the CDC, the vision for NIH’s future, and the mechanisms for holding into account the disparate elements of DOD contributions to health security.

A few important factors help stabilize U.S. leadership. Funding for global health may not be growing, but it has proven relatively steady, with bipartisan support in Congress. In the midst of the accelerating U.S.-China confrontation and the standoff over Covid-19 origins, senior-level dialogue on health security between the two superpowers ceased. But the prospect of a resumed high-level exchange never died, and the Xi-Biden summit at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in November 2023, marked a warming restabilization, including a commitment to collaborate on curbing production and export of the precursors of fentanyl.

The Tests of U.S. Performance in 2024

Whether new U.S. strengths translate in 2024 into serious progress in global health, both in managing geopolitical tensions and rebuilding trust and confidence in the Global South, is an open question. The same is true for whether the gains prove durable and can withstand a possible Trump presidency.

- In 2024, the Biden administration’s performance in four areas will be critical in judging whether significant progress has been achieved that can be carried into the future.
- The administration is called upon in 2024 to demonstrate its commitment and resolve to sustain, in league with its allies, and most importantly, its partners in the Global South, the three foundational legacy instruments that have changed the course of global health over the past two decades. These comprise PEPFAR, the Global Fund, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, all of which are in cycle. PEPFAR’s five-year reauthorization lapsed in 2023, in part due to a distracted White House. Two questions will dominate 2024: will the White House in 2024 deliver ample appropriations for PEPFAR? Second, as the Global Fund and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, are each approaching their multiyear replenishments, will administration leadership fuel the political momentum essential to bring each process to a successful conclusion?
- The administration is called upon in 2024 to lead in helping land the pandemic instrument negotiations at a promising spot. That won’t be easy, since divisions between the Global North and Global South remain stark, and expectations of what the process can generate have jumped outside the boundaries of reality from all directions. Debate centers on access and benefit sharing; One Health (incorporating the health of humans, animals, and ecosystems); research and development (R&D), including intellectual property and technology transfer; and financing to create capacity. Megathemes that have emerged out of the pandemic experience that will drive discussions well into the future: the norms of equity, access, and the imperative to invest in distributed power and capabilities in the world’s regions.
• The United States is the single power in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) that can be most truly effective in brokering compromise, aligning expectations with reality, and driving toward a text that is reasonable, fair, and pragmatic, while avoiding undermining intellectual property protections and unachievable financial and other commitments. Remarkably, both Russia and China have stood on the margins of the negotiations and have elected thus far not to be spoilers. Time, of course, matters. Interestingly, the deepening international anxiety over possible electoral outcomes in the United States and elsewhere in 2024 may help push the negotiators to the finish line. It is fueling that argument that the United States and other parties to the INB must mark significant diplomatic progress by the time of the World Health Assembly in May 2024 and get as close to closure as possible by the end of 2024.

• The United States needs to restore a serious high-level dialogue with China to prepare for the next unknown pathogen of pandemic potential. If it does not, it is choosing to live with a dangerous strategic gap that could quickly come back to haunt both the United States and China in the future.  

• Estrangement over Wuhan and the deadlock over Covid origins have created barriers reinforced by domestic politics in both countries. That situation, luckily, is easing somewhat, as the U.S.-China relationship has restabilized in 2023. The United States and China now have a modest window to test whether a senior dialogue can indeed begin in non-flashpoint areas of common interest where commonsense, pragmatic solutions are within reach. Cooperation is deepening in curbing the flow of precursor elements to fentanyl to the United States from China. Talks could kick off on any of a number of compelling and timely issues: climate and health; artificial intelligence and biotechnology; laboratory biosafety; R&D clinical trials through corporate and university partnerships; aging; financing capabilities in low- and middle-income countries; and strengthening the health workforce. Tacitly, the United States and China are contributors to the Pandemic Fund. On workforce issues, the United States and China already have each registered their shared early interest in the Global Health Emergency Corps, begun under the World Health Organization to create a health security leadership network, expand interoperable surge capabilities to address dangerous outbreaks, and build regional capabilities.

• How and whether the United States effectively approaches the runaway health and humanitarian crisis in Gaza will be decisive in 2024 in shaping its standing in global health. Already, this burgeoning crisis has eaten away at U.S. credibility, fueling regional instability and deepening alienation from the United States. There are steps that the United States can and should take now to address how to avert Gaza slipping into a permanent wasteland with no path out. These include U.S. policy pronouncements on adherence to international humanitarian law; conditioning future U.S. security assistance; forming an ad hoc coalition focused on dramatically expanding the flows of medicines, food, fuel, and water; and expanding the technical and logistical support of CDC and USAID.

Reputations Are Fragile

Diplomacy will be instrumental in 2024 in achieving U.S. critical, priority goals in global health. Unlocking compromise solutions to the pandemic instrument negotiations—avoiding a damaging deadlock—demands much serious diplomatic work and White House backing. The same is true of preserving the long-term vitality of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Global Fund, and PEPFAR. The United States needs to also recognize that its effectiveness, credibility, and protection of U.S. national interests, as they pertain to health security and the ethical norms that underlie global health, rests on courage and risk-taking. That is certainly true in considering how and when to engage China at a high level on health security and how and when to confront the human catastrophe in...
Gaza for which the United States is now being held, in part, to account.

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