

Vaccine Diplomacy in Central Asia: Russia vs. China?

Can “vaccine diplomacy” change any minds in Central Asia when it comes to the Russia vs. China equation?

First there was “mask diplomacy” and now there’s “vaccine diplomacy.” In the context of Central Asia, vaccine diplomacy is a hot topic, which pairs well with preexisting narratives about the region as a geopolitical battlefield. Given that Russia and China are major figures in the COVID vaccine arena, it’s natural to contrast their efforts in the region. Can “vaccine diplomacy” change any minds in Central Asia when it comes to the Russia vs. China equation?

“What [vaccine diplomacy] does do is play into existing regional and global agendas,” Alexander Cooley, director of Columbia University’s Harriman Institute, said during an online event put together by IWPR in Central Asia and the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs.

In speaking about China’s “mask diplomacy” Cooley noted that there were as many positive stories as negative ones, with negative coverage focusing on “China’s wily intentions, the shoddy quality of the goods involved, on how it was trying to push its Belt and Road Initiative and pry EU countries from the EU” and so on. These are familiar themes and many have their Central Asian equivalents.

Despite all of China’s efforts in Central Asia over the past decade — much of it in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative — China’s biggest BRI partner in the region, Kazakhstan, doesn’t have present plans to use Chinese vaccines.

When Kazakhstan began its coronavirus vaccination campaign at the beginning of February 2021, its plan was to start with 22,000 doses of Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, with further doses to be produced locally. As Diana Mustafina wrote for IWPR last month, Kazakhstan plans to begin using a domestic vaccine, QazCovid, which is currently in phase three trials in the spring, and reportedly the U.S./German Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will arrive in the second half of 2021. Nur-Sultan is reportedly in talks with China’s Sinopharm and Sinovac Biontech, but within its multivector approach to procure vaccines, it doesn’t have any Chinese orders.

The same is not true in Uzbekistan, however, which largely skipped participating in the BRI of old but has, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, since 2016 noticeably grown its cooperation with China. Uzbekistan recently began its vaccination campaign this month with doses of the Chinese Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical vaccine, which is at present undergoing stage three trials. Uzbekistan, hosting a portion of those trials, is using the local brand name ZF-UZ-VAC 2001 for the vaccine. Uzbekistan placed an order for 35 million doses of Sputnik V in September 2020, but has yet to approve the vaccine for use. Meanwhile, Russia — per comments from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov — is apparently considering allowing Uzbekistan to produce Sputnik V (Kazakhstan is already doing so).

In a survey released in early February, the Central Asia Barometer found that the majority of Central Asians believed Russia was the country “best able” to help them with the coronavirus.

An astounding 75.5 percent of Kyrgyz surveyed ranked Russia as “best able” to help them; 57.8 of Uzbeks said the same and 51.6 percent of Kazakhs did. As for China, 19.1 percent of Kazakhs said Beijing was “best able” to help them, followed by 13.6 percent of Uzbeks and 7.5 percent of Kyrgyz. The Central Asia Barometer noted a generational element: “Older respondents, more than young people, believe that, if necessary, Russia will provide assistance to their country in the fight against coronavirus. Young people constitute the largest share of those expecting support from other countries (China, USA, etc.)”

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The biggest problems for Central Asia, however, when it comes to vaccines isn't necessarily a supply or geopolitical question; it's the local matters of logistics and overcoming hesitancy.

For the former, look no further than Kyrgyzstan, which, along with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is eligible for access to vaccine supplies through the World Health Organization's COVAX initiative. But not all vaccines are equally manageable. Kyrgyzstan Deputy Health Minister Nurbolot Usenbayev in January was skeptical about being able to accommodate the Pfizer vaccine, given the super-cold storage requirements. Kyrgyzstan has issued plans for a three-phase vaccination campaign, presumably starting with Sputnik V and then incorporating an expected delivery of more than half a million doses of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine (produced in India).

The matter of vaccine hesitancy requires deeper exploration, but the vaccine drives in the region at this stage are conceptualized as voluntary. As it has run true elsewhere in the world, the key issue may not be acquiring enough vaccine doses for a country's population but convincing that population to sit for the jab.

Returning to the initial question of whether "vaccine diplomacy" can change any minds in Central Asia when it comes to the Russia vs. China equation, the answer is what it always has been: The region continues to look primarily, though not exclusively, to Russia first. Multivectorism suits as not just as a workable foreign policy model but as a vaccine strategy too.

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